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Nikki L. Foley-Demby

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The Treatise Committee for Nikki Foley-Demby certifies that this is the approved version
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**A Comparison of Traditional 6th – 8th Grade Middle Schools and K-8th Grade
Academies in the Areas of Student Achievement and School Climate**

Committee:

Ruben Olivarez, Supervisor

Edwin Sharpe

Noah DeLissovoy

Joanelda De Leon

Richard Williams

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By

Nikki L. Foley-Demby. B.S.; M.Ed.

Treatise

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A comparison of Traditional 6th–8th Middle Schools and K-8th Grade Academies

In the Areas of Student Achievement and Climate

Nikki L. Foley-Demby, Ed.D.

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Supervisor: Ruben Olivarez

ABSTRACT

Researchers differ in their views of the effects of the structure of traditional middle and high schools in public education .on student performance. They question the effectiveness of school and grade level configuration, and its compatibility with the age-appropriate cognitive, social, and emotional development needs of students. Some believe that eliminating the traditional break between elementary and middle schools would enhance students' overall learning opportunities, particularly for ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged students, and reduce the current disparity in student performance between traditional middle schools and K-8 academies.

This research is founded on a study of (a) curricular and co-curricular richness of the core program; and (b) the organizational elements of the elementary and intermediate school configurations. This mixed-methods investigation utilized both quantitative and

qualitative methods to develop the data. The quantitative method incorporated a comparison of six schools that were once either K-5 elementary schools or 6-8 traditional middle schools but were later reconfigured to encompass all grade levels making them K-8 academies. The quantitative method was used to evaluate the quality of (a) student performance in mathematics and language arts as determined by state assessments (b) the school climate as perceived by the teachers, parents and community members. Creswell (2005) noted that the combination of quantitative and qualitative data gathering, analysis, and interviews strengthens the understanding of the problem and related research findings.

Many school districts with 6-8 traditional middle schools have experienced students not making adequate progress and are considering changing their grade structure to K-8. DeJong and Craig (2002) list the reasons for this conversion to cause fewer transitions for students, to keep students in neighborhood schools, to reduce transportation costs, to improve safety, and to accommodate declining enrollment. The researchers hope that, along with other current research, this study may serve to compel more school districts to consider adopting alternative grade configurations when students are not making adequate progress in the traditional 6 - 8 grade configuration.

The purpose of this study is to explore three research questions that pertain to school configuration and school climate as perceived by all stakeholders. These questions are:

Research Questions

- How do K-8 academies compare in achievement in the areas of mathematics and language arts when compared to traditional 6-8 middle schools?
- Are K-8 academies perceived to be more effective in the areas of parental involvement and in having a positive school climate conducive to teaching and learning, than traditional 6-8 middle schools as perceived by all stakeholders including administrators, teachers, parents and community members?
- What perceptions do all stakeholders including administrators, teachers, parents, and community members have regarding the overall effectiveness of K-8 academies.

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CHAPTER I: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The overall effect on student performance at traditional 6th–8th middle schools and elementary schools in public education has been an issue of contention among researchers in the United States. All stakeholders, including administrator’s, teacher’s, parent’s, and community members are seeking answers concerning the crucial transition from elementary to middle school and whether or not K – 8 schools are better able to meet the social, emotional and educational needs of students. Questions have been raised regarding the effectiveness of school and grade level configuration and their social readiness with the age-appropriate cognitive, social, and emotional developmental needs of students. It has been considered that the elimination of the traditional break that students experience between the elementary and middle schools enhances the overall learning opportunities, in particular for ethnic minority and economically-deprived students, and reduces the discontinuity of learning and the academic performance disparity that currently exists between students attending traditional middle schools and students attending K-8 academies.

This research study was founded on the curricular and co-curricular richness of the core programs of elementary K-8 and traditional 6-8 middle schools in one school district in the State of Texas. The philosophy and structure of K-8 schools have changed significantly since the turn of the 20th century. K-8 schools are more than simply adding middle-grade students to an elementary school, or vice versa. They employ the nurturing, individualized instruction, and student-centered atmosphere of elementary education

combined with the instructional processes and concepts of middle grade students (Coladarci & Hancock, 2002).

K-8 schools began many years ago with the one-room school house in the 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, a majority of students attended K-8 schools before going to high school (80% of high school graduates attended K-8 schools in the 1920s). Junior high schools, (7th – 8th), were prevalent by the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1960s 80% of students still attended a separate elementary/middle school combination before going on to 9th-12th grade (Paglin & Fager, 1997).

This study is a mixed-methods investigation, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain the data. The quantitative method involves a side-by-side comparison of six schools that were once either K-5 elementary or traditional 6-8 middle schools in an urban district in Texas. The six schools were later reconfigured into K-8 academies. The side by side comparison focuses on the areas of (a) student performance in mathematics and language arts as determined by the use of state assessments, (b) school climate conducive to student learning as perceived by teachers and school stakeholders. Creswell (2005) noted that a combination of quantitative and qualitative data gathering, analysis, and interviews strengthens understanding of the research and findings as they relate to study research questions.

Background

In a large urban district in the State of Texas, which is where this study was conducted, the need for a change had presented itself. Although the district had seen success in several areas, it seemed that one particular attendance cluster of the district

was in need of a great deal of attention. From the 2000–2004 school years, the district experienced declining enrollment and declining achievement rates in the attendance cluster of study. The cluster consisted of one high school and the two traditional 6 through 8th grade comprehensive middles and five K through 5th grade elementary schools within the feeder pattern. This particular cluster had a high population of low SES students, low academic achievement and declining enrollment. The focus of attention was needed in the areas of academics, behavior, inadequate resources and school configuration. This situation presented the need for a district-wide reform initiative with the hopes of bringing about overall transformational change in the school district.

This came at a time when there was a newly appointed superintendent. The superintendent brought on board had a proven track record of successfully turning around school districts that were experiencing multiple problems, such as systemic dysfunction, financial deficits, chronic episodes of low performance, and many other issues. Additionally, the newly appointed superintendent had experience in districts that needed to restructure the make-up of grade levels as well as the philosophy of good thinking and learning for not only the students but the teachers and administrators too. At the same time, the district under focus was experiencing issues with declining enrollment due to the loss of housing availability in the attendance cluster and the loss of students to private, charter, and parochial schools.

It was essential for the district to implement a creative plan to address the obstacles that stood in its way of meeting the needs of its students, as well as to regain the

numbers of students that had left or transferred from the district of study and re-enrolled in other districts outside of the boundaries for various stated rationales. Much of the data gained regarding the needs of the campuses of focus came from board minutes and notes as well as from the records obtained through the requests made for open records from the district. All information was used to pull facts about the schools of focus and to gain information regarding the discussions held that referenced the focus campuses.

In this attendance cluster in Texas located on the east side of the city, the district was experiencing low enrollment and a significant exodus of students in many of its schools. After researching the history of each of the schools and their patterns of matriculation, the leadership of the district decided that there was a need for a study to further analyze the data. The purpose of the study was to analyze the rationale behind the matriculation patterns and to look further into a change that would address these problems. They had the task of identifying a program with outstanding features that address the needs of the community and attract students back to their schools. The leadership team visited multiple school districts throughout the United States with similar demographics who had successfully overcome some of the same issues that currently plagued the focus district. Some of the districts visited had traditional elementary schools and traditional comprehensive middle school configurations and some of the districts visited had K-8 schools. Successes, (increased enrollment and academics) were experienced with both configurations. The leadership team chose to further examine the K-8th grade configuration for all six schools in the attendance cluster being addressed. A strategic planning committee was created by district administration in an effort to

research pros and cons of the K – 8 configuration. This committee was comprised of district staff, parents and community members. The strategic planning committee made recommendations to the board for introducing the K – 8 concept based on the findings from their research. They discovered that there were multiple positive attributes associated with the K–8th grade configuration that could help the struggling schools to not only boost their enrollment but also to boost their academic standing while creating a positive environment for their students.

This would help create a positive school environment that is conducive to more individualized teaching and learning and would allow for meaningful relationships between all stakeholders. In addition to creating an environment more conducive to learning, the district’s leadership team believed that the resulting environment would create fewer opportunities for problem behaviors, such as acts of student violence or bullying. Thus, teachers would be able to get to know their students and their data and would be able to build a stronger rapport with each of them. This, in turn, would increase the level of accountability that the students held toward their teachers, as well as toward other adults within their school system.

The K-8 configuration comes with its own set of potential problems or disadvantages. Compared to schools with a narrower grade configuration, the K-8 configuration might not be as effective in attending to the specific developmental stage of a particular age group of students or provide age range services tailored to unique needs (Fager & Paglin, 1997). In facilities where the middle grade enrollments are smaller, there tends to be fewer resources available (e.g., time, money, staff, space, etc.) to enrich

the middle-level program. Schools with smaller enrollment are less likely to be able to provide a broader selection of specialized electives, a full range of extracurricular activities, and/or specialized facilities and services (Beane & Lipka, 2006).

Creating K–8th grade academies within the cluster of schools being studied would allow them to lessen the number of transitions students from elementary to middle school experience, giving them more flexibility to do horizontal as well as vertical teaming. This would provide more opportunities for teachers to get to know the student and their data personally.

After being presented with information about the K-8 configuration, the school board of the study district embraced the concept of K-8th academies and unanimously agreed that this configuration would be a workable alternative to address the needs of the cluster schools. The K-8 configuration was a new concept in the state of Texas and would be considered as an innovative strategy to use for school reform. This configuration came at a time when Texas needed more innovators that were passionate about improving access to quality educational opportunities for all students.

As the district moved forward with looking at possibly reforming the schools in the focus cluster to K-8 schools, they also looked at ways to create funding sources to enhance choices and programs provided by the schools. One of the ways that many of the schools visited were able to enhance their programs was by becoming district internal charter schools'. Each of the schools applied for the internal charter grants, which afforded them with multiple opportunities to receive additional funding. An internal charter grant provides funding to the school allowing them to provide additional

programs, resources and opportunities for children. By applying for an internal charter grant it would allow the school to act as a stand alone charter while maintaining its' public school status.

In 1995 Texas lawmakers first launched public charter schools, which are one of the most significant education reforms in the state's history. Public charter schools are charged with the duty to do the following:

1. improving student learning;
2. increasing the choice of learning opportunities within the public school;
3. creating professional opportunities that will attract new teachers to the public school system;
4. establishing a new form of accountability for public schools; and encouraging different and innovative learning methods. (Texas Education Code Section 12.001)

In an effort to rectify the problems that the district of study was facing, the school board along with the leadership team chose to reconfigure the 6 schools as K-8 district internal charter schools. Prior to going with the K-8 grade reconfiguration, the cluster had to apply for the Internal Charter School's Grant and upon approval they had to be willing to implement all of the anticipated changes that would be associated with the grant. For example, the Internal Charter Schools Grant came with funding to back the schools in implementing their new program focus/theme for the first three to four years. One of the immediate needs for the K-8 configuration was having classrooms that would be conducive for all students in grades K-8, which means accommodating lower grades and upper grade students. Classroom furniture would need to be purchased and secured to match the various range in sizes of the students. These purchases needed to be made prior to the students enrolling and showing up for the first day of class. This meant that

schools had to begin early in the summer making purchases and preparing the campuses in order to accommodate the new structure.

The proposed schools had to do a lot of preliminary work prior to moving forward with the new K–8 configuration. They had to meet with their Campus Leadership Team (CLT) and their staff in order to get the majority vote to move forward. After the staff was on board, each focus campus had to hold community meetings to inform their students’ families of the proposed change in program, and ensure that they were in agreement with the new structure of the campus. After doing this, they were charged with the task of taking the proposed reconfiguration idea to the school board for approval.

On May 10, 2004, the school board of the focus district moved for approval of the charter school application for the proposed cluster of 6 schools to reconfigure and change to the K-8 Academy model. A motion by a board member was seconded by another board member, and approved by a vote of 7-0 with all board members present. The board had successfully approved the application from the proposed cluster of 6 schools to have a superintendent-initiated, public feeder-system charter to provide K-8 educational configurations at all participating campuses. Since the school superintendent had initiated the approval and received full school board backing the focus cluster was approved to make six of its’ elementary schools K-8 grade Academies. The principal had to go out and put the implementation of the newly configured schools into motion.

The Assistant Superintendent for Non-Traditional Campuses and Special Programs provided introductory remarks regarding the focus school’s in-district charter application process. It was stated that the purposes of the in-district charters are to

encourage individual campuses to develop far reaching school improvement plans, to publicly declare their intent to become an “Exemplary” campus to be recognized by the Texas Education Agency as school district sponsored, and to be eligible for developmental grant funding from the U.S. Department of Education.

Under the focus district’s Policy EL (Legal) and EL (Local), and in accordance with Texas Education Code 12.058, the focus school district began accepting internal charter school applications in 2000 as part of a charter school initiative to improve academic focus. School No.1’s principal presented a summary of the 6-school cluster feeder reconfiguration system. An important component of the public charter reconfiguration was to increase vertical alignment of the district scope and sequence which is the curriculum that is created by the district and aligned to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Grades PK–12.

The principal from school No. 1 felt that by having all grade level’s K – 8 on the same campus it would create an atmosphere of collaboration allowing all teachers more opportunities to speak on a daily basis about curriculum and instruction expectations. They were able to meet as needed to talk about trends in grade levels where students were lacking certain expectations allowing the teachers from those grade levels to shift their instructional focus and ensure that they were covering those student expectations with students in a deeper more rigorous manner.

The newly configured schools would be using the K-8 portion of the scope and sequence as they do collaboration and planning within and across grade levels. This

public charter reconfiguration is defined as a group of six schools converting to K-8th grade schools situated in a community where all schools are within a 10-mile radius.

A board member asked for a definition of “seamless curriculum” as stated in the presentation. The principal from School No. 2 stated that, a seamless curriculum involves coordinated planning from one grade level to the next so that the next grade continues where the prior grade stopped. This coordination of curriculum ensures that there are no gaps and no time is wasted in movement between grades. The board member asked about data on the district’s existing reconfigured schools, and whether or not improvements had been made. The Assistant Superintendent of Non-Traditional campuses stated that a full report on the reconfigured schools would be brought before the Board before Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scores were received. The School Board President asked that the report also include data on attendance, parental involvement, enrollment, and discipline rates.

The School Board President asked about the amount of funds each campus would receive in the areas of special education, Title I, etc. The Assistant Superintendent of Non-Traditional Schools said that the charter schools would receive the same amount of funding as other schools, with the exception of federal grants, because public internal charter schools were eligible for federal funding for school reorganization and curriculum development. The School Board President asked if charter applications for reconfiguration were limited to elementary and middle schools. The Assistant Superintendent of Non-Traditional Schools said all district grade levels were eligible to

apply. The School Board President said he would like to see other campuses apply for charter school in the future to continue the reconfiguration district wide.

School Board members asked the schools of focus if they would have any problems with hiring teachers. The Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources said that her staff was presently working on hiring for all of the schools. She said that the state was now issuing a new certification to teach grades 4 – 8, which would help the K– 8 grade schools with their staffing. School Board members asked if the district was going to be ready with science labs for the students. The Executive Director for Math and Science said that all campuses in this feeder system were being equipped with two labs: one for the elementary grades and the second for the 6 – 8 grade students. She said the equipment was ordered last month and scheduled for delivery in June 2004. A School Board member asked about physical modifications for the restrooms and cafeterias. He then said that the K– 8 grade charters for reconfiguring these schools were revolutionary, but that a change was definitely needed.

The School Board President recommended that the aforementioned items 10, 11, and 12 be voted on as a group. Motion was made, seconded by another board member, and approved by a vote of 7-0 with all board members present. The motion to move forward with the change of the 6-campus cluster of schools to be reorganized into a K–8 Academy was carried.

After a long process of seeking and closely reviewing reconfiguration models that might prove to be helpful in the district of study the board unanimously approved to

move forward. After a vote of 7- 0, the district moved in favor of restructuring of five PK-5 campuses along with the one 6 - 8 traditional middle school.

There were seven schools that functioned as PK-8 stand-alone academies for four years: Of the seven schools, six of them were the focus schools that were used to gather data for this study. The superintendent retired in the summer of 2006 which prompted a change in leadership and a new vision for the district K-8 Academies was created. Although the K-8 configuration was a huge success in the district of study since its inception, with the arrival of a new superintendent, unfortunately, the grade level configuration of the schools would eventually be headed for a change.

In response to a perceived need by the district's business community, the new superintendent spearheaded a district-wide school efficiency study. A broad-based citizens' committee recommended the closure of nine schools, including two of the seven schools in the focus cluster. This action caused for a re-drawing of school boundaries and eventual administrative decisions leading to the re-conversion of the schools to their original traditional elementary and middle school configurations.

Statement of The Problem

Students who attend middle schools scored lower on math and reading tests than they would have had they attended a K-8 school, according to a new study released by two Columbia University researchers. The same study found that middle school students also miss almost two additional days of school per year than K-8 students.

Columbia University's Johan Rockoff and Benjamin Lockwood examined the records of 193,000 New York City public school students, of which 8 percent attended K-

8th grade schools. All of the students entered 3rd grade between the fall of 1998 and the fall of 2002 and remained in the city school system until the 8th grade. The data by grade revealed that students who entered middle schools go from scoring better than their K-8 peers in 5th grade to scoring below these students during the middle school years.

The middle schoolers scores decline in the year that they transitioned to middle school and continued downward through the 8th grade. These findings held up even after accounting for differences in poverty, English language learner status, special education needs and socioeconomic characteristics. Rockoff and Lockwood attribute the drop in test scores to the more diverse student body and more students per grade in middle schools. New middle schoolers also become the youngest children in school after having been the oldest, making for a difficult transition (Rosenberg, 2010).

Purpose of The Study

Additional research was needed to determine if there was a relationship between student academic achievement and enrollment in either a traditional 6 – 8 grade middle school or a K – 8 grade academy. Specifically, the researcher was trying to assess whether or not there were significant changes in school performance and climate. Although the focus school district had continued some of it's K- 8 grade schools in the district, it was now in a position to re-examine their initial need that prompted them to revisit the K – 8 grade configurations since the district was searching for a new superintendent.

Additionally, the academic performance had declined in 5 of the 6 focus schools that were previously K – 8 academies but later reconfigured back into K through 5

elementary schools. In many instances the middle school population of each of the focus academies persistently performed higher than the students in the lower grade levels that participated in state assessment. It had been speculated that since the K- 8 school in the district of study had been reconfigured back into K – 5 campuses, their performance had declined due to the loss of the 6 – 8 grade population. Ironically, although the 6 – 8 grade students were the highest performing population in the K – 8 grade academies, the traditional middle schools that received the students after the K – 8 grade campuses were reconfigured have taken a deep decline in academic performance in the areas of math and reading in the 6 – 8 grade population.

Research Questions

Additional research was needed to determine if there was a relationship between student academic achievement and enrollment in either a traditional 6 – 8 grade middle school or a K-8 grade academy. This study was guided by the following research questions:

Research Questions:

- How do K-8 academies compare in achievement in the areas of mathematics and language arts when compared to traditional 6-8 middle schools?
- Are K-8 academies perceived to be more effective in the areas of parental involvement and in having a positive school climate conducive to teaching and learning, than traditional 6-8 middle schools as perceived by all stakeholders including administrators, teachers, parents and community members?

- What perceptions do all stakeholders including administrators, teachers, parents and community members have regarding the overall effectiveness of K-8 academies.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions of terms have been formulated:

AEIS – Academic Excellence Indicator System (maintained by the Texas Education Agency to show school performance across the state over the years)

Achievement Gap refers to the observed disparity on a number of educational measures between the performance of groups of students, specifically defined by gender, race/ethnicity, ability, and socioeconomic status.

Assessments: Texas has continually implemented testing systems such as the following: the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills in 1979; Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills in 1984; Texas Assessment of Academic Skills in 1990; Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills in 2003; and State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness in 2012 (TEA, 2010).

Conclusion: The last main division of a discourse, usually containing a summing up of the points and a statement of opinion or decision reached.

Disparities generally refer to inequality among individuals and groups within a society. In many countries, individuals belonging to certain racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to be poor.

Socioeconomic status: A mixed group of students that come from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds that are educated together.

“Elemiddle School” – The combination of an elementary school configuration with a middle school added. Students remain in the school from either system.

Gathering the data: Data collection is any process of preparing and collecting data, for example as part of a process improvement or similar project. The purpose of data collection is to obtain information to keep on record, to make decisions about important issues, or to pass information on to others. Data are primarily collected to provide information regarding a specific topic.

Grade Level : Students are grouped in a particular grade level based on their current age. As they enter the school they will be grouped with their peers of the same age.

High Performing – A high performing school is categorized by their state accountability rating. Campuses that were rated either Recognized or Exemplary are referred to as “High Performing” campuses.

Hypothesis: A testable prediction; which designates the relationship between two or more variables.

K–8th grade Academy: Students enrolled in Kindergarten through 8th grade. These students are in classrooms with peers of their age (ranging from 5-14 years of age).

Low Socio-Economic is commonly applied to those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The lower classes constitute roughly a fifth to a quarter of American society, mainly low-rung retail and service workers as well as the frequently unemployed and those not able to work.

Professional Development: Teachers gathering together to deepen their content knowledge by studying new strategies and ideas that broaden the span of information available to deliver to their students during instruction.

Reconfiguration: To make a new configuration of an institution of learning, changing the make-up of grade levels within the school.

Researcher: The researcher refers to the person who is conducting the research and the author of this study.

State of Texas Accountability: States are required to meet the federal mandates; however, each state may interpret the laws and create legislation at the local level. Texas updates the statewide accountability manual annually to determine measures for public schools.

Texas Education Accountability (TEA) manual defines the established criteria for campuses. The state guide defines established criteria for “all students” and for subgroups based upon demographic data and standard ratings of achievement for a campus or district.

Traditional 6 – 8 Grade Middle School: Students aged 11-15, enrolled in Grades 6-8.

Test/Assessment – a procedure intended to establish the quality, performance, or reliability of something, especially before it is taken into widespread use.

Tracking (also called ability grouping or streaming) is a practice, in education, of placing students into different groups within a school based on academic abilities

State Rating: As a result of the accountability movement, federal mandates urged states to create a school rating system. For instance, based upon state tests, the TEA (2011) issues a rating of Academically Unacceptable, Acceptable, Recognized, or Exemplary to each district and campus

Urban District : Relating to a certain part of the city that a person lives in, particularly the inner part of the city.

Hypothesis

A common misconception is that a hypothesis will be proven. Generally, a hypothesis is used to make prediction that can be tested by observing the outcome of an experiment. Through this study, the researcher has hypothesized that K-8 Grade academies produce students that perform at a higher percentage rate in Language Arts and Math than students in traditional 6 – 8 grade middles school. Additionally, it is further hypothesized that the level of positive parent involvement and school climate will be much higher in a K-8 grade setting than schools that are K-5 or traditional 6-8 grade schools. If the outcome is inconsistent with the hypothesis, then the hypothesis is rejected. However, if the outcome is consistent with the hypothesis, the experiment is said to support the hypothesis (Fisher, 1966). This careful language is used because researchers recognize that alternative hypotheses can never be proved but rather only supported by surviving rounds of scientific testing and eventually become widely thought of as true.

A useful hypothesis allows prediction, and within the accuracy of observation of time, the prediction will be verified. As the accuracy of observation improves with time,

the hypothesis may no longer provide an accurate prediction. In this case, a new hypothesis will arise to challenge the old, and to the extent that the new hypothesis makes more accurate predictions than old, the new will supplant it. Researchers can also use a null hypothesis, which state no relationship or difference between the independent or dependent variables. A null hypothesis uses a sample of all possible people to make a conclusion about the population (Fisher, 1966).

Limitations

The sample in this study is limited to those students at six focus schools that were formerly K–8th grade academies in a large urban district in Texas. During the 2008-2009 school year, the district voted to revert 5 out of 6 of the K– 8 grade campuses back into K-5 elementary schools. Two of the schools were completely closed down, although both of the campuses had earned the highest Reading and Math test scores from the Texas Education Agency that had ever been seen at those respective campuses throughout their existence. All of the 6 – 8 grade academy students were given a choice to either continue at the one and only academy left in the cluster, Academy No. 1, or to move to one of the traditional 6 – 8 grade middle school campuses outside of their attendance zone. Although all the students in this study are from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, the caliber of instruction as well as the educational experiences they had received, depending on which elementary school they attended, could influence the responses to the questionnaires and interviews. Out of the six schools that were studied only one of the schools still remains as a stand-alone K-8 campus in the entire cluster. At

the request of the leadership of the district, all other campuses were reverted back to traditional elementary campuses.

Finally, the number in the sample may be limited because all of the qualitative surveys and interviews were done on an at-will basis. This limitation could restrict the researcher's ability to generalize the findings to get a true picture and sense of what the majority of the individuals that worked within focus schools during the reconfiguration process were truly feeling.

Methodology (Abbreviated)

This study was a mixed-methods investigation that utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to describe the data. The qualitative method incorporates small group discussions using open-ended questions with teachers, parents and community members through individual interviews with teachers, parents and community members, and individual interviews with teachers, parents and community members also using surveys created through survey creation software. The quantitative method utilizes Math and Reading Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) & Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) data spanning from the years of 2000-2012 from each school to determine how each of the grade level configurations fared when compared to one another. Creswell (2005) noted that, access to both quantitative and qualitative data can lead to better utilization of data for understanding the research problem. Data were gathered in the form of Math and Reading assessments but were used to analyze quantitatively through direct comparison and discussion.

Significance of the Problem

Recently, a number of articles have been published on assessing the benefits of K-8 schools in the United States. In particular, there has been quite a degree of discussion among researchers on what they found or did not find about K-8 versus middle school grade configurations. Much of the research has been specifically on grade school configuration, and the specific benefits of K-8 versus middle school configurations. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) Office of Planning and Service Coordination responds to requests from the field of education regarding current educational concerns and issues. The staff provides readily available research articles and promising practices, or makes referrals to technical service providers and other sources. One of the most common recent requests from principals, teachers, parents, and policymakers is for research that will help determine what grade configuration is best for students in various grade levels. Is it more appropriate for fifth or sixth graders to be in a middle school or elementary school? Are there academic and developmentally appropriate benefits to the K-8 grade configuration versus the elementary school and middle school configuration?

Almost a decade back, NWREL looked at the available research on grade configuration and concluded that little evidence existed to determine a cause-and-effect relationship between grade configuration and academic achievement. The few studies that did exist offered few clear policy guidelines. For example, one controlled study showed that sixth graders did better in a K-8 setting rather than a middle school setting, but it did not demonstrate how the configuration affected other students of different grade

levels (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Many studies also did not control for school size, socioeconomic factors, and other variables, so results could be attributed to reasons other than grade configuration.

Not much has changed during the last decade in terms of the limited amount of rigorous research, although a few more studies have been conducted. Still, no empirical, large-scale studies have examined the relationship between grade configuration and student achievement as measured by standardized test scores (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jacobson, 2005).

Of the studies that exist, only a few have statistically controlled variables: Most are cases of correlational studies that rely on data self-reported by school districts. Few have looked at the relationship between grade configuration and student outcomes. However, several recent research reviews have done a good job of summarizing existing research and offering suggestive rather than conclusive findings.

Rationale for the Study

The rationale for this study is to decipher whether or not 6th – 8th grade students perform better in K- 8 grade academies or traditional 6 – 8 grade middle schools. The researcher is also looking to see if the climate and parent involvement differs in the mixed configurations of schools. Over the past decade in the field of education, middle schools have had to deal more and more with students falling short academically, according to the Texas Education Agency’s annual Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS). The AEIS report has provided a plethora of information to schools across Texas regarding assessment and demographic data. A pattern of low achievement

has begun to surface not only among middle school students but in particular among African American students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. There is evidence of a few scattered traditional middle schools across the state that have demonstrated high achievement, but for the most part, high performing middle schools are few and far between (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jacobson, 2005).

The lack of positive middle school campuses to use as a model for performance has provoked a desire to conduct further investigation to find what configuration and/or strategies should be used to influence school-wide academic excellence in performance. In addition to analyzing some of the obvious variables that might have an impact on student performance (leadership, quality teaching, and parental involvement), according to the research, examining the structure/grade reconfiguration of the school can be just as important a factor as the others previously discussed.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A disparity currently exists in the achievement of students attending a traditional 6–8 grade middle school versus those who attend K–8 grade academies (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Simmons and Blyth found that 6–8 grade students in K-8 grade schools had higher academic achievement, as measured by both grade point averages and standardized test scores, especially in mathematics. These students also had higher levels of participation in extracurricular activities, demonstrated greater leadership skills, and were less likely to be victimized than those in the traditional 6–8 grade school setting. Therefore, the problem as undertaken in this study was the effectiveness of the 6–8 graders in K-8 grade academies versus traditional 6–8 grade middle schools. An attempt was made to answer the questions that were raised, that is, are K–8 grade academies more effective in the area of student achievement by quantitatively comparing Texas Academic Assessment System Data (TAAS) and Texas Academic Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) passing percentage data to the performance of traditional 6 – 8 grade middle schools.

In order to overcome the decline in academic achievement among early adolescents in the United States, middle schools became popular in the latter half of the 20th century (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Paglin and Fager (1997) wrote that the founders of the traditional middle school concept proposed six classical roles for the middle school. Paglin and Fager labeled these as follows: articulation, integration, exploration, differentiation, guidance, and socialization. Paglin and Fager further postulated that the primary functions of traditional middle schools are not completely academic. The authors mentioned that Grades 6 – 8 addressed students’ developmental needs as well

which included social, academic, and behavioral needs. Later, Finn (2005) indicated that it was time for a thorough reform of middle school education, with a new focus on high standards, discipline, and accountability for student academic achievement.

As parents demand more academic freedom for their children, K-8 grade academies are gaining momentum. In an article entitled A review of strategic environmental assessment in 12 selected countries, in the *Wall Street Journal*, Chaker (2005) reported that many school districts are moving quickly to the K-8 grade concept of the middle school, and that a growing body of evidence suggests that middle school age students do better when they can remain longer in their familiar elementary schools. Chaker found that those students perform better academically and have fewer disciplinary problems than students attending the traditional 6 – 8 grade middle schools.

Transitions

An ideal setting to promote academic achievement would be for students to attend schools in a K-8 setting across the country. This recommendation was made by *The National Forum of Applied Educational Research Journal* in an article written by Wren (2003), U.S. Department of Education Reading First Newsletter. The issue of school-to-school transitions is one of the more prevalent themes throughout the grade span configuration literature. It is generally agreed that transitions are disruptive to the social structure in which learning takes place. With transitions, it is generally not the age of the student that matters but the disruption of the change itself. One study conducted in a large inner city district in the Midwest looked specifically at grade span configuration and transitions. This indicated a positive relationship between grade performance and the

opportunity to remain in the same learning environment and not have to move to a new setting to learn. Similarly, significant differences were observed for students experiencing one school-to-school transition as compared to two and three transitions from various teachers during the day. In effect, the more transitions a student makes, the worse the student performs (Wren, 2004)

Some earlier studies also pointed to a greater achievement loss associated with the transition from elementary to middle school at Grade 6 and from middle to secondary school in Grade 9 compared to students who were in K-8 schools (Alspaugh, 1998). On a related note, Alspaugh also reported that the students who transitioned from multiple elementary schools and merged into one middle school experienced greater achievement loss compared to those students who transitioned from a single elementary school into one middle school.

The recurring conclusion in the literature is that carefully planned, smooth transitions are important whenever they occur; in other words, schools must be responsive to the needs of incoming students and provide targeted comprehensive transition programs as pointed out in National Middle School Association, *Turning Points; Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (1989) and *This We Believe: Successful for Young Adolescents* (2003). Schools must anticipate the potential disruption in the learning environment due to the change and/or transition and be proactive in addressing the needs of the students ahead of time.

Research suggests that schools should be geographically located in a neighborhood setting and should be economically and ethnically diverse. The schools

should house more than 400 students at the elementary level and no more than 600 at the high school level (Hough, 2005). Keeping neighborhood schools small in size and diverse, will increase the chances of poor and minority students being successful and will encourage more parental support and more parental involvement in the schools (Castaldi, 1994). The debate as to renovation versus new construction has no simple answer. Each building, location, and potential grade level configuration will need to be evaluated on an individual basis (Miller, 2001).

K- 8 Revival

The dissatisfaction with middle level outcomes in certain circles has prompted a renewed interest in and a trend toward the revival of K-8 elementary schools in some districts (Pardini, 2002). In theory, these structures would include a middle level component within an elementary configuration. While no large scale, empirical study has examined the relationship between grade configuration, no large scale, empirical study has examined the relationship between grade configuration and student achievement. Several small qualitative or anecdotal research studies have favored a K-8 model (Hough, 2005). Although the statistical and anecdotal research is limited, these studies suggest, that there may be some advantages to this configuration in terms of achievement, behavior, safety, parental involvement, attendance and class size (Klump, 2006). In response, several large school districts (Baltimore, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Cleveland, New York City, San Antonio) are reverting many of their intermediate schools into a K-8 model.

The results of several studies indicated that middle level Grades 6, 7, and 8 realized higher achievement in K-8 schools than in schools with middle school configurations (Castaldi, 1994). From her study of Miami-Dade County schools, Abella (2005) noted that K-8 students had significant short-term beneficial results in achievement, attendance, and suspension rates. She also observed that 6th and 7th grades in Miami-Dade County schools showed greater improvement in mathematics and reading as compared to the same grades in middle schools, but the two groups had identical scores in 9th grade, so the effects were not long term (Abella, 2005). Abella cautions that further research should be done to determine if these effects remain true when taking into account factors such as greater numbers of students in the K-8 schools operating for longer periods of time.

Offenberg (2001) determined that 8th-graders showed higher achievement in K-8 schools than in middle schools. However, Offenberg acknowledged that a contributing factor in the higher achievement might be the lesser number of 8th-grade students in the K-8 schools as compared with those in middle schools.

Hough (2004) makes a distinction between the effectiveness of K-8 “elemiddle”(which is a combination of K-5 & 6-8) schools that adhere to middle school philosophy and programs, and K-8 schools that do not. Hough’s research suggests that when K-8 “elemiddle” schools are found to be outperforming 5-8 and 6-8 schools, it is because they are fully implementing middle grades’ promising practices. However, Hough admits that no studies have been conducted with a large enough sample size to

compare middle schools that fully implement the middle school philosophy, with K-8 schools; consequently, generalizations should not be made.

Alspaugh (1998) studied 16 school districts and found that students who attended middle schools experienced greater achievement loss in the transition to high school than students making the same transition from a K-8 school: “The findings imply that students placed in relatively small cohort groups for long spans of time experience more desirable outcomes”. The schools studied were primarily in rural and small-town districts, with no schools in urban areas. Alspaugh’s previous studies indicated that students typically recover any achievement loss the year after the transition to a new school.

The results of such studies should be interpreted with caution as they are very few in number, cannot necessarily be generalized across schools, and do not control for all possible variables. Researchers urge educators to study the strengths and weaknesses of various configurations in order to create effective educational services.

Rather than debate which grade configuration is best for middle grades, we would be better off expending our energy creating a curriculum that intellectually engages and inspires young adolescents, pushing for organized structures that support high-quality relationships, and finding better ways to reach out to families and communities. (Beane & Lipka, 2006, p. 30)

In a recent research review, Anfara and Buehler (2005) noted that, “no sequence of grades is perfect or, in itself, guarantees student academic achievement and healthy social and emotional development” (p. 57). No particular grade configuration is the “magic bullet to improving student achievement” (Anfara & Buehler, 2005, p. 57).

The academic performance of students is the major concern behind the return to K-8 schools. Districts that have moved to K-8 configurations, or who are contemplating

such a move, typically cite the need for improved academic performance as the primary criteria for the change. However, not all movements in favor of K-8 schools emerge from discussions of student achievement or even adolescent development. Some want K-8 schools to create true neighborhood schools. Others seek K-8 schools as a way to preserve racial and/or economic segregation. This multiplicity of purposes seems to make the K-8 grade configuration more attractive because it appears to accomplish several desirable ends. Another major factor in the decision to adopt K-8 schools involves the issues of student control, discipline, and safety. Truancy, high dropout rates, violence, and substance abuse are all associated with middle schools, while K-8 schools are deemed to be “safe places.” Because K-8 schools are typically smaller than many middle schools, they may provide young adolescents with the personalized attention that they would not get in larger middle schools (Paglin & Fager, 1997).

Converting to a K-8 configuration also eliminates the transition from 5th to 6th grade that occurs in 6-8 middle schools (Hough, 2005). These transitions require students to develop new relationships with adults and peers in a typically larger, more bureaucratic schools, and negotiate unfamiliar school regulations and social norms. The K-8 configuration may also lead to sustained parental involvement in their children’s schooling. While many families are quite involved in their children’s elementary schools, their participation declines dramatically when their children enter middle school (Pardini, 2002).

Research Evidence

Empirical research on the topic of grade configuration is sparse. Many reports are anecdotal in nature and describe the perceived benefits and drawbacks of various grade configurations. Very little research attempts the more difficult task of determining if a cause-effect relationship exists between grade configurations and academic achievement while controlling for variables like school size, student socioeconomic status and teacher experience.

Numerous scholars and practitioners have argued that middle schools influence students' behaviors and social-emotional outcomes in negative ways (Howley, 2002; Paglin & Fager, 19997; Reeves, 2005; Renschler, 2002). These researchers have suggested that middle schools have detrimental effects in the areas of self-esteem, sense of belonging or connectedness to school, interpersonal relationships, and school safety (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). Only a handful of the early studies compared students in middle schools to students in other grade configurations. In most cases, the authors based their arguments on hypothetical assumptions rather than directly comparing student outcomes in different types of schools.

Researchers in four recent studies suggest that converting middle schools to K-8 or 7-12 schools had little or no impact on students' academic achievement when other school and demographic factors were taken into account (Hough, 2003). At the same time, in some of these studies, researchers (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jacobson, 2005) suggest that K-8 schools may benefit young adolescents' social and emotional development. Schmitt (2004) conducted a study of the impact of professional

development (PD) and grade configuration on student achievement. Schmidt's sample included 292 middle-grade teachers from 43 schools in Missouri, 22 of which were designated as high PD schools, and 21 as low PD schools. She found that neither PD nor grade configuration had a direct relationship to student achievement, although teachers in 6-8 schools were more likely to be highly engaged in PD than their K-8 or 7-12 counterparts (Guskey, 2000).

McKenzie, Ogle, Stegman, and Mulvenon (2006) examined grade configuration as an environmental contextual factor that could potentially affect academic success. The researchers examined data from 500,000 Arkansas students in the 4th, 6th, and 8th grades between Spring 2001 and Spring 2005. The researchers found that grade configuration was not a statistically significant predictor of student academic success. What did seem to matter in the 4th and 6th grades was the state's accountability system; that is, students in these grades often performed better in schools that were configured to match the state examination schedule because the last year at school was the year in which tests were administered. For students in the 8th grade that were the lowest performing group, this effect was not evident (Offenberg, 2001).

Weiss and Kipnes (2006) conducted a rigorous, multilevel analysis of the effects of different grade configurations on student outcomes in the Philadelphia School District. The first wave of the study began during the summer of 1996 with a random stratified sample of 1,483 students attending 45 Philadelphia schools. The researchers made the following findings:

Students in 6-8 schools were more likely to have parents with lower education levels and to receive public assistance than those in K-8 schools.

Students in 6-8 schools fared significantly worse than their K-8 counterparts on a number of measures such as course grades, failure rates, perceived safety and threat, and self-esteem.

When school size was taken into account, along with several socioeconomic and demographic variables at the school and individual level, grade configuration had no significant effect on the four academic outcomes studied: grades, standardized test scores, attendance, and disciplinary problems.

According to parent and student interview data, students in K-8 schools did have significantly higher self-esteem and were less likely to perceive threats in the school environment.

School size mattered—larger schools had a more detrimental effect on student outcomes regardless of grade configuration.

The authors concluded that there were “far fewer differences in student outcomes by school type” than previous research would suggest. (Weiss, & Kipnes, 2006, pp. 239-272)

Byrnes and Ruby (2007) also compared the achievement of students in middle schools to students in K-8 schools in Philadelphia using a sample of 41,000 eighth grade students across five cohorts from 95 schools. The researchers found that the older K-8 schools did perform significantly better than the city’s middle schools as was expected, but these differences were related to differences in student and teacher populations, average grade size, and school transition rates. The newer K-8 schools did not achieve the same advantage, despite having smaller grade sizes and lower transition rates due to the more disadvantaged student and teacher populations. After controlling for school transition and average grade size, there were no discernable differences between K-8 and middle schools in terms of academic achievement.

Another study provided contrasting results using administrative data on public school students in North Carolina, (Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2007) found that 6th grade students attending middle schools (6-8) were much more likely to be cited for discipline problems than those attending elementary schools (K-6). After adjusting

for the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the students and their schools, that difference remained and persisted at least through 9th grade. When the researchers analyzed end-of-grade test scores, they found complimentary findings. It was noteworthy that these researchers contrasted middle schools with traditional elementary schools serving grades K-6 rather than K-8.

Taken together, these studies suggest that simply reconfiguring schools does not necessarily enhance student academic performance, although it may have some benefits on young adolescents' social-emotional development. At the same time, creating small schools or small learning communities within large schools may help facilitate greater personalization which, in turn, may lead to improved teaching, learning, behavior, and healthy social-emotional development. Interestingly, none of these studies considered whether or not the middle school concept was implemented; K-8 schools were simply compared to middle schools. The results could be vastly different if exemplary middle schools were used in this research.

A meta-analysis was examined of the available research addressing the identification of issues essential to the decision-making process of a unit school district in Central Illinois. The findings, as reported to the district, were that it was the primary mission of the school district to provide an environment where all students would reach their academic potential in the safest and most nurturing environment. The research was analyzed and, following the analysis, recommendations were made on the following components: Grade level configuration, diversity professional development and renovation/reconstruction of new schools.

Grade Level Configuration

The results of several studies indicate that students in middle level Grades 6-8 obtained higher achievement in K-8 schools than in schools that are of the middle school configuration (Klump, 2006). Offenbergl (2001) also determined that 8th grade students performed at a higher achievement level in a K-8 setting when acknowledging that a contributing factor for the lower achievement at the middle schools may have been the larger number of students at each grade level. Alspaugh (1998) supported the K-8 configuration when he cited the findings from his study of 16 school districts and found that students who attended middle schools experienced greater achievement loss in the transition to high school than students making the transition from schools that had a grade level span of kindergarten through 8th grade. Alspaugh (1998) also found that students placed in relatively small groups for long spans of time tended to experience better performance in high school. Gregg (2002), in her research on elementary school grade span configuration found new evidence on student achievement, achievement equity, and cost efficiency. In her research she suggested, that smaller learning environments were the most equitable and cost efficient means of delivering high student achievement through smaller schools with broader emphasis on instruction.

While the middle school concept was introduced and held to be a viable method to alleviate the problems facing students at those grade levels, not all research supported this belief. Alspaugh (1998) quoted a 1997 Pamperien research study finding that the implementation of middle school practices had little influence on the achievement scores of middle school students. Wihry, Coladarci, and Meadow, (1992) found that 8th graders

attending school in junior/senior high school performed less well than 8th graders in elementary settings (K-8, K-9 and 3-8). High (2005) posited that it was conceivable that schools with configurations of 5-8 or 6-8 were incorrectly calling themselves “middle schools.” While they may assert that they utilize the middle school practices, many do not. Hough (2005) states that only those schools fully implementing the middle school philosophy as outlined in the National Middle School Association’s 2003 position paper should be labeled “middle schools.” Hough (2005) asserts that many school systems are conducting their own research and finding the students in Grades 6-8 who are attending a K-8 school are scoring higher than their counterparts in other grade span configurations. He feels that the successful K-8 “elemiddle school” is the school that is successful in implementing the middle school philosophy.

Hough (2005) cites a nationwide study of 500 schools that examined the relationship between grade span configurations and student achievement. The results were that K-8 “elemiddle schools” were consistently producing more desirable results than schools with other configurations. Over the past few years, many states including Louisiana, Maine, Texas, Colorado, Georgia, and Connecticut have looked at the feasibility of recommending conversions statewide. Many large urban school districts are looking at switching to K-8 schools as well.

When examining the research into grade level configurations, researchers found that the number of transition students had some negative impact on student achievement. Renchler (2000) stated that school transitions impose stress on students, and negatively influence schools’ identity and sense of community. Gregg (n.d.) stated that multiple

transitions cause other negative outcomes. A research summary on the transition to high school, completed by The National Middle School Association, cited current research on transitions from middle schools to high schools, which indicated that students experienced a decrease in achievement from middle school to high school. Students with transitions at Grade 6 and 9 experienced greater achievement loss than those students with fewer transitions, and experienced more behavior problems such as suspensions and expulsions early in the 9th grade year. Alspaugh (1999) conducted some additional research on the impact of transitions on student achievement and found that, with each transition, the student suffers some achievement loss. However, he noted that the student generally recovers the loss in the year following the transition.

Other research exposes the negative effects of transitions. Wren (2003) states that grade span configuration and transition have a significant positive and negative effect on student achievement, respectively. Alspaugh (2000) noted that students who transition into high school without attending an intermediate school experienced less of an achievement loss than students who went through multiple transitions. Gregg's (2007) research found that there was an increase in the high school dropout rate as the number of transitions increased. Paglin and Fager (1997) provided a list of factors to consider when determining grade span configurations:

- The cost and length of student travel
- A possible decrease or increase in parent involvement
- The number of students at each grade level which may affect class size and course offerings
- The effect of whether or not neighborhood schools stay open or close
- The number of school transitions
- The opportunities for interactions between age groups
- The influence of older children on younger
- The building design is it suitable for the grade span configuration. (p 27)

Professional Development

Teachers often take advantage of college classes, workshops, and institutes, but these efforts have little impact on student achievement because the efforts tend to be disjointed, unfocused, and offer high school teachers few opportunities to reflect on what they have done with their fellow teachers. In order to be effective, professional development should be focused on what teachers in individual schools need to know and be able to do for their students. Focused professional development that is based on high standards of teaching and learning, and that changes the current practices, is essential to improve teaching and better student achievement (Promising Practices, 2004). In 1997, the San Francisco Unified School District was one of five recipients of the U.S. Department of Education's first National Awards Program for Model Professional Development. That district leadership decided that a uniform professional development plan would not work in their setting. They put together a package of professional development opportunities where schools were able to tailor their professional development program to fit the needs of the individual schools and teachers. They developed school site plans that identified what the teachers needed, what the individual departments needed, and what the school needed. They not only provided time for teachers to work together on professional growth but they also allowed time for common preparation periods, and provided district funds for substitutes being provided for released time. Their efforts in the area of professional development resulted in a significant increase in student achievement scores in reading and math for three consecutive years.

The National Middle School Association published a research summary on the topic of Professional Development of Teachers (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010). Their report stated that the best way to increase teacher effectiveness in the classroom is through regular, high quality professional development. A National Center for Education Statistics study in 2001 found that teachers felt the professional development was most effective if it contained two elements: teachers had to know that the professional development was linked to other program activities at school in which they were involved, and that the professional development activity was followed up with school-based activities. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) study affirms the assertions stated earlier that the professional development was linked to other program activities. It also affirms the assertions stated earlier that professional development must be focused on what the teacher and the school needs and can be integrated into the daily life of the school. The NCES research summary suggests that the one-size-fits-all approach to professional development is not effective. Middle-level teachers have different needs than primary or high school teachers. While it may be easier to provide focused training to staffs in narrow grade level configurations that factor needs to be weighed against the positive effects on student achievement of other grade configurations. Guskey (2000) concluded that an effective design for implementing professional development is one that integrates district-wide and site-based experiences. Site based experiences can also be narrowed to provide professional development at the grade level, content area, or special needs area.

Diversity

A study at the University of Maryland through the *National Forum of Applied Educational Research Journal* (2008) revealed that a majority of faculty and students believe that multi-racial/multi-ethnic classrooms generate more complex thinking among all students. They also agreed that learning in multi-racial/multi-ethnic classrooms had a positive impact on students' cognitive and personal development because it challenges stereotypes, broadens perspectives, and sharpens critical thinking skills. They went on to state that diversity in the classroom is necessary but not sufficient for increased student achievement. In order to be effective, the learning environment must be learning-centered rather than teacher-centered, must utilize interactive teaching techniques, and must contain a supportive, inconclusive classroom atmosphere.

While there appear to be academic benefits resulting from integrated classrooms, other benefits are worthy of mention. Coeyman (1998) cites researchers who applaud the increase in academic achievement, but he also believed that integrated classrooms serve a broader social function of breaking down barriers. Minorities who attend integrated schools tend, with increasing frequency, to live in integrated neighborhoods, have a mixed circle of friends, and earn higher wages. While not all agree that court order desegregation is the answer, many do assert that in order to be productive, integration and not desegregation must occur. In 2006, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights assembled a panel of experts to discuss whether elementary and high schools students really benefit from a diverse environment. Banerji (2006) noted that Kurlaender stated that attending a diverse school can provide an enhanced attitude and citizenship, and lead to educational

and occupational gains. Kurlaender also stated some studies which show that white students are positively affected by their interactions with minorities. He believes that cross cultural racial interaction and friendships take place. However, not all members on the commission were convinced that racially balanced schools provided any positive impact on academic achievement.

Positive aspects of diversity on students were also demonstrated in an article by Gurin, Nagda, and Lopez (2004) focusing on research completed on diversity in education and citizenship. They argued that experiences with diversity educate and prepare citizens for a multicultural democracy. The researchers concluded that mere contact with racially diverse populations is not enough; there must be equality in status, existence of common goals, and intimacy of interaction in order to produce positive effects. The authors concluded that the studies cited in their article supported the claim made by Guarasci and Cornwell (1977) that democratic citizenship is strengthened when students understand and experience social connections outside of their often parochial “autobiographies.”

While there has been a significant amount of research on the topic of ethnic diversity, economic diversity and its impact on student achievement has not been investigated to the same degree. The available research does not lend itself to find a positive effect when educating students in an economically diverse setting. Wake County, North Carolina, has a 30-year history of race based on integration. It shifted to an economic model in 2000. Its goal was to keep the low-income population to 40% at any given school. It has 22 of its 139 schools with a higher percentage than the desired

40%, but even with that figure it only busses 2.5% of its students in order to achieve this economic balance even with a minimal disruption and slight opposition. While academic and social equity may result from this economic integration, the reality of politics will make the future of this model uncertain.

Homewood (2000) discussed the topic of socioeconomic lines in education with Stephen Plank, a researcher at Hopkins' Center for Social Organization of School. Plank found that teachers were just as important as students when promoting interaction of children and academic success. He found that traditional teachers tended to create interaction among different groups. These traditional teachers did not see a need to change their teaching style to accommodate the diversity of the class. As a result, those teachers often promoted the rise of a select group of students. Those students were usually the brightest or the best behaved. The teaching style here was mainly made up of lectures and had a very narrow range of classrooms activities (Plank, as cited in Homewood, 2000).

In more integrated classrooms, effective teachers tended to draw on the different home and life experiences of the students and incorporate them into their lessons. These teachers also utilized a variety of activities that actively encouraged participation among the different ethnic and economic groups in the classrooms. By incorporating the diversity of the students' experiences into the classroom, many of the students were able to learn from each other (Graham, 1994).

Graham (1994) stated that a multicultural environment requires social skills that can best be developed in ethnically diverse schools. These skills are best developed

through exposure to very diverse people, cultures, and points of view. Diversity, Graham posits benefits everyone. Additionally, Juvonen (2003) notes that psychologists from UCLA have now found that students are more likely to feel safer, less bullied, and less lonely in ethnically diverse students.

Miszell (2004) points out that,

There is not adequate research to provide definitive guidance about the relative effectiveness of K-8 and 6-8 schools, but there is no shortage of information and models for how to educate youth effectively in middle grades, regardless of the configuration. (p. 11)

The answer to the debate as to which configuration is best “should be found in schools where middle-level promising practices are most easily and readily implemented at highest degrees for the longest periods of time, resulting in positive student outcomes” (Hough, 2005, p.4).

Overall, the review of the literature revealed many unanswered questions and inconclusive or conflicting results regarding grade span structures. The relationships between program implementation and student performance as they relate to various grade spans still needs to be thoroughly examined. It seems, however, that some school districts view the restructuring of grade spans and facilities as a quick or easy fix for unsatisfactory student performance results. Instead, in an article in RMLE Online, Schmitt (2004) suggests that:

In their efforts to improve student achievement, policymakers would be better advised to concentrate on fully implementing (middle school) programs and providing high quality professional development for teachers to improve student learning than to engage in abstract debates over other factors not supported by research. Grade configuration factors are currently being debated for which the research regarding student achievement is inconclusive. Improving student

performance . . . can best be achieved when the entire school community focuses on common goals a part of a whole school reform initiative.

Students attending high school without attending an intermediate school experienced less problems transitioning. Gregg's (n.d.) research found that there was an increase in the high school dropout rates as the number of transitions increased.

A Positive Collaborative School Culture

When considering school reconfiguration and which grade level structure is most effective, the thought of maintaining a positive school culture comes to mind as an essential component to the implementation of the new structure. The leader must carefully orchestrate the facilitation of the vision through the push-and-pull process that encourages change. Sergiovanni (1991) stated that,

One theme emerges from this discussion of the process of change. Though principals are important and their visions are key in focusing attention on change and in successfully implanting the process of change, what counts in the end is bringing together the ideas and commitments of a variety of people who have a stake in the success of the school. As this process unfolds, principals can often find themselves on thin ice. They need to be clear about what it is that they want, but cannot be so clear that they are providing people with road maps. They need to allow people to have an important say in shaping the direction of the school and deciding on the changes needed to get there, but they cannot be so detached that these individual aspirations remain more rhetorical than real. (p. 83)

Shared decision making is an attribute that is a necessity for urban school leaders. The Bay Area Reform Collaborative conducted under the leadership of Copeland (2003), was a longitudinal study on leadership attributes that promote success in economically disadvantaged areas. One underlying factor that contributed to success was shared decision making. According to Copeland, shared leadership encouraged collaboration and allowed staff members to “sustain” their progress despite local and district

roadblocks. He also found that, as teachers and administrators collaboratively created systems, they in turn transformed the culture and climate of the school.

Summary

At the intermediate level, many researchers caution against equating the middle level “concept” or philosophy with any specific grade configuration or organizational structure. Since the findings about the effectiveness of various configurations are inconclusive, the general consensus is that “effective programs and practices, not grade configurations determine the quality in schools where middle-level promising practices are most easily and readily implemented at the highest degrees for the longest periods of time, resulting in positive student outcomes.

There are also conflicting arguments about the most appropriate placement of Grade 6 students. Some research points to an achievement advantage when Grade 6 students are located in an elementary configuration. On the other hand, there is a general agreement that students in Grades 6, 7, and 8 have more in common developmentally in terms of physical, psychological, social, and intellectual variables than other age-grade combinations and constitute an appropriate peer grouping.

In spite of some highly publicized K-8 reorganizations in a few districts in the U.S. recently, the overall trend has been a decrease in K-8 configurations over several decades and rise in the middle level model within a three-tier organization. Nevertheless, reports of behavioral problems and lagging achievement in the middle grades (e.g., Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, TIMSS) are often associated

with the middle school concept, and have prompted some school districts to explore other alternatives.

The recent trend toward the revival of K-8 elementary schools in a few school districts (Pardini, 2002) has been one response. Several small qualitative or anecdotal research studies have favored a K-8 model (Hough, 2005), suggesting that there may be some advantages to this configuration in terms of achievement, behavior, safety, parental involvement, attendance, school, and class size. At the same time, the K-8 configuration comes with its own set of potential disadvantages or problems. In facilities where the middle grade enrollments are smaller, for example, there may be fewer resources available (e.g., time, money, staff, space) to enrich the middle level programs. Schools with smaller enrollments are less likely to be able to provide a broader compliment of specialized electives or courses, a full range of extra-curricular activities, and/or specialized facilities (Beane & Lipka, 2006).

Particularly at the middle level, the professional training of teachers may be the key factor in determining how well teachers accept the established tenets of effective practice and how well they subsequently implement them. Research suggests that fewer than one in four middle grade teachers have specialized preparation for this level so targeting teacher learning and staff development may hold promise as an effective intervention to strengthen those areas where teacher attitudes conflict with the middle school concepts.

Overall, the review of the literature revealed many unanswered questions and inconclusive or conflicting results regarding grade span structures. The relationships

between program implementation and student performance as they relate to various grade span configurations still needs to be more thoroughly examined. It seems however that some school districts view the restructuring of grade spans and facilities as a “quick or easy fix” for unsatisfactory student performance results. Instead, in an article Schmitt (2004) suggests that,

In their efforts to improve student achievement, policymakers would be better advised to concentrate on fully implementing (middle school) programs and providing high quality professional development for teachers to improve student learning than to engage in abstract debates over other factors not supported by research. Grade configuration appears to be one of the debates over other factors not supported by research. Grade configuration appears to be one of those factors currently being debated for which the research regarding student achievement is inconclusive. Improving student performance . . . can best be achieved when an entire school community focuses on common goals as part of a whole school reform initiative.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Mixed Methods

The goal of the research process was to produce new knowledge or a deepened understanding of a topic or issue. This process takes three main forms (although, as previously discussed, the boundaries between them may be obscure):

- Exploratory research, which helps to identify and define a problem or question
- Constructive research, which tests theories and proposes solutions to a problem or question
- Empirical research, which tests the feasibility of a solution using empirical evidence.

There are two major types of research designs: qualitative research and quantitative research. Researchers choose qualitative or quantitative methods according to the nature of the research topic they want to investigate and the research questions that they aim to answer.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is the art of understanding human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior in broad ways of thinking. In order to analyze broad themes, one must research by aiming to investigate a question without attempting to qualify measurable variables or look for potential relationships between variables. This type of research aims to investigate a question without attempting to qualify measurable variables or look to potential relationships between variables. It is viewed as more restrictive in testing hypotheses because it can be expensive and time consuming, and

typically limited to a single set of research subjects. Qualitative research is often used as a method of exploratory research as a basis for later quantitative hypotheses. Qualitative research is linked with the philosophical and theoretical stance of social constructivism (Willis, 2007).

Quantitative Research

Quantitative research is a systematic empirical investigation of quantitative properties and phenomena and their relationships. When collecting the data, the researcher asks narrow questions to collect numerical data and then further analyze it by utilizing statistical methods. The quantitative research designs are experimental, and they are correlational. Statistics derived from quantitative research can be used to establish the existence of associative or casual relationships between variables. Quantitative research is linked with the philosophical and theoretical stance of positivism (Alspaugh, 1998).

The quantitative data collection method relies on random sampling and structured data collection instruments that fit diverse categories of students as well as teachers. Due to the simplicity of the questioning, the methods produce results that are easy to summarize, compare, and generalize. Quantitative research is concerned with testing hypotheses of interest derived from the theory and/or being able to estimate the size of a phenomenon of interest. Depending on the research questions, participants may be randomly assigned to different treatments; this is the only way that a quantitative study can be considered a true experiment. If this is not feasible, the researcher may collect data not participant and situational characteristics in order to statistically control for their

influence on the dependent or outcome variables. If the intent is to generalize from the research participants to a larger population, the researcher will need to employ probability sampling to select participants (Yecke, 2006).

In either qualitative or quantitative research, the researcher (s) may collect primary or secondary data (Yecke, 2006). Primary data is collected specifically for the research, such as through interviews or questionnaires. Secondary data is data that already exists, such as census data, which can be reused for the research. It is a good ethical research practice to use secondary data whenever and wherever possible (Turner, 2004).

A mixed-method research that includes qualitative and quantitative elements, using both primary and secondary data, is becoming more common today (Hough, 2005). The overall consensus is that there is no definitive answer to the question: What is the best configuration? The topic is complex and controversial, but no single configuration has proven to best serve all the goals and purposes of middle-level education (e.g., academic achievement, student development, and social adjustment, high school preparation, parental involvement, etc.). Each configuration has its own distinct advantages and disadvantages. The suggestion then would be that school boards are better served by basing their decisions on their own district goals and priorities and focusing on building on the positive potential strengths and minimizing the weaknesses of whatever grade span is in place (Palin & Fager, 1997).

Data Gathering

This study is a mixed-methods study that heavily relied on the honesty and integrity of the teachers that administered the assessment to the students. Also the equity in the way that the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) and Texas Assessment Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) was administered from the years of 2000–2012 across the state including the piloted campuses in this research study. The data was captured from the Academic Excellence Indicating System (AEIS) report that is put out yearly by the State of Texas. This report is filled with information regarding every public and charter school in the State of Texas that took the standardized test for that school year. In addition to the passing and failing percentages for each of the content areas tested, the report also includes attendance, dropout rates, special education numbers, limited language speaking students, a breakdown of staff experience, average salaries at each campus, etc. The researcher had the distinct honor to work closely with the Research and Evaluation Department of Student Accountability from the study focus district. The task was to pull tailored reports from each of the focus schools over time that captured their success as elementary schools and also decipher whether or not their academic success would continue or diminish after the reconfiguration to K-8 academies. The researcher's rationale for teaming with the Research and Evaluation Department of Student Accountability was to ensure that the data sets that were being used were aligned and based on the same information.

The quantitative data that was utilized in this study specifically related to only two content areas; Language Arts and Mathematics; therefore, the findings could only be

applied to those two areas of achievement. The six schools of focus were all from one specific area of town all of which were in the same district. Although the student performance increased at greater rates after the schools went from traditional elementary schools to K – 8 academies, two of the schools were closed after the 2007–2008 school year due to low enrollment in prior school years so there was only data for the schools while they were open between the years of 2000 and 2008.

The qualitative portion of the data was gathered through multiple sources in an effort to ensure that results were from a variety of sources and not solely based on one form of assessment. The researcher was able to secure a listing of all teachers that worked in the reconfigured schools during the transformation period through open records. In addition to working closely with the Research and Evaluation Department of Student Accountability, the researcher was able to focus and glean as much information as possible regarding district accountability. The researcher was successful in making contact via phone, email, via survey and in person with former staff members and community members from all six of the focus schools. Meeting times were conveniently scheduled to conduct interviews, roundtable discussions, and in some instances some staff members agreed to simply fill out a quick survey regarding the different grade configurations. A tremendous amount of insight was gained regarding the participants' feelings about which configuration worked and if they didn't, why or why not. In addition to just answering the scripted questions that were provided by the researcher, the participants went on further to offer words of advice and insight on how the reconfiguration could have been done differently and gave suggestions from their

perspectives on how the district could improve the process if they considered doing it again in the future.

Gathering the qualitative data was quite interesting from the researcher's perspective because it was very informative to find that many of the participants were eager and ready to share their thoughts on the whole reconfiguration process. Those that had an opinion on the process seemed to eagerly share and wanted their information to get back to the district leadership in an effort to make changes that they felt were needed. Those that had no opinion truly could not care less about the process, feedback to district administration or future plans for other reconfigurations of schools.

Focus of the Study

The focus of this study was to identify the attributes of reconfigured teams with hopes of figuring out what makes students successful or not successful academically. A qualitative study was conducted using participants from a strategically selected group of individuals from the six identified focus campuses in one school district in the State of Texas. In addition to monitoring the academic progress of the students within the focus campuses it was important to evaluate the educational structures that exist in middle schools and have proven to be overwhelming for 6 – 8 grade students. The purpose of this research was to explore and evaluate educational structures that existed in K–8 instructional settings.

The survey was uniquely designed to not only glean informational on best instructional practices from the participants but it also was used to evaluate educational structures that existed in middle school settings. There is overwhelming research that

speaks specifically to the achievement gap between African American students and their counterparts as well as the evidence of a variety of social factors that are present that inhibits student growth (Gustein & Peterson 2005). Data has concluded the evidence of school and community challenges that persuade middle school students to disconnect and isolate themselves. A number of researchers have analyzed the characteristics that are prevalent and the relationships that exist in the constant challenges. The focus of this study surrounded K-8 academies versus 6-8 traditional middle schools in public schools in an urban district in Texas. There is definitely a need for student improvement in academic achievement. It was the researcher's task to figure out which organizational structure seemed to work best. The area of focus was the middle school conceptual framework and to determine which configuration was most effective. In addition to academic support, the researcher included the physical, intellectual, and social-emotional needs of middle school children and a program of studies based upon the concept of exploration which was supposed to provide opportunities for student growth (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; George, 2009; Merenbloom, 1983).

Research questions in a qualitative study provide a basis for gathering descriptive information that assists in the development of critical pieces which address the purpose of the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Calabrese, 2006). Research questions also “set the boundaries” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 37) on what will be studied. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that as research questions are formulated, they are clearly connected to the conceptual framework and “represent the facets of an empirical domain

that the researcher most wants to explore” (p. 23). According to Calebrese (2006), research questions set out to accomplish the following:

Research questions are the basis for the appropriate research strategy employed in the study. They dictate the methods used in the study, creating a strong nexus between the questions asked and the methodology. In qualitative research, the research question is an interrogative sentence that asks a question about some process, issue, or phenomenon to be explored. (p. 9)

Strauss and Corbin (1990) remind researchers that the “original research question is a directive” (p. 39) that leads the researcher to examine the specifics such as performance, location, relevant and important documents, and other essential pieces; namely, keeping the researcher focused on the topic of study.

Summary

When considering the onset of the idea of reconfiguration of the six focus schools in the district of focus, there was a range of emotions that originally surfaced. When the idea was first presented to the teachers, students, and parents, there was originally negative feedback from them. Many parents brought up a very valid issue of concern regarding placing 4-year olds and 14-year olds in the same building together. Socially, there is a huge variance in the age ranges and parents in particular wanted to ensure that their little ones did not pick up poor behavior, language, and habits in general from the older children.

Ironically, the most positive feedback that we received was from the parents of the 6th–8th grade students. These parents were elated with the thought of their children receiving more time in an elementary setting to mature. The parents appreciated the fact that in the academy setting, their children would still receive some of the elementary principles of instruction although they are “technically” middle school students. The parents would have an opportunity to collaborate with teachers from previous years on up to their anticipated 8th grade teachers. This would give students the opportunity to build a stronger rapport and relationship with the teachers ultimately creating a higher level of two-way trust between teacher and parent.

There were some community members that had concerns about going from traditional elementary schools and traditional middle schools to academies. They felt that it would create more behavior problems among 6th–8th graders and that there would be behaviors learned among 4 and 5-year old students because they would be more likely to

mock their peers' negative behavior. After the onset of the true academic program and the data began to reveal the positive attributes of the program and it was obvious that the academic progress of the students in the academy seemed to exceed their peers in a traditional middle school and/or elementary school, community members' feelings began to change about the concept of the academy.

In this study, a methodology that sought to understand all participants' experiences in a specified school community was needed. Research that evaluated individual perspectives to gain an insight on the strategy that encompassed the entire organizational culture was important to ensure that the positive characteristics that were employed were documented. It was necessary to record and analyze each group of individuals within both school organizations to understand how their experiences comprehensively equated to the success or failure of academy students.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS OF DATA

Choosing an appropriate methodology of study is extremely important in educational research. It is dependent, however, on a variety of factors and may take on many different forms. Traditionally, there should be a direct relationship between the research design and the questions that are being investigated in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 134).

The ability to engage in ownership of growth based on personalized data by students alongside their parents, teachers, campus leaders and district administrators is vital (Wayman & Jimerson, 2010). Additionally, Wayman and Jimerson suggest the collaborative use of data as an integral requirement for school learning, but also referred to a broad definition on the information, which includes any facts that help teachers know more about their students. Wayman and Jimerson asserted that data also may include attendance, demography, health history, family sociological needs, and so on.

Although data for instructional improvement is critical, school improvement goals require leadership artistry, which incorporates expectations for the sociological context of each educational community (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Copland, 2003). Furthermore, Leithwood and Seashore-Louis (2011) proposed that the principal lead the staff in viewing data as more than a measure of accountability.

More research is needed to determine if there is a relationship between student achievement, enrollment, and overall performance in either a traditional 6th–8th grade middle schools versus a K-8th grade academies.

The three research questions that guided the study were as follows:

1. How do K-8 academies compare in achievement in the areas of mathematics and language arts when compared to 6-8 traditional middle schools?
2. Are K-8 academies perceived to be more effective in the areas of parental involvement and in having a positive school climate conducive to teaching and learning, than comprehensive 6-8 middle schools as perceived by teachers, principals and parents and stakeholders?
3. What perceptions do all stakeholders including administrators, teachers, parents and community members have regarding the overall effectiveness of K-8 academies?

Question 1 was quantitative and focused on the content areas of language arts and mathematics only. The data was provided on either the rating scale of the TAAS and/or the TAKS. The data would be analyzed to see if the academy K-8 concept had more favorable outcomes, or did the middle school traditional 6-8 concept have more success?

Questions 2 & 3 were based on indicators of the success of the campuses as perceived by the teachers and administrators point of view and also from the point of view of parents, community members and stakeholders through the interview protocols and discussion. Success was determined by percentages that were designated as passing as deemed by TEA for each year in question throughout the 2000–2011 school years.

Presentation Phase

There are ten tables that represent five schools that were previously configured as K-5 grade elementaries but later reconfigured into K-8 grade academies. There was one additional school (shown in Table 1-4) that was originally a 6–8 grade traditional middle school and later reconfigured into a K-8 grade academy. With the goal of gathering consistent data, the researcher categorized the tables as follows: grade level, the actual math and reading percentage the school received from TEA for each year noted, the year the school changed to a K-8 academy and the linear percentage passing progression for both content areas being measured over the span of years designated.

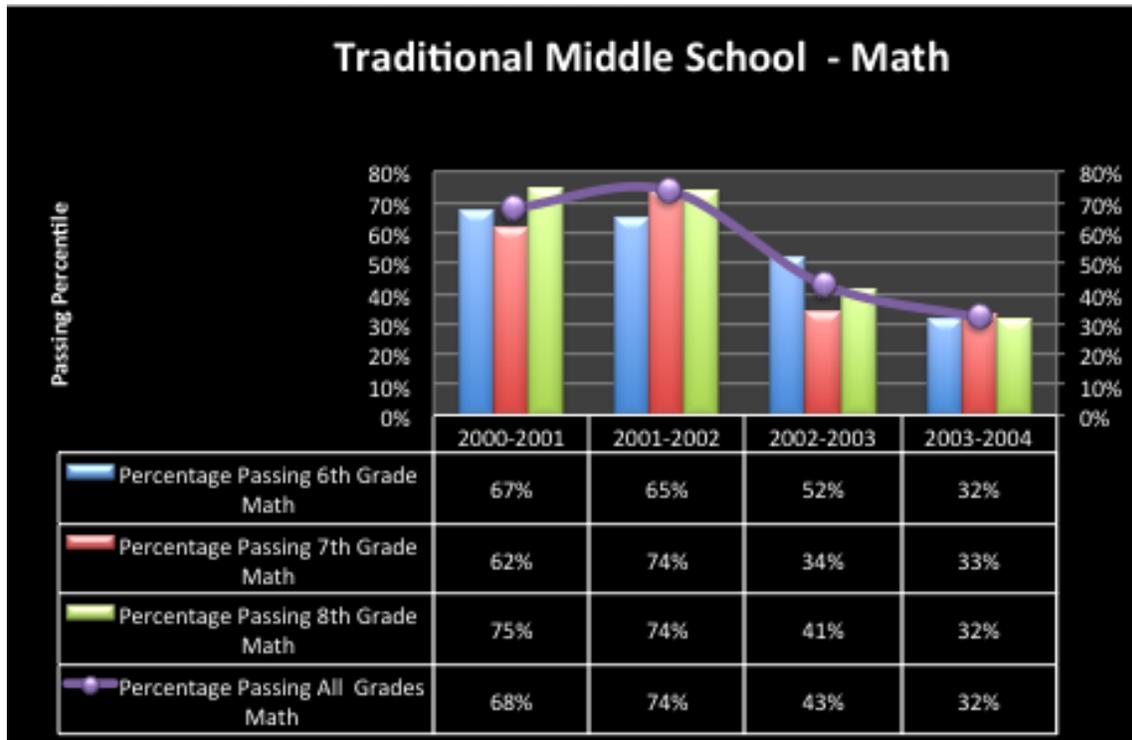
Focus School No.1: Traditional Middle School

Research Question 1: How do K-8 academies compare in achievement in the areas of mathematics and language arts when compared to 6-8 traditional middle schools? As indicated in the introductory statement to this chapter, there were various data sources used to answer this question. The prior history of the district indicated a strong need for unique performance indicators. Long-range goals set by the district for student performance were strictly correlated to the goals set forth by the Texas Educational Agency. In an attempt to improve district wide performance overall, leadership chose to designate rigorous instruction starting with K–8 strategies as a viable school impact district-wide intervention. The Focus School Board Policy for the K-8 conversion brought about major academic performance changes. The end result was clear that the

K-8 district-wide conversion would have to be a major intervention in order to improve the overall performance of the targeted campuses as well as the district.

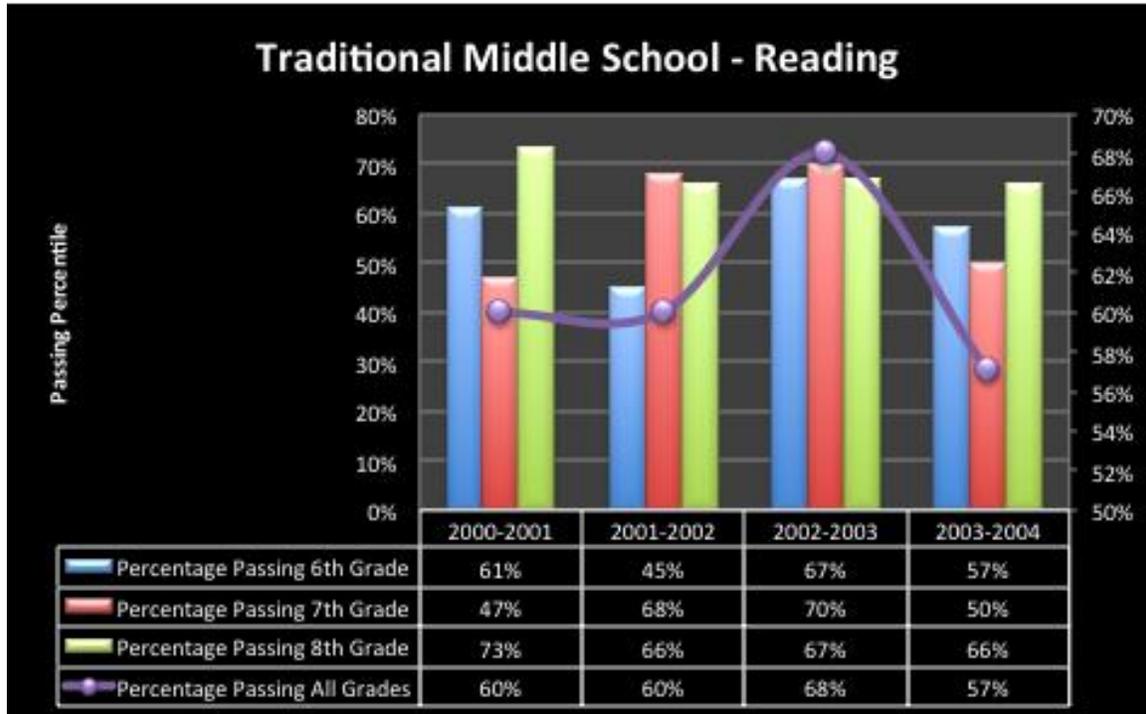
There were definite academic differences between students in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade traditional middle school configurations in comparison to the data regarding students in the K-8 configuration. The data set that was used to highlight the differences between the two configurations was from one of six focus schools. In the following Tables 1 and 2, the comparison that was used was the data from the school when it was a traditional 6-8 grade middle school and in tables 3 and 4 when it was transformed into a K-8 grade academy.

Table 1
Focus School No. 1: Traditional Middle School – MATH



* Prior to becoming an Academy

Table 2
 Focus School No.1: Traditional Middle School - READING



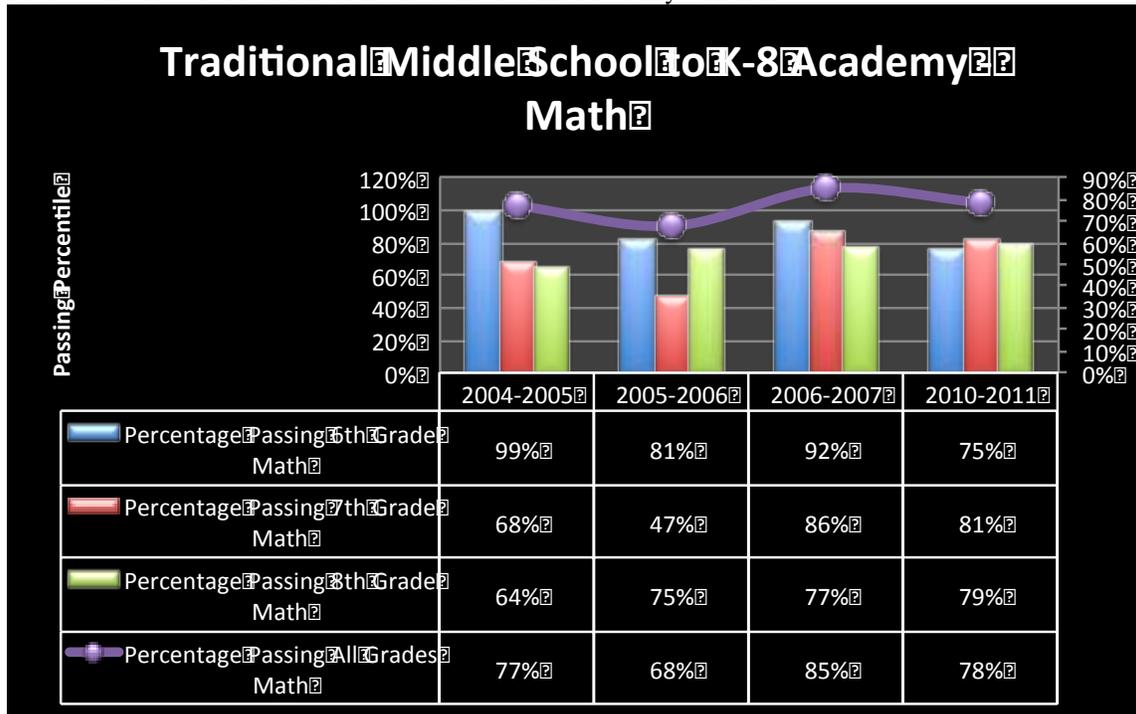
*Prior to becoming K-8 Academy

Focus school #1, which will be referred to as Traditional Middle School, had a long record of low performance. The tables above show the performance of focus school #1 when it functioned as a 6 – 8 grade traditional middle school. During this time the campus was operating under the state rating of academically unacceptable, which it maintained for at least 3 consecutive years.

At the start of the 2004 – 2005 school year, focus school #1 was officially reconfigure from a 6 – 8 traditional middle school to a K – 8 Academy. As you will see in the proceeding tables, the academic performance of the students in focus school #1 significantly increased in the content areas of reading and mathematics. Under the K – 8 Academy configuration the 6 – 8 grade students showed remarkable growth from the

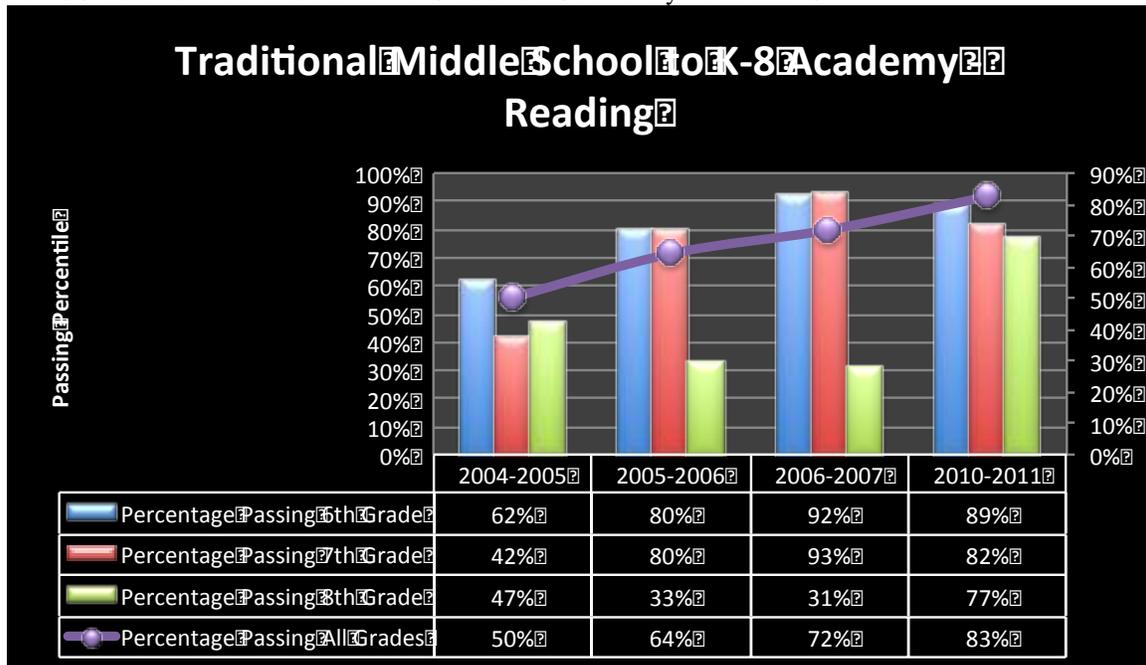
level of performance they had previously shown when they were in a 6 – 8 traditional middle school.

Table 3
Focus School No.1: Traditional Middle School to K8 Academy - MATH



*After becoming a K-8 Academy

Table 4
 Focus School No.1: Traditional Middle School to K8 Academy – READING



*After becoming a K-8 Academy

There were definite academic differences between students. In this comparison it shows the performance of students in a 6 – 8 middle school that was later reconfigured into a K – 8 Academy. The difference between the two configurations can be seen in the aforementioned Tables 1, 2, 3 & 4. The data set being used to highlight the differences between the two configurations was the data from one of six focus schools. For Focus School No. 1, the comparison that was being used was the data from years 2000–2004, when the school was functioning as a traditional 6th, 7th, and 8th grade middle school. Tables 3 and 4 show students’ scores from 2005–2011 after the traditional middle school was reconfigured into a K-8 Academy.

From 2000–2004, the focus school was rated “Academically Unacceptable” due to poor student performance. After the reconfiguration of the school to an Academy in 2005, the student performance began to increase in both Reading and Math. For the first time in the history of Focus School No. 1, it received the rating “Recognized” by the Texas Education Agency. Two years later, the school was rated “Recognized” for a second time in its history.

Although there could have been many factors that lead to the higher performance in the academic areas of focus, this study looked at the impact of the grade reconfiguration on student performance. Although there is a possibility that there could have been other factors that contributed to the score increase, the school reconfiguration was the major change that had been made prior to the performance increase. When looking at the data, there are single, double, and even triple digit gains, as seen in Tables 1 - 4. There is a strong possibility that the reconfiguration of campuses could have made the impact on the student’s success. There also could have been an increase in performance due to the level of support the campus received from the Campus Instructional Coordinator and the expertise of the Campus Instructional Coaches.

After the reconfiguration to a K – 8 Academy, the administrators of the school made campus wide adjustments in all instructional programs in every grade level. There was additional emphasis given in the areas of professional development, the allocation of funding for supplies and materials as well as the re-design of the level of instructional support provided campus wide. With all of these adjustments being made they all served

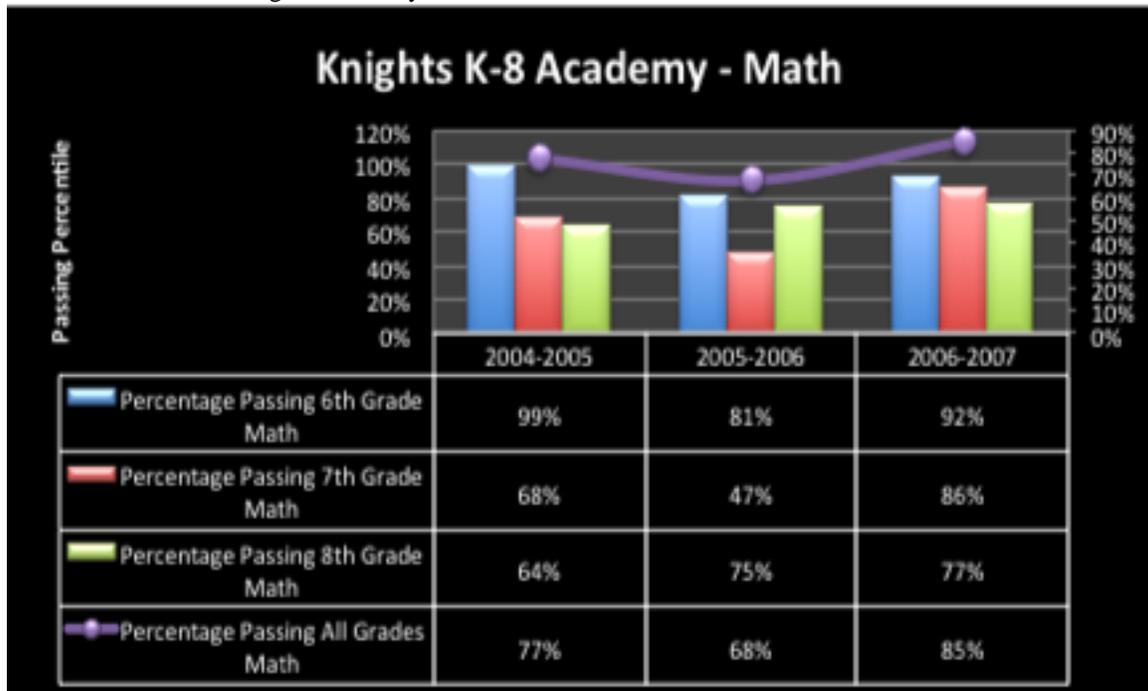
as a positive factor that helped the reconfiguration have a successful impact on the school.

Focus School No.2: Knights Academy

Research Question 1: How do K-8 academies compare in achievement in the areas of mathematics and language arts when compared to 6-8 traditional middle schools?

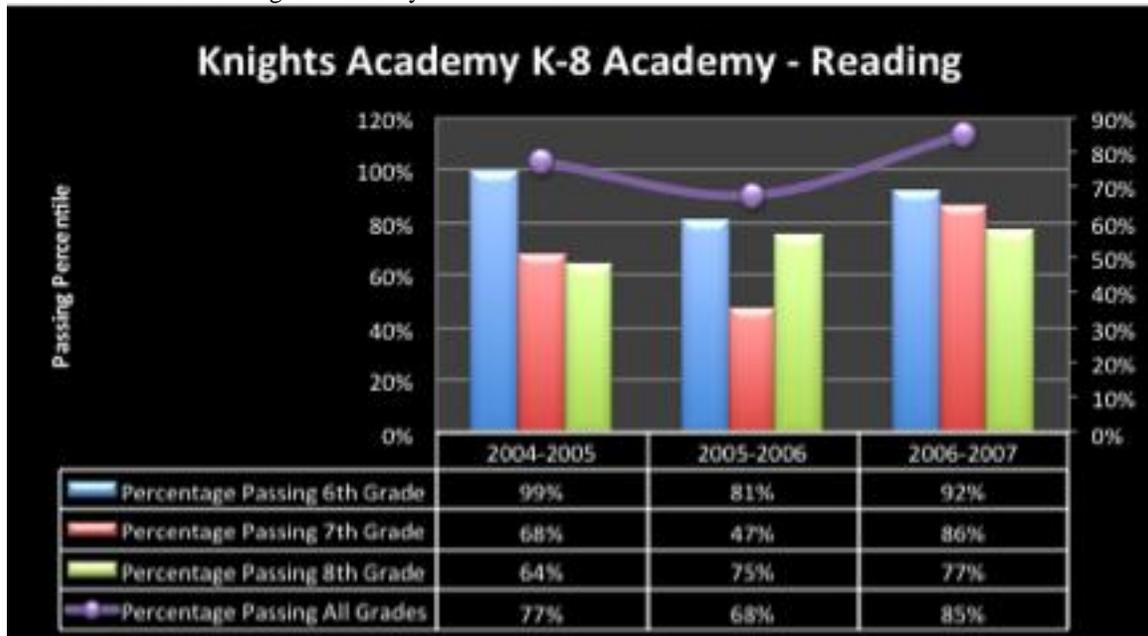
Focus School No. 2 was a mid to high-performing school that was nestled inside of a neighborhood within a well-known African American community. Despite the consistently positive progress of the school in all content areas, the district opted to close the Knight Academy at the end of the 2006 – 2007 school year.

Table 5
Focus School No. 2: Knights Academy – MATH



*After becoming a K-8 Academy

Table 6
Focus School No. 2: Knights Academy - READING



*After becoming a K-8 Academy

This high-performing academy had a history of mid to high performance prior to the reconfiguration of grade levels. After the reconfiguration, the school continued to meet expectations for the first three years of the change. The school really began to take off during its last two years in existence. They scored even higher over the next few years, which was higher than the state expectation. As one can see from Tables 5 and 6 regarding Focus School 2, it scored “Recognized” in consecutive years in the monitored areas of study: Reading and Mathematics. In addition to those posted in Tables 5 and 6, the school also scored within the “Recognized” and “Exemplary” range in the content areas of Science and Social Studies.

Unfortunately, even with the noted academic success of the Knight Academy, the school district’s long-range planning committee chose to close the school prior to the 2008-2009 school year. The rationale that was given for closing the school was due to

poor facilities, declining enrollment, and loss of efficiency to run the school due to lacking operating funds. The Knight Academy families went out of their way to make the district aware of their discontent regarding the closing of their school. Many of the families truly believed in the K-8 model and wanted their children to continue being educated in the same type of setting. Although the district planned for the students from the Knight Academy to attend a neighboring elementary and middle school after they closed they experienced a different outcome. Surprisingly, at least 300 of the 450 students enrolled in the Knight Academy went to a neighboring K-8 Academy rather than attending the schools the district slated for them to attend after the closure.

Focus School No.3: Ponies Academy

Research Question 1: How do K-8 academies compare in achievement in the areas of mathematics and language arts when compared to 6-8 traditional middle schools? After being reconfigured into an academy, Focus School No. 3 did well enough to maintaining an acceptable performance rate from TEA. With Focus School No. 3, there were definite academic differences between students when the campus was a K-5 configuration in comparison to the data regarding students when it was reconfigured to K – 8. The data set that is being used to highlight school No. 3 is from 2004 - 2007.

This data shows how the Ponies 6 – 8 grade students performed during the time that they were functioning as a K-8 Academy. As early as the first full year of implementation the students showed impressive gains in the content areas of Math and

Reading. They were able to maintain their progress after the reconfiguration and maintain their rating of acceptable by the Texas Education Agency.

Although there could be many factors that lead to the higher performance in the academic areas of focus that the study looked at, there could possibly be other factors that contributed to the increase. When looking at the data in Tables 5 and 6 there are steady as well as remarkable gains noted. Some of the gains could be attributed to the reconfiguration of the campus allowing more time and resources to be focused on those particular grade levels. There also could have been improvement as a result of the additional support received from the Campus Instructional Coordinator and the expertise of the Campus Administration.

Tables 7
Focus School No. 3: Ponies Academy - MATH

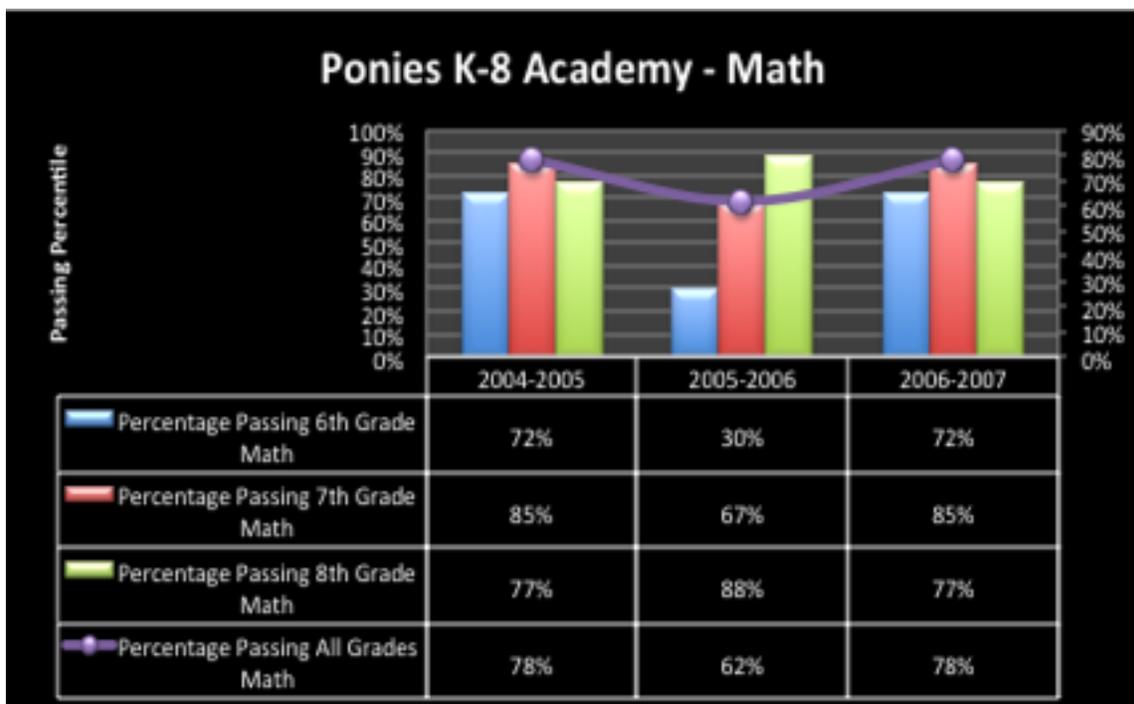
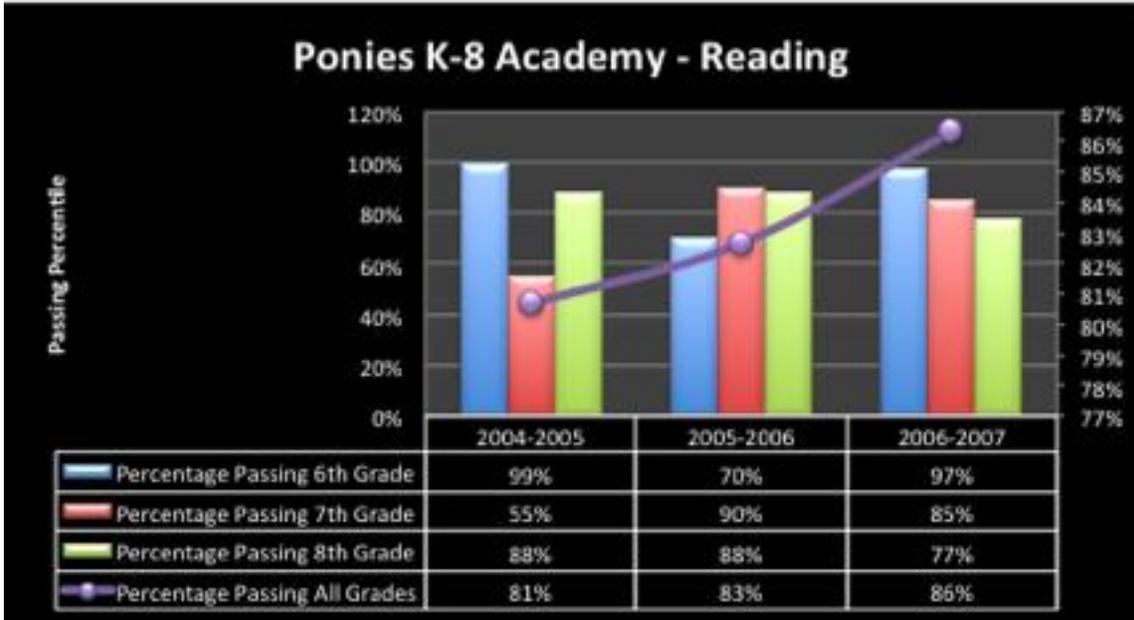


Table 8
 Focus School No. 3: Ponies Academy – READING



Focus School No. 4: Scotties Academy

Research Question 1: How do K-8 academies compare in achievement in the areas of mathematics and language arts when compared to 6-8 traditional middle schools? At focus campus #4, Scotties Academy had already established a pattern of steady performance prior to the consideration of making it into a K-8 academy. When analyzing Tables 9 and 10, the performance of this focus school during it’s year as a K-8 academy, steadily maintained its momentum and at times exceeded expectations.

Table 9
Focus School No. 4: Scotties Academy - Math

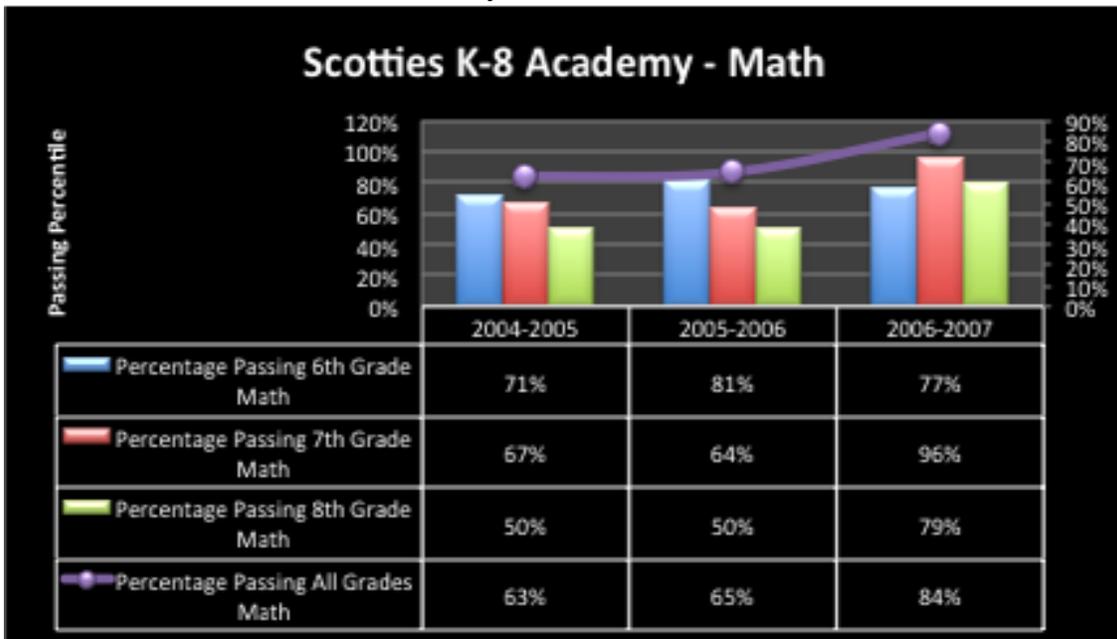
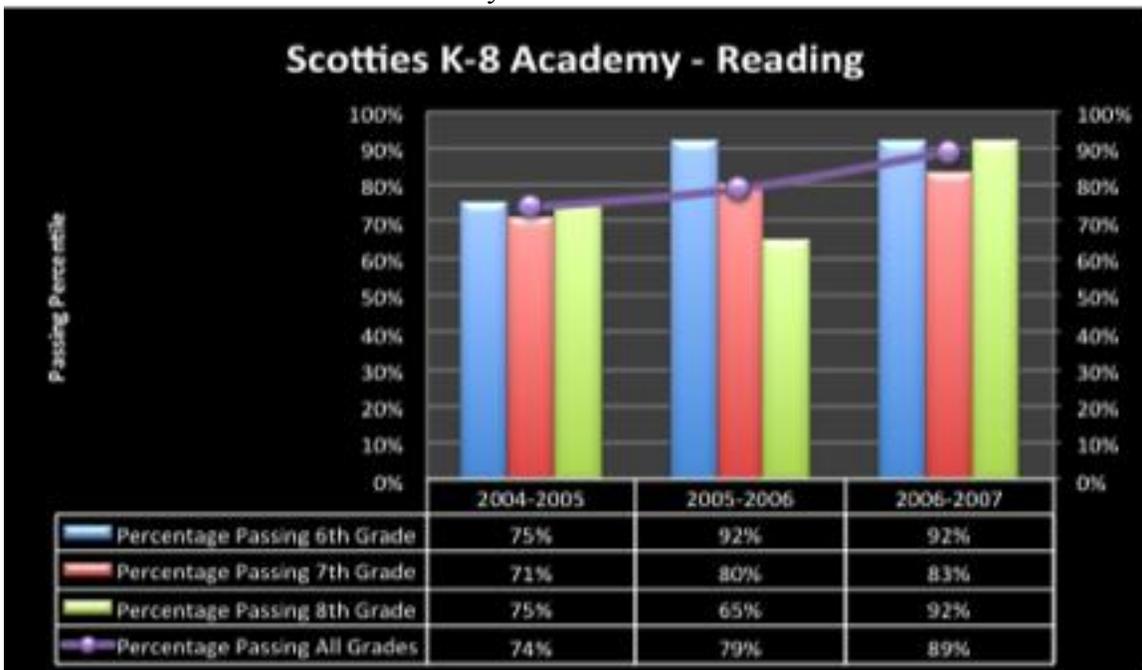


Table 10
Focus School No. 4: Scotties Academy



The administrative team at Focus School #4 had a long tenure at the campus. Although all of the campuses within the district followed the Site Based Management Model, this administrative team challenged the district on its selection of Reading curriculum and received special authorization to select and implement an alternate curriculum program of their choice. The district allowed them to continue implementing the alternate curriculum program because the Scotties Program was able to maintain steady academic progress that yielded favorable ratings from the Texas Education Agency.

Focus School No 5: Dorie Academy

Research Question 1: How do K-8 academies compare in achievement in the areas of mathematics and language arts when compared to 6-8 traditional middle schools? Focus School No. 5, Dorie Academy, had a history of meeting expectations when it was configured as a PK-5 grade school. After the reconfiguration to K-8 grade, the school was able to maintain their scoring pattern reaching “acceptable” performance on a yearly basis. Dorie Academy was unique because it served as the bilingual hub for the cluster of schools within its’ feeder pattern. This added another variable to the performance expectations that had to be closely monitored as an accountability subset for the campus. Considering this population of students had a high mobility rate throughout the district, monitoring and tracking attendance was a high priority on the radar for the Dorie Academy administrative staff as well.

Table 11
Focus School No. 5: Dorie Academy

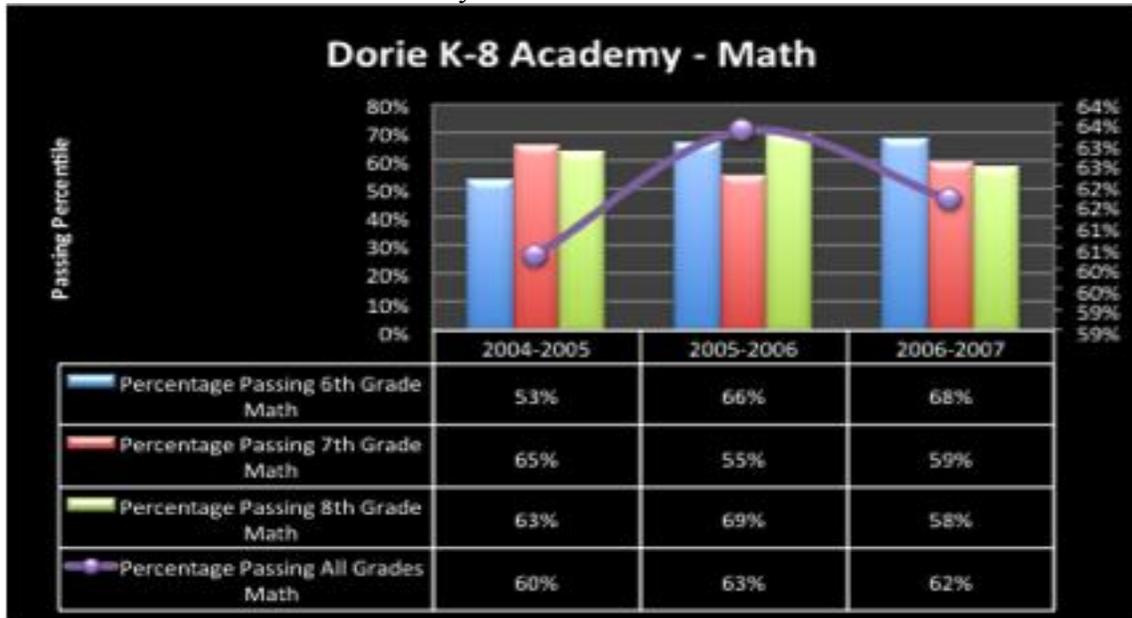
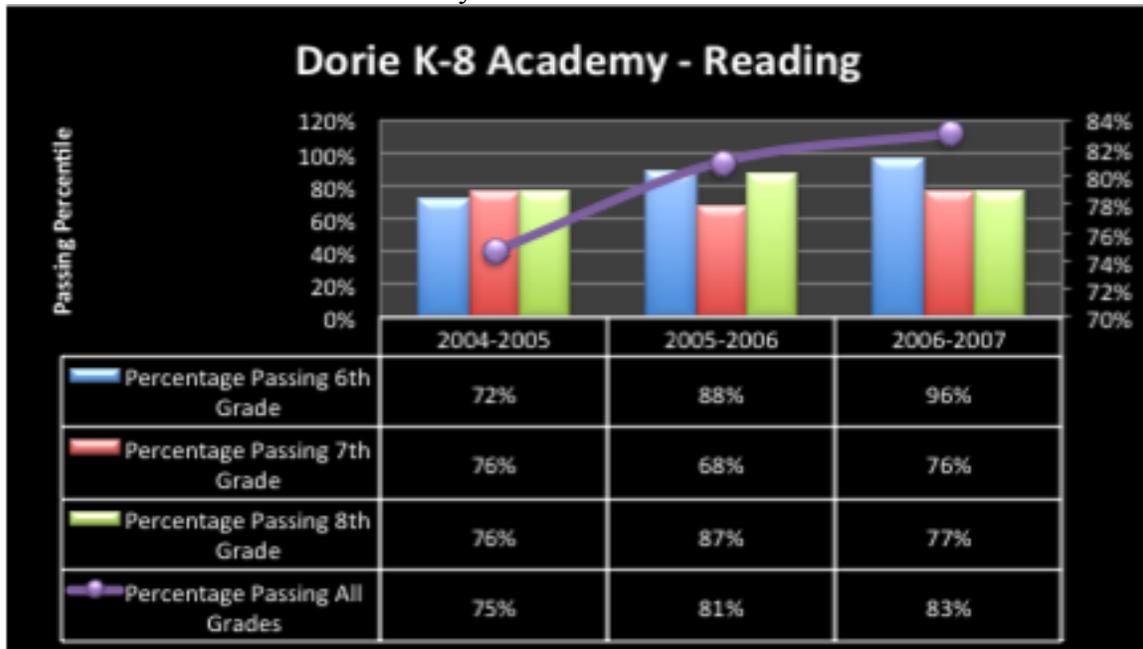


Table 12
Focus School No. 5: Dorie Academy



Focus School No. 6: Otto Academy

Research Question 1: How do K-8 academies compare in achievement in the areas of mathematics and language arts when compared to 6-8 traditional middle schools? Focus School #6, Otto Academy, was a little different from the other focus schools within the study due to its attendance zone. All of the other academies were situated within communities that had a designated feeder pattern of neighborhoods that they receive students from. Otto Academy was in an industrial area heavily populated with businesses and a few apartment complexes. The majority of the students that attended Focus School #6 were bused in from other areas of the city. Although this could have created a barrier for building home/school relationships, Otto Academy maximized its' opportunity to build business and community partnerships. They received a great deal of support, both financially and through volunteerism.

Table 13
 Focus School No. 6: Otto
 Academy

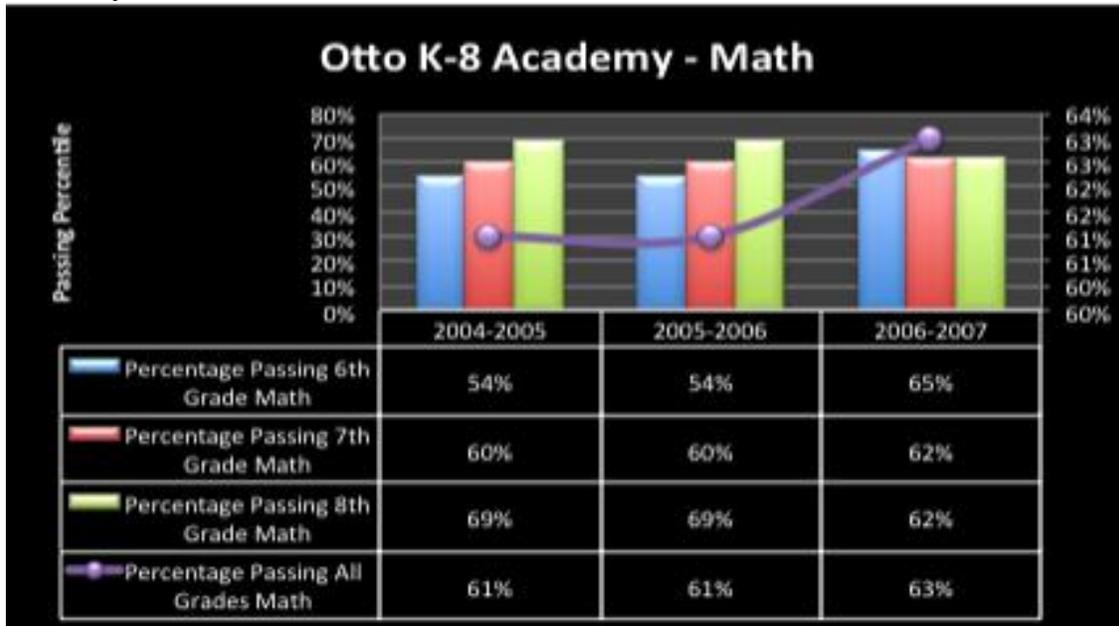
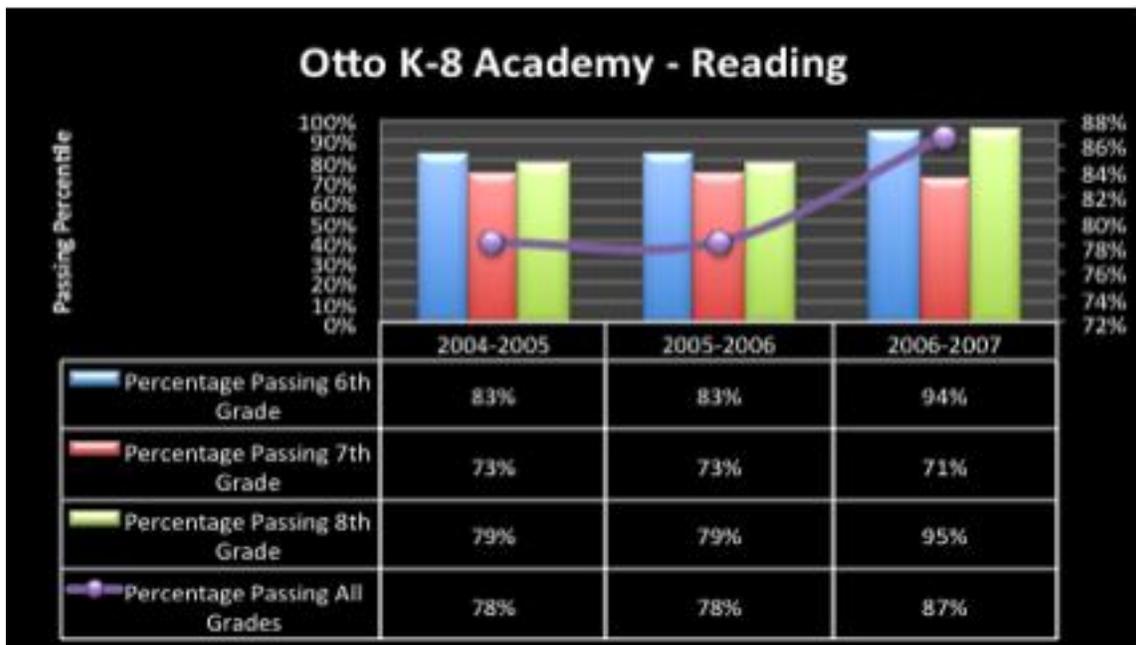


Table 14
 Focus School No. 6: Otto Academy



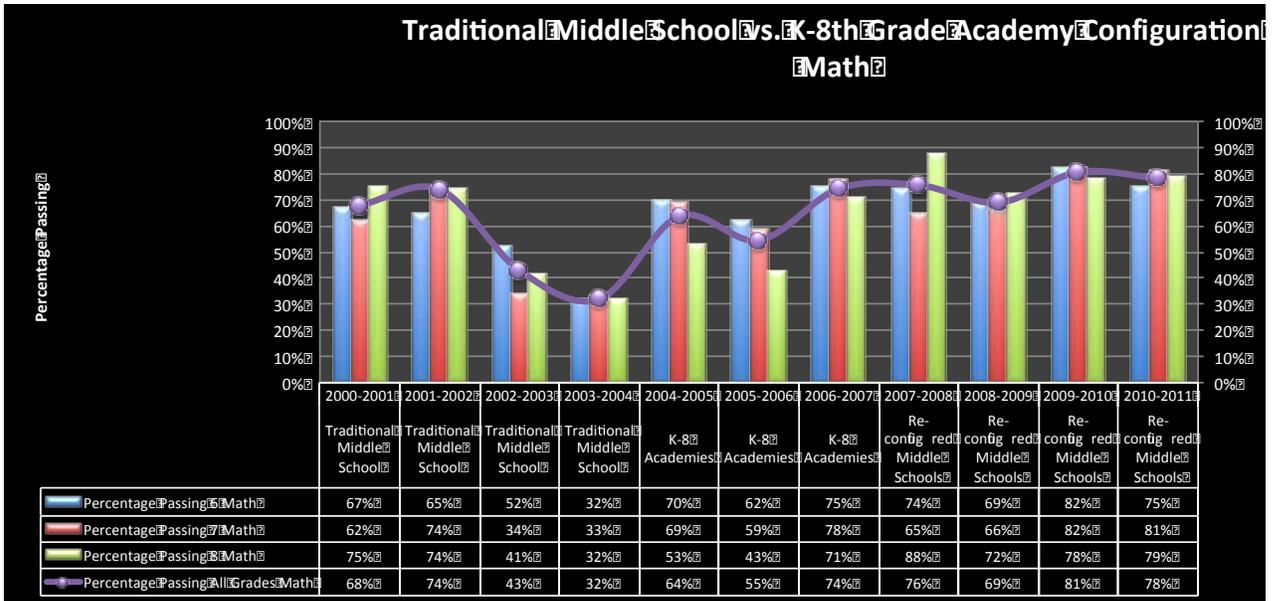
This campus was able to maintain acceptable to recognized academic performance prior to and following the reconfiguration to a K-8 academy. Unfortunately the districts long range planning committee selected Otto Academy as one of the schools to close at the end of the 2006 – 2007 school year. The districts rationale was due to the poor facilities, declining enrollment and loss of efficiency to run the school due to lack of operational funds.

Houston Cluster Feeders

2000 - 2011

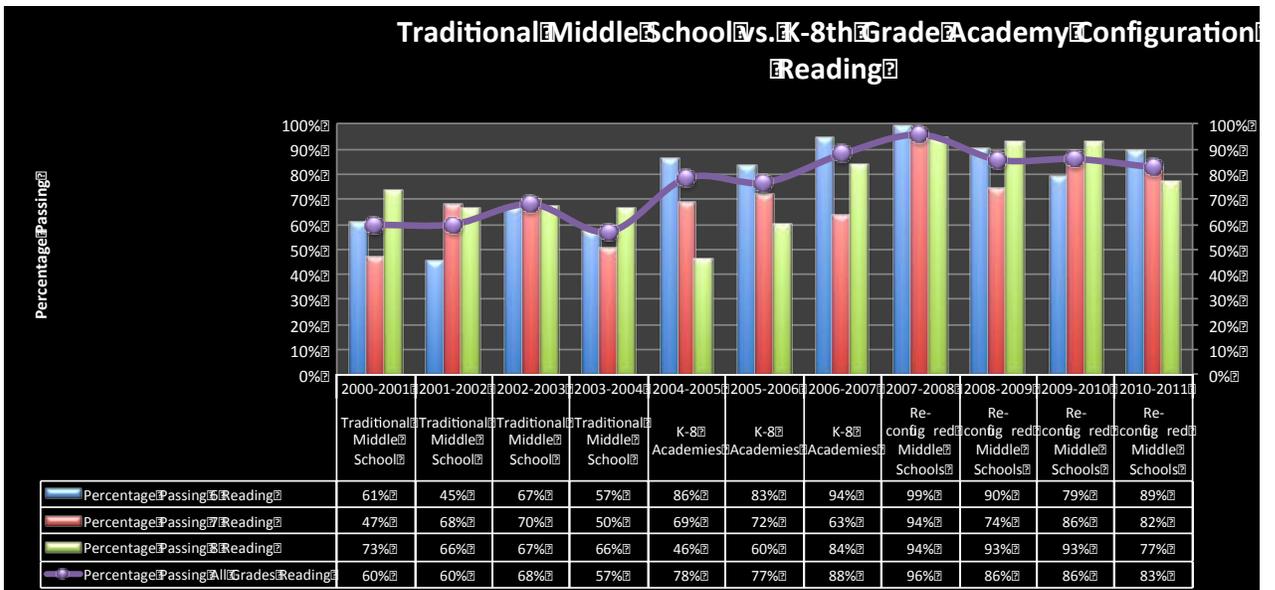
In summation, this table was designed to provide an overview of the influence that the K – 8 Academy model had on the six campuses of study over the span of 11 years. The goal was to provide a before, during and after summary of the impact of the academy reconfiguration focusing specifically on students in 6 – 8 grade. The first four years of data reflect the performance of 6 – 8 grade students while attending a traditional 6 – 8 grade traditional middle school. The next three years highlight the aggregate performance of 6 – 8 grade students while simultaneously attending 6 different K – 8 campuses within the same district/feeder pattern. The last four years of data highlighted the performance of 6 – 8 grade students while attending a stand alone K – 8 academy that remained open after 5 of the 6 of the schools that were previously K – 8 Academies closed.

Table 15:
Focus Cluster: Houston cluster feeders



2004–2005 The first year of the switch from tradition 6th – 8th grade middle school to K- 8th grade academy

Table 16:



Focus Cluster: Houston cluster feeders

2004–2005 The first year of the switch from tradition 6th – 8th grade middle school to K- 8th Academy.

Research Question 2: Are K – 8 academies perceived to be more effective in the areas of parental involvement and in having a positive climate conducive to teaching and learning, than 6 – 8 middle schools as perceived by all stakeholders including administrators, teachers, parents and community members?

Research Question 3: What perceptions do all stakeholders including administrators, teachers, parents and community members have regarding the overall effectiveness of K – 8 academies?

In an effort to address research questions 2 and 3, the last round of data was gathered quantitatively through the collection of surveys and by asking a series of questions to teachers, parents, administrators and community leaders on grade level configuration and whether or not it was found to be successful or not for students in middle grades, 6 – 8.

As the researcher began the process of soliciting contact with the focus campuses, the feedback proved to be very positive and well received. After the initial point of contact was made with the campus administrators regarding the desire to schedule an informational meeting, all four of the campus principals eagerly extended an invitation for the researcher to come to the campus and speak in more detail about what to expect during the research process. The researcher was unable to talk with the principals of two of the focus campuses due to them having been previously closed prior to the initiation of this study.

The initial meetings took place on each focus campus with the building principal. In two of the four schools the principal as well as the assistant principal were present for the initial meeting. At one of the four campuses the curriculum coordinator attended the meeting along with the assistant principal and principal. Collection and administration procedures were discussed during the meeting and all four of the campus principals wanted to know if they would be able to review study feedback regarding how teachers, parents and community members perceived the climate of their schools as well as the effectiveness of the K – 8 model.

At the conclusion of the initial meeting a date was mutually agreed upon for the researcher to return to the campus to collect the hard copies of the survey data as well as conduct individual and small group interviews with faculty and staff members. Each campus principal was asked to select at least five parents from their campus to give a copy of the survey to as well as invite them to come to the school on the scheduled date for the data collection visit.

The data collection visits at each of the campuses yielded great opportunities for gleaning very pertinent information regarding the researchers questions surrounding school climate, perceptions as well as the effectiveness of the K – 8 model. During the informational sessions there were a variety of data collection ideas that surfaced. While some of the participants filled in surveys that had specific open-ended questions, there were also individual and small group interviews going on with parents, teachers and administrators. The conversation with the parents and community members placed a lot

of emphasis on their perceived benefits as well as drawbacks that they have found due to having their children in the K – 8 model.

As a result of the data collection visits at four of the focus campuses the researcher was able to secure interviews/surveys from 30 faculty and or staff members and 15 parents and or community members. The feedback from staff members was overwhelmingly positive regarding the K – 8 configuration. Out of the 30 teachers over 75% of them felt as though the academy model allowed them more opportunities to team and collaborate with one another. They felt that this configuration was more conducive to learning due to the smaller class sizes, which ultimately allowed them to build a greater rapport with their students. The faculty and staff members also perceived that the climate within the K – 8 model was much more positive and it definitely created a collaborative environment where parents were more active in their children's education.

The resounding feeling that was expressed by the parents/community members was that the environment of the academy tended to seem more controlled than a traditional 6 – 8 grade setting. Of the 15 parents, 12 of them felt that the smaller class sizes allowed the teachers to provide more individualized instruction. All 15 of the parents expressed that by keeping the 6 – 8 grade students in the academy configuration it gives them more time to mature and get ready for high school. The parents expressed that they feel comfortable volunteering and being a part of the campus because their children had been in the school since they were in kindergarten and they had time to build strong relationships with the teachers. All 15 of the parents felt that many of the issues of safety and bullying did not seem to be major issues within the academy model.

On a negative note, 2 of the 15 parents felt that although the academy model provided a smaller safer environment they did not feel that their children had an opportunity to participate in as many electives or advanced courses because they did not go to a traditional middle school. Also, 3 of the 15 parents said that although the 6 – 8 grade students benefited from remaining in a more elementary setting, they did not feel that it was appropriate for 5 year olds and 13 year olds to all be on the same campus. Finally, 3 parents felt as though resources available to students were more bountiful in a traditional middle school but were extremely limited on a K – 8 campus.

Table 17

Interview Probes

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Do you feel that one configuration is more conducive to learning than the other?					
Out of 30	0	4	5	13	8
Are there more opportunities for vertical and horizontal teaming in academies?	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Out of 30	4	0	11	12	7
Are you able to build a stronger rapport with your students due to smaller class sizes?					
Out of 30	0	4	8	5	13
Does the school configuration affect the climate and parent involvement?	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Out of 30	0	5	10	8	7

Interviews

The following information was gleaned from interviews that were done individually and during small focus group discussion with administrators, teachers, parents and community members. There was a bank of survey questions used to guide the conversation that yielded lots of opportunities for open-ended responses. The statements that were gathered as an outcome of the open-ended responses were displayed in the proceeding statements in an effort to give more information to the reader regarding the underlying thoughts and beliefs of the administrators, teachers, parents and community members on K-8 academy practices versus traditional 6th, 7th and 8th grade middle school practices. We started off with a great conversation on the configuration of the instructional setting and how it is the key component to creating either a successful or unsuccessful program:

I feel that the K-8 academy style would be more conducive to true academic success if it is held to operating in the true boundaries in which the academy style was designed.

I believe that either instructional setting could be conducive to teaching the whole child. It would largely depend on the overall structure of the campus, quality of teaching and programs as well as expectations

A traditional middle school offers more electives also much more support in areas of teaching and learning.

The middle school students are in a transitional period in their lives and often have certain behaviors. These actions influence the younger kids and most of the time has a negative effect.

I prefer the K – 8 model but the district seems to provide more academic support, AP classes and electives to traditional 6-8 middle schools. That is not fair!

The academy structure is more conducive to learning because it builds a

strong sense of community. The older students assist the younger students because they are familiar with the atmosphere.

In the K-8 model we have more opportunities to build a rapport with our students. It is possible because the teachers have access to the real picture of the student's strengths and weaknesses throughout the years.

I truly believe the academy structure provides more success especially for the struggling middle school students in that MS teachers have access to ES teachers, curriculum, strategies and other support if needed.

I feel that the K-8 academies are more conducive to teaching the whole child.

Traditional middle schools are afforded more staff, instructional resources and support.

In my opinion, the K-8 academy is more successful if it is appropriately staffed to meet the academic and extracurricular initiatives for both elementary and middle school.

The best configuration is the K-8 academy because you have the opportunity to teach the whole child due to the following factors: students attend the campus as an elementary and middle school student, teachers can "vertically" collaborate best teaching practices to meet an individual student's learning needs/strength. Also, parental support is increased especially if they have children in both elementary and middle school at the same time.

I believe the K-8 academies tend to be more controlled than a middle school setting. There are not nearly the problems that are experienced in traditional middle schools.

Individual instruction can be provided based on class sizes and rapport with students. It is easier to accomplish in academies because having all (multiple grade levels) of the students for instruction is a plus.

I think traditional middle schools provide more rigor while academies provide more individualized instruction.

Since I have taught in an academy for so many years I am sure I have some biases. I like the academy atmosphere but I also feel that we are lacking

areas that are prevalent in traditional middle schools (ex: more electives, pre AP courses, etc.)

The academy provides a more close knit environment where parents are more accessible and play a stronger role in the education of their children.

Academies are better for inner city kids because there are typically smaller class sizes.

Parents seem to be more active and eager to participate in the academy setting. When I worked in traditional middle school we never saw parents.

I like the K-8 academies because it allows you to see a true growth in students through the years. The academies have smaller classes which allows more time with each student. My only complaint is that we don't have electives to offer.

I think having the smaller class sizes in academies is a bonus.

The academy concept is a great idea. Structure is critical and the ability to have more close interaction is very helpful.

I love the opportunity to get to know the students due to our small class sizes.

I believe in the smaller school setting. I see, on a daily basis, students positively interacting with 4th, 5th and 6th grade teachers that they previously had.

My child attends a K -8 academy and I feel that her success is mostly due to the smaller/closer environment.

I feel that academies are able to monitor not only the academics of a student but also the behaviors.

Academies allow for time to discuss other strategies that may work that have not been thought of or used before.

Students are not nameless, faceless, blobs; you can identify weaknesses and strengths more quickly.

I believe the K-8 setting is more conducive to academic success because teachers are able to monitor attendance, the movement between classes, the

rigor being provided and the ability to identify those students that may need further services.

In K-8 academies, you watch and are a part of a child's growth from kinder through 8th. Often students view each other as family and teachers treat them as such. We monitor their success, encourage them to continue and intervene either academically or socially when needed.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

K-8 schools began many years ago with the one-room school house. At the beginning of the 20th century, a majority of students attended K-8 schools before going to high school (80% of high school graduates attended K-8 schools in the 1920s). Junior high schools were prevalent by the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1960s, 80% of students attended a separate elementary school, junior high school with Grades 7-9, and high school with Grades 10-12 (Paglin & Fager, 1997).

The philosophy and structure of K-8 schools have changed significantly since the turn of the 20th century. K-8 schools are more than simply adding middle grade students to an elementary school, or vice versa. Some educators believe that the success of K-8 schools is due to the utilization of best practices from both elementary and middle school education. They employ the nurturing, individualized instruction, and student atmosphere of elementary education, combined with the instructional process and concepts of the middle grades education.

Parents and teachers/staff have well-founded concerns that their students are suffering emotionally as well as academically due to the transitions from elementary to middle school. After researching the effects of grade-span configurations, Coladarci and Hancock (2002) suggested that the incidence of higher test scores at K-8 schools versus traditional middle school are due to the “continuity of experience” that students have in schools with a larger grade span (i.e., K-8 or K-9 schools). Coladarci and Hancock suggest that there are many changes that young students find difficult, such as a new

school building, unfamiliar teachers and administrators, as well as a different set of rules and expectations. It is evident to many educators that transitions have a negative effect on student performance. This remains true for both rural and urban areas. New York City, rural Louisiana, as well as Maine have data that demonstrate the negative effects that transitions have had on their students. Students from K-8 schools performed better on academic achievement tests than those from middle schools or junior highs. Although these areas are different geographically, the conclusion can be drawn that these students benefited from the lack of transitions. A study conducted in 330 schools in Pennsylvania found that there was an even more profound effect on students of low socioeconomic status when considering the reduction of transitions between schools (Coldarci & Hancock, 2002),

Including a wide range of ages in one school has been a source of angst for some people while considering the K-8 configuration (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Others have observed that the older students act as role models for the younger students and that having them coexist has been beneficial for both age groups. The older students seem to be more likely to demonstrate good behavior, knowing that there are young children looking up to them. Appropriate grade level planning along with formal mentorship programs can encourage and facilitate positive relationships among the various age groups in a K-8 school (Paglin & Fager, 1997).

The whole K-8 concept has been considered as a school of the future. Schools of the future should be organized to have the flexibility to embrace multiple program delivery systems. This may include team teaching, thematic instruction, and/or

departmental organization. The buildings must be flexible enough so that, from year-to-year, the users of the building have the ability to alter the instructional methodology Paglin & Fager (1997).

Flexibility is addressed in this educational program through providing the following:

- Spaces in a variety of sizes that can be configured and re-configured in multiple layouts.
- All classrooms with similar configurations and with as little fixed cabinetry as possible to allow for many configurations.
- Spaces such as the media center, cafeteria, and the gymnasium that will be located to allow for after-hours access without disturbing the entire building.
- Finishes on the floors, walls, and ceilings that are easy to clean and allow for maximum personalization of the space.
- Furniture that is flexible, durable, and easy to move, so the spaces can respond to a dynamic educational program.

Research Question #1

How do K-8 academies compare in achievement in the areas of mathematics and language arts when compared to traditional 6-8 middle schools?

The ultimate goal of this study was to analyze qualitative and quantitative data from the six focus schools in Texas to determine if students enrolled in traditional 6th-8th

grade middle schools performed better academically and behaviorally than those students enrolled in K–8th grade academies or vice versa. Also, does grade configuration, which refers to the range of grades within a school, have an effect on the outcome of learning? Grade configuration is an important issue to various blocks in public education, including supporters of middle schools and urban educators concerned with the association between grade configuration and school climate.

What determines a student’s level of academic achievement is complex. The simple fact is that students that enter public middle schools fall behind their peers in K–8 schools. This is true both for math and language arts. Even more troubling, the middle school disadvantage grows larger over the course of the middle school years. With the transition into a middle school, students set out on a trajectory of lower achievement gains.

After studying the six focus schools, both the qualitative as well as the quantitative data suggest that students perform at a higher rate in both language arts and mathematics in a K-8 campus as opposed to a traditional middle school setting. Although the data suggest that the K-8 campuses perform better and seem to be more beneficial for the social growth of middle school students, there were negative factors that were noted as well. Overwhelmingly, from the qualitative feedback, a universal negative was that middle school students in a K-8 academy are not exposed to the same number of electives that they would be at a traditional middle school. Additionally, another negative was that middle school students in a K-8 setting have few opportunities for advanced coursework or pre-AP classes. Although these are definitely considered as factors that bring great

concern, are they large enough factors to overlook the proven fact that middle school students are performing academically at a higher rate in K-8 academy settings?

Overall, the review of the literature revealed many unanswered questions and non-conclusive or conflicting results regarding grade configurations. For example, one viewpoint was that too many middle schools have not fully implemented consistent programs and practices, while another study concluded that their Grade 6-8 schools implement middle school programs and practices at a higher level than any other grade span. In contrast, several small studies have suggested that K-8 schools realize higher academic achievement results (Hough, 2005), although the extent to which they are implementing middle level concepts is not always clear. One possible program implementation is between program implementation and student performance as they relate to various grade span configurations.

The intention behind question #1 was to serve as an investigation of those factors at K-8 middle school that were associated with the increase in achievement of 6th-8th grade students. The findings suggest that at the specified grade levels, students need specified organizational and instructional factors accompanied with teacher and administrative guidance to achieve at high levels in middle school. The outcomes were determined by a variety of interviews and questionnaires that focused on a variety of characteristics of the learning environment. The objective of the interviews and surveys was to gain insight from administrators, teachers, parents, and focus groups. The information was examined to decipher which indicators work positively in the K-8 program and observe which did not.

An important finding in this study was that schools that have successful K-8 programs have highly effective organizational systems that center on collaborative grouping. At these K-8 campuses the school leadership, teachers, parents and community members are committed to developing strong organizational units. Specifically, schools that have dedicated educators who use these techniques with their students individually as well as in a group to get them involved in social and leadership-based activities have more exposure to perform at a higher rate than their counterparts. Of all six of the schools that were researched in this study, five of them were considered to be the highest ranked predominantly African American elementary/middle schools in the district. One of the schools in particular was considered as one of the highest ranked predominantly African American elementary/middle school over the past two years.

Research Question # 2

Are K-8 academies perceived to be more effective in the areas of parental involvement and in having a positive school climate conducive to teaching and learning, than traditional 6-8 middle schools as perceived by all stakeholders including administrator's, teacher's, parents and community members?

There are various factors that influence the effectiveness of K-8 programs that by design foster a positive climate and have high levels of parental engagement. A key component is to ensure that the K-8 school has a strong instructional program. By having

a strong instructional delivery there is an increase in the possibility of the K-8 program being more successful.

One of the critical components to question #2 dealt with creating a positive school climate and implementing structures to support parent and family involvement. The survey and questionnaire data collected showed a strong connection between parent and family involvement in schools and children's academic achievement, attendance, attitude, and continued education. In the instances where families chose not to become involved it was primarily due to the fact that they were not feeling that the school climate, the social and educational atmosphere of the school, was one that made families feel welcomed, respected, trusted, heard, and needed. The qualitative data collected suggested that there is a connection between the school climate and the extent to which parents and families are involved in their children's education. When schools create a positive climate by reaching out to families and providing structures for them to become involved, the result is effective school-family partnerships. Such partnerships connect families and schools to help children succeed in school in their future. Future research on this topic/research frame is needed to build a level of capacity to close the achievement gap.

It seems that there is no time greater than the middle school stretch for students to socially connect to groups and begin to plan their future endeavors. The study emphasized on the creation of organizational and instructional structures that foster effective collaborative networks and faculty sponsorship is crucial at the middle school level due to the socialization of students.

Research Question #3

What perceptions do all stakeholders including administrators, teachers, parents, and community members have regarding the overall effectiveness of K-8 academies?

Interview questionnaires and surveys were used at each focus school to gather data on various organizational and instructional factors that are prevalent at each of the campuses. The interview questions were used to analyze prevalent elements of administration, teachers, parents and community members as well as student leadership groups that surfaced. Administrators, math department and language arts department teachers watched focus groups of students to come up with underlying perceptions and strategies that they felt would be necessary to use with the students in their classrooms.

This technique was used at all six schools to evaluate the differences in the K-8 academies versus the 6th–8th grade traditional middle schools. The researcher came up with a lot of positive identifying characteristics in all six settings. All research participants (administrators, teachers, parents, and community members) came together with lots of positive factors that contribute to the achievement of the students in the K–8 academy setting. They also identified areas of growth that they needed to address in order to see their campuses become more successful.

While the focus of the study was on the developmental and organizational factors that perpetuate the success of students at the K–8 academies, it was also important to keep a networking process to examine how the factors attributed to the success of the students. Through the increase of parental involvement the climate of the school made a

shift from each of the stakeholders working in isolation to a well-aligned team working together and moving forward with a common goal. Through a series of interviews and questions, a variety of findings confirmed the existence of specific organizational and instructional structures that were instrumental to the success of the 6th–8th grade students in K-8 settings.

In summation, the perception of all stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, parents and community members, was that the K-8 academies are definitely effective. Due to the smaller learning environment and the longevity on one campus, stakeholders felt that teachers had a better opportunity to build meaningful relationships with their students. Stakeholders also felt as though there were fewer disciplinary incidents regarding bullying and student to student physically aggressive behaviors. Finally, the stakeholders also felt that the K-8 academies made an extra effort to work closely with parents and community members in an effort to create a stronger home/school connection. All of these observations were made by stakeholders via surveys, individual and small group roundtable discussion as well as one on one interviews. Each of the factors discussed by stakeholders were from their perspectives the reason for the overall effectiveness of the K-8 academies.

Conclusion on Study and Recommendations for Future Research

That intent behind this study was to examine whether or not 6-8th grade students were more successful academically as well as socially in a K-8 academy setting or a traditional 6th-8th grade middle school setting? These six schools were successful in achieving higher scores in mathematics and language arts and also had implemented strategies to motivate students to perform better academically as well as behaviorally. Is the phrase “all children can learn” really true? Research suggests that it is true. It is really important that successful educators that are working with the students as well as their parents and community members believe that this statement can be actualized. By using a mixed methods approach, data was gathered and analyzed from school administrators, teachers, parents, and student data. The goal of the research was to identify perceptions and best practices that lead to quality teaching and learning.

In chapter I, the goal of the study was to identify the research questions that would determine the direction of the examiner and help develop the instructional focus perceived by the administrators, teachers, parents and community members. Chapter I set the stage for the purpose of the study, the hypothesis, the significance of the problem as well as the rationale of the study. All of these components helped the researcher to better understand the K-8 concept and more clearly decipher whether it was adding value to the students’ schooling while in their 6th, 7th, and 8th grade years.

Chapter II gave an extensive review of the literature and overview of the methods that were being used to glean the information for the study. It gave the researcher a platform to build a positive background surrounding the K-8 academy concept. The

review of the literature provided a plethora of investigation factors that could be further used to determine the success at the school level for the students. The researcher was able to identify organizational strategies that surround the school leadership and boost the level of community support. Through this collaboration, the depth of rigor that is provided in the instruction in the classrooms will result in an increase in positive morale. Alternative strategies were used that would prove to be successful when trying to motivate students in K-8 academy settings to embrace their learning environment and celebrate their successes that were far exceeding those in the traditional 6th, 7th, and 8th grade middle school setting.

Chapter III gave an in-depth overview of the type of methodology that the researcher used. Additionally, there was a very thorough explanation given on the rationale for doing a mixed methods study, the site for the study, data collection procedures, and specific information regarding the various groups that were included in the qualitative interviews and focus groups. Detailed information was also used to provide an understanding for how the data was disaggregated in the quantitative portion of the study and what deemed one configuration successful over the other.

Chapter IV gave all of the results from the interviews, surveys, focus groups, one-on-one discussion and disaggregation of quantitative data along with charts, graphs and narratives. Through the use of the survey, the researcher was able to unfold underlying beliefs, perceptions, and instructional motivation shared by all considered. The conclusions of leadership, teachers, parents and community members were very positive

and certainly provided a positive influence on the quality of instruction delivered and the high level of learning taking place.

Chapter V created a forecast of how this research would have implications on the future. This chapter summarized the findings, conclusions, implications and recommendations for the future. A large part of the research concluded that having a great teacher in the classroom is instrumental in the development of student learning for the whole child. The teacher is definitely the program and if the teacher is unable to incorporate and network good teaching and learning opportunities into their instruction, it will make a critical impact on student achievement in the classroom. If all of the players: administration, teachers, parents and community members believe that the K-8 program will be beneficial to the success of their students, it will be. If schools can be positive and successful with a K-8 program placing a focus on the middle years (6th, 7th & 8th grade) that are so often lacking focus, there should also be recommendations to consider creating a K-12 model implementing some of the same enhancements and changes that have been implemented into the K-8 program to ensure its success.

The goal for this research is that it not stop here but continue to grow and assist in organizing other K-8 models in other districts, cities, states in the United States to continue to meet and exceed the academic achievement goals of students in the middle years (6th, 7th & 8th). Considering the entire nation continues to deal with the widening of the achievement gap, there has to be proactive leadership put into motion to provide conditions within schools across the country to promote success. The findings indicate that there is no one-size-fits-all program that one can continue to keep offering American

students with hopes of seeing different “positive” results. It is time to make sure that educators keep the “main thing the main thing,” which is to maintain the instructional focus for all students and instill comprehensive strategies of good teaching and learning every day “from bell to bell.”

APPENDIX A: TEACHER SURVEY

Survey

1. What type of Middle School setting do you currently work in?

- K – 8th grade Academy
- Traditional 6th – 8th grade Middle School

2. Have you ever worked in a traditional 6th – 8th grade setting?

- Yes
- No

3. Considering the learning environment that you work in, do you feel that one structure is more conducive to learning than the other (6th -8th grade Traditional Middle Schools verses K-8 grade Academies)?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Comments: _____

4. When looking at the number of 6-8th grade students in Academies as opposed to the number of 6-8th graders in Traditional Middle School's, is horizontal and vertical teaming possible in the educational structure that you teach in? If so, do you feel that it is essential in building rigor throughout the middle school grades (6th – 8th).

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Comments: _____

5. When considering the size of the current Middle School structure that you work in and the number of students that you service, is it possible for you to build a strong rapport with the students and truly provide individualized instruction to each of them?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Comments: _____

6. Does the number of students being served in your current instructional setting (K-8th grade Academy or 6th – 8th grade Middle School) impact the school morale and or climate as it pertains to parents? Do parents feel comfortable and welcome volunteering and providing assistance in your school?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Comments: _____

7. Please share, in your opinion, which instructional configuration (K- 8th grade Academy or Traditional 6th – 8th grade Middle School) do you feel is more conducive to true academic success for 6th – 8th graders allowing for optimal individualized instruction and rigor?

Comments: _____

8. Which instructional setting do you feel is the most conducive to teaching the whole child, K-8 Grade Academies or Tradition 6th – 8th grade Middle Schools?

Comments: _____

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