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The dissertation of Melaney M. Sanchez titled *Perspectives of African Americans in Rural Maryland: Are Public Elementary Schools Meeting African American Students' Needs?* submitted to the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Instructional Leadership for Changing Populations at Notre Dame of Maryland University has been read and approved by the committee.

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Perspectives of African Americans in Rural Maryland:

Are Public Elementary Schools Meeting African American Students' Needs?

by

Melaney M. Sanchez

A Dissertation

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the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This study sought to learn about African American community members' perceptions regarding their satisfaction with local elementary schools in predominantly white, rural school districts in Maryland. The research was conducted in rural counties because much of the attention about the achievement gap has focused on urban areas, where necessary solutions may differ. The Community Opinion Inventory (AdvancED, 2003) was distributed to African American community members in five school districts in rural Maryland using snowball-sampling methods. One hundred and fifty six surveys were collected, representing a 41% return rate.

In this study, African American community members' perceptions revealed they were most satisfied with well-maintained grounds, comprehensive programs, opportunities to learn, and media resources. They were most concerned with bullying, a lack of staff diversity, and substance abuse. Support for Student Learning resulted in the highest mean subscale score, and School Climate yielded the lowest score because it was the subscale with the lowest degree of agreement. Analysis of the COI scores with Maryland State Assessment reading and math performance data showed high to moderate correlations between the math scores and COI measures but little or no relationship between local school satisfaction and the state reading scores.

This study's findings supported a need for educators to collaborate with African American community members in predominantly white rural school districts to further investigate solutions for closing the achievement gap. Examining the

community members' perspectives demonstrated the merit of a caring and safe

environment, the value of staff diversity, and the importance of high expectations.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Daniel Sanchez, and our two children, Elijah and Jade, for their continual patience, encouragement, and love; to my father, Charles Michael, who has cheered me on since my very first breath; and to my mother, Ellane Caveney Michael Hogan, who taught me to believe that I could accomplish any goal, with the grace of God.

Acknowledgements

 First, I wish to thank the young man I met at a minority achievement conference who challenged me to become a better educator of all students when he said, "To teach me, you must first know me." He planted the seed for this research study. Next, I would like to thank all of the community members who participated in this study. I am immensely appreciative of the time that you dedicated to completing the survey and for your contributions in sharing your valuable perceptions related to the quality of rural schools for African American elementary students.

I am also grateful for the support and guidance of my doctoral committee: Dr. Joan Sattler, Sister Catherine Sarther, and Dr. Kelly Bull. Thank you for teaching me, for guiding me, and for pushing me to become stronger in my skills and understanding.

In addition I would like to thank my classmates and colleagues, specially Karen Wooten, Kelly Sheranko, Winsome Waite, Sylvia Lawson, Jack Smith, Bonnie Fuller, Kathy Koch, Jeff Maher, Kelsey Fleming, Karen Vogel, and Dan Whetzel. Each of you played instrumental roles in assisting me intellectually, socially, and emotionally to persevere through the most challenging moments.

Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my husband and my children. Thank you, Daniel, for always being optimistic, for taking on more responsibilities, and for being the world's best chef. Thank you, Eli and Jade, for understanding that my studies were valuable and that education is truly priceless. You both desire to put others first, and this inspires me. I can always count on you for encouraging words, a warm hug, a witty thought, or a helping hand. Thank you for making my world so beautiful. I love you more than words could say.

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Chapter I

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Historically, there has been an achievement gap between white students and

African American students in the United States. Academic disparity in urban settings has

been documented repeatedly, but the circumstances and needs of rural students of color

have rarely been acknowledged in current literature. In the United States, there is a

disparity between the racial and cultural backgrounds of teachers and students, and this

undermines the ability of children of color to succeed (Ladson-Billings, 1994).   White

teachers, who generally have grown up with minimal exposure to racial or ethnic

diversity, dominate the teaching profession (Frankenberg, 2006, p. 4). The potential

ramification of this hiring imbalance is a widening of educational inequity; teachers of

color may be likely to produce more favorable academic results with students of similar

backgrounds (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010).

Maryland public schools are prime examples of this racial and cultural

incongruence between educators and their students. Statewide, 76.1% of the teachers are

white; 17.8% are African American; and 6.1% are American Indian/Alaskan Native,

Asian/Pacific Islander, or Hispanic. Maryland public school student population

percentages differ greatly, however, as 45.5% of the students are white; 37.9% are

African American; and 16.5% are American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific

Islander, or Hispanic (Maryland State Department of Education, 2010). Ogbu (2003)

suggests that race relations need to be adequately studied and understood to address "the

educational consequences of what Blacks believe about their relationship with whites and

white institutions" (p. 256). Ogbu saw value in understanding community opinion and

suggested that school systems should partner with communities to establish a joint

responsibility for educating African American youth to solve the collective problem of

the achievement gap.

In classrooms across the United States, African American students are continuing

to perform at lower levels than their white peers (Craig & Washington, 2006). All

members of society have a stake in students' futures, so the origins, nature, and extent of

this achievement gap must be understood for progress to be realized. Manning and

Kovach (2003) believe this gap transcends all social classes and is not solely an

educational or urban problem. Delpit (2006) stated that the dilemma is not exclusively

based on instructional methodology; instead it is has become an issue of power. To

determine what is best for children of color, she suggested that educators must listen to

voices that cross social, racial, and cultural lines. This could be accomplished by

establishing educational policy that reaffirms the beliefs, culture, and heritage of students.

Delpit suggested that educators should have the perspective that celebrates, rather than

tolerates, diversity in the classroom. She proposed that this could be accomplished by

seeking answers from those who are culturally similar to the students. Community

outreach could enable educators to genuinely understand the needs of diverse populations.

For these reasons, the purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of the African American communities in rural Maryland in relation to educational attributes of public elementary schools, including the Quality of the Instructional Program, Support for Student Learning, School Climate, Community-School Relationships, and the Management of Resources. These characteristics of schooling contribute to academic excellence for elementary students and may provide insights for closing the achievement gap that has persisted between African American students and their peers for decades (Barton, 2004; Collins, 2010; Craig & Washington, 2006; Evans, 2005; Ferguson, 2002; Hale, 2001; Howard, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Manning & Kovach, 2003; Ogbu, 2003; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Thompson, 2004; Williams, 2003).

Background

Dorsey (2008) contends that thousands of lives have been impacted due to race-based legal cases in education and suggests that the United States judicial system has promoted white privilege as it adhered to legal precedence and opposition to equity. In her historical review of the legalities of race-based education, Dorsey documented the chronology of key legal cases beginning with the 1849 case Roberts v. City of Boston, when a school district denied a black child access to a primary school based on race. In 1857, the Dred Scott v. Sanford case denied citizenship to Mr. Scott, who was seeking the rights and privileges guaranteed by the U. S. Constitution. Citizenship was denied based on the Supreme Court finding that blacks were property and only equal to 3/5 of a person. The Freedmen's Bureau Acts of 1864, 1865, and 1866 were legislation that

intended to establish programs to aid former slaves become self-sustaining by, "enforcing contracts and renting abandoned land" (Dorsey, 2008, p. 23). These acts included congressional debates over the distinction of the races and resulted in funding for blacks to receive some education. The 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (1865) abolished slavery with the intent of promoting human rights and was followed by the Civil Rights Act. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 was enacted to alleviate discrimination against the newly freed slaves and granted blacks, including former slaves, U.S. citizenship entitling them to equal rights. The 14th Amendment (1868) was significant because it formally provided equal rights to black freedmen or former slaves. Twenty-eight years later, Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) denied Mr. Plessy the privilege of sitting in a railway car with white men based upon the fact that he was of mixed race, 1/8 African and 7/8 Caucasian, and the doctrine of separate-but-equal was established. Fifty-eight years of separate schooling ensued until the Brown v. Board of Education (1954) case decided that separate-but-equal educational facilities were unequal resulting in detrimental effects upon black children and their motivation to learn. To eradicate economic and social oppression against minority groups, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted to prevent discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin so that "equal opportunities in employment, education, and housing for all U. S. citizens" (Dorsey, 2008, p. 26) was legally established.

In 1966, the United States Department of Education commissioned the Coleman Report, titled Equality of Educational Opportunity. It was published with the intentions of describing aspects of the U.S. educational system, followed by an analysis of educational achievement. The report descriptively presented a dismal picture of the

effectiveness of the U.S. educational system due to a lack of equal opportunities for all students (Cain & Watts, 1970, p. 228). It included findings that identified specific concerns about the achievement gap, including the fact that a majority of students attended schools that were largely segregated, that negro student averages at the end of high school tended to be about one standard deviation below whites (Coleman, 1966, p. 219), that decline in achievement scores tended to be localized in rural areas in the South and Southwest, and that minorities equally desired to do well in school. The Coleman Report determined that a student's socio-economic status was more likely to determine a positive educational outcome than were measured differences in per pupil spending. School and teacher quality were found to have a significant impact on student achievement. This report influenced public opinion, transformed educational policies, and spurred further research regarding the achievement gap.

Ladson-Billings (2006) recommends looking at the long-term problems that have created this academic achievement gap historically, socio-politically, and morally. Historically, Ladson-Billings (2006) found that educational inequities were related to race, class, and gender. This was especially true for African Americans, who were forbidden an education during slavery. After emancipation, schools maintained African Americans as a servant class, and school supplies were hand-me-downs from white schools. In the Southern states, rural black students who worked on farms were only schooled for approximately four months, and secondary schooling was not universal in the South until 1968 (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Prior to 1954, when the Supreme Court overturned legislation that supported education that was "separate but equal" in Brown v. Board of Education, African American students were forced to contend with unequal

resources in community schools. Clearly, a lack of consistent schooling, along with inadequate supplies and facilities, caused African American students to experience educational inequities across the United States over a long period of time.

Socio-Political Considerations

Socio-politically, communities of color have long been excluded from the civic process. Although the Fifteenth Amendment was enacted in 1870, African Americans and other minorities were deprived of their legal right to vote due to discriminatory voter registration and election practices. Ladson-Billings (2006) specifically identifies the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as a pivotal piece of civil rights legislation because of the sharp rise in minority voter registration after its enactment. Voter registration has provided minorities the means and ability to exercise community control through democratic participation. Ladson-Billings also notes that a quest for quality education was a major component of the modern civil rights movement. During this era of socio-political upheaval, important statutes and court decisions were enacted to protect the rights of all students, including Title VI, 42 U.S.C. § 2000d et seq., which was part of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). According to Ladson-Billings (2006), the denial of first-class education – and the broadened career opportunities it affords – as well as limited access to lawyers and legislators kept African Americans from accumulating political capital equal to that of their white counterparts.

Moral Obligation

According to Ladson-Billings (2006), all people are influenced by a moral debt, which she defines as "the disparity between what we know as right and what we actually do" (p. 8). Citizens who have been excluded from social benefits and opportunities cannot be expected to focus upon personal responsibility to close the educational gap. Ladson-Billings suggests that education must be joined with social responsibility so that lines between the races are no longer parallel, but intersecting. This moral debt must compel educators to take action by advocating for minority students "because it is the equitable and just thing to do" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 9) to make an impact on the deficits that exist academically for underserved populations.

The social and political exclusion of African Americans from society has been documented for centuries. History has documented blatantly malevolent policies, such as slavery, as well as subtle, yet irreversibly harmful actions, such as excluding families of color from participating in or making decisions regarding school-related activities that would ensure a quality education for their children (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 7). To move forward and make progress for all students, there must be a wide understanding of the history of education, the impact of previous educational decisions, and the potential for current policy to shape the future. It seems as if the achievement gap has been accepted as the norm. Instead, Ladson-Billings challenges educators to "deploy our knowledge, skills, and expertise to alleviate suffering" (p. 10) and to urgently address the pressing concerns that come with the achievement gap.

Evidence of the Academic Achievement Gap

The achievement gap that exists between African Americans and their peers can be documented through reoccurring assessments. In 2001, the federally mandated No Child Left Behind Act required states to demonstrate proficiency on standardized assessments. The Maryland State Department of Education (2011a) performance-level descriptors define proficiency as "a realistic and rigorous level of achievement." An ongoing challenge in this mandate has been reducing the achievement gap that exists between African American students and their peers because African American students are earning basic scores more often than any other minorities on the Maryland State Assessment in reading and math (Maryland State Department of Education, 2011c; Maryland State Department of Education, 2011d). A basic score of achievement indicates that additional work is needed for students to attain proficiency. Maryland State Assessment, or overall reading MSA scores for grades 3–8, reflected that African American students had the highest percentage of basic scores, 23.5%, when compared with all other races or ethnicities (Maryland State Department of Education, 2011d). The same overall result was true for the MSA math assessment. African American students had the highest percentage, 33%, for basic, compared with other races or ethnicities by gender for the mathematics content area (Maryland State Department of Education, 2011c).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) evaluates student achievement in math, reading, science, and writing at the elementary level in grade 4. It is the largest standardized test that continuously reports achievement, and it is considered to be naturally representative of the student population in the United States (National

Center for Education Statistics, 2011). The test is uniform because the same sets of test

booklets are administered in each state in chosen elementary, middle, and high schools in

grades 4, 8, and 12 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Long-term trends

for assessments have been recorded since 1971 for reading and 1973 for math. As of the

2008 assessments, nine-year-old, black students made a 34-point gain over the reading

and math scores in the early 1970's (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a).

Therefore, score gaps narrowed significantly among black students who took NAEP tests

in 2004 and 2008 compared with black students who took the tests in the early 1970's. In

2009, national reading measurement reported that fourth-graders across the nation

averaged a scale score of 220. The national scaled score between black and white

students resulted in a 25-point difference, which provides evidence that the educational

gap exists. Maryland's fourth-grade reading results were similar to the national average

with a score of 226. Black, fourth-grade students in Maryland had an average score 27

points lower than white students, who had an average of 210 (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2009c). In 2009, mathematics scores for public school fourth-grade

students resulted in a gap of 26 points nationally and 27 points in Maryland between

black and white students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b). NAEP

provides a snapshot of the national and state scores and affirms evidence of the academic

gap at both levels since the initial inception of the test.

  Ultimately, Maryland's goal, according to the Maryland State Department of

Education Achievement Initiative for Maryland's Minority Students (2001), was "to

ensure accountability for every student to meet or exceed the rigorous performance and

achievement standards" (p. 80). Maryland has implemented a range of policies with the

intent of closing the achievement gap. The Maryland State Department Education Achievement Initiative for Maryland's Minority Students (2001) suggested that minority achievement efforts should focus on obtaining input from the minority community. "A major problem is that minorities are often planned for and not planned with" (p. 3). State administrators also noted that plans must be proactive, strategic, and tailored for individual schools. They suggested that this could be achieved through incisive, intentional planning that is open to constant transformation due to the demands for new knowledge and skills. In August 2010, the federal government awarded Maryland a four-year, $250 million Race to the Top grant. The Race to the Top program seeks to increase student achievement, reduce the achievement gap, assist struggling schools, and improve teaching as a profession. Maryland continues to revise curriculum and is transitioning and developing standards for the new Maryland Common Core State Curriculum (Maryland State Department of Education, 2011b) to increase academic rigor by identifying essential skills and knowledge in each subject area. Maryland is implementing reform to build a statewide technology infrastructure for data and instructional tools to support and monitor student achievement. It is also redesigning the evaluation model of teachers and principals and is implementing initiatives to assist districts and schools that are low-performing (Maryland State Department of Education, 2011b.) These initiatives are evidence that Maryland recognizes that the achievement gap is not only a concern that should be acknowledged, but that it is also an essential challenge that must be faced.

Recognizing Educational Disparities

Acknowledging that this academic achievement gap exists is the first step that must be taken to reduce or close it all together. Jenkins (2004) warns that there is reason for alarm because the gap is instead widening, and he calls on the African American community to ensure students and their parents are the driving force to reverse this trend. Jenkins (2004) states, "when Black people lost the will to close the gap, when they turned the responsibility of closing the gap over to the government and the rest of society, the gap began to widen again" (p. 129).

Researchers have explored numerous explanations for the gap, including, but not limited to, cultural discontinuity (Ladson-Billings, 2001); academic disengagement (Ogbu, 2003); the need to align policy, resources, and accountability (Williams, 2003); the inability of educators to understand the cultural and developmental needs of black children (Kunjufu, 2005); a lack of respect for the black community (Jenkins, 2006); and social dominance (Howard, 2006). The need to accelerate achievement for African American students has been well-supported and documented for several decades, and it remains a crucial initiative today (Delpit, 2006; Education Trust, n.d.; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Maryland State Department of Education Achievement Initiative for Maryland's Minority Students 2001; Maryland State Department of Education 2003; Thompson, 2004). By acknowledging that the gap exists and partnering with educators to become part of the solution, parents, students, and the community can change the norm from excuses for past disappointments into celebrations of excellence.

Determining Academic Necessities of African American Students

Data that reflects the current attributes of African American students can be collected and then used to identify and serve their academic needs. African American community members can provide valuable information regarding their perceptions of the current state of education to partner with school systems so that current practices can be documented, reviewed, and improved or affirmed. In this study, the main focus is on African American students who attend schools in rural districts, which few studies have examined (Irvin, Farmer, Leung, Thompson, & Hutchins, 2010; Jimerson & the Rural School and Community Trust, 2006; Tilghman, 1997). This study adds to the research by giving a voice to community members as stakeholders for future generations. For educators to better advocate for the needs of African American learners, this researcher suggests that obtaining input and support from the African American community would be beneficial. Documenting these community members' perspectives regarding their local elementary schools adds to the literature and provides a foundation for future research. Delpit (2006) concurs with the need to bring community forces into the discourse:

> There is never a guarantee that a particular language or educational policy will "work" but when the policy reflects the goals of the people it is to affect ... and when it reaffirms rather than negates a people's knowledge of its culture and its heritage, then there is no better prospect for its success (p. 90).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) share Delpit's (2006) point of view because they suggest that researchers who are conducting studies in communities of color should seek out primary sources because "without authentic voices of people of color (as teachers, parents, administrators, students, and community members) it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities" (Delpit, p. 58). It should

not be assumed that only educators know what is best for students. Partnering with community members provides a means for decision makers to meet the academic needs of all students.

Theoretical Rationale

The normative standard used in education is based on the white European American experience, according to Saddler (2005). He cautions against blaming the failure of African American students on parents, laziness, or the media, and he suggests that historical structures, including schooling, have had a significant influence on contemporary culture. He states that, "biases in public schools are institutionalized, systematic, and cumulative," and educators need to avoid "fixing" the students and instead focus upon dismantling and reconstructing the educational system so that students are no longer mis- and de-educated. He believes this will require a full-fledged commitment on the behalf of all stakeholders to generate solutions that will liberate the potential of African American students (Saddler, 2005, pp. 53–54). Clearly identifying attributes that contribute to achievement is a part of the solution.

Educators need to better understand the point of view of populations who are culturally different from their own. Delpit (2006) writes, "We must keep the perspective that people are experts on their own lives ... they can be the only chroniclers of their own experience" (p. 47). She challenges teachers to use the ideal position of their role to initiate real dialogue about the issues. Jenkins (2004) states that white schools are generally middle-class-oriented, and this may cause many educators to lack basic knowledge about black children, their condition, and the need for authority to address issues that will improve education. Thompson (2003) suggests that to improve the

quality of instruction that African American students receive, positive relations between home and school must be established. She is convinced that not only do educators need to hear the voices of their students, they also need to hear the voices of parents and guardians.

Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to provide educators with feedback from African American community members with the overall goals of (1) enriching the quality of the instructional program and supporting student learning, and (2) increasing the use of resources, improving the climate within elementary schools, and establishing better community/school relationships.

Statement of the Problem

Little is known about the perceptions of rural African Americans regarding their local elementary schools. Schools could more productively educate all students if this relationship were established. According to Adams and Forsyth (2006), social interactions within a relational framework can either establish or block trust between stakeholders. The authors go on to suggest that when these relationships include trust and collaboration, parents and educators are more likely to work together to meet common objectives. By gathering feedback from the African American community regarding education, an environment could be created where diversity is respected.

The overall purpose of this study was to build upon the research base regarding attributes that elementary schools possess, specifically from the perspective of African American community members living in rural counties because their opinions are missing from the literature. A research study on an urban, elementary school in Maryland (Collins, 2010) examined factors that improved achievement and found that

student performance was improved by attributes such as strong leadership, a positive school climate, a student-centered focus, and goal setting using data. Johnson, Livingston, Schwartz, & Slate (2001) reviewed research studies to identify factors of effective schools from the viewpoint of teachers, parents, and administrators. Their findings suggested that good elementary schools have a positive school climate and strong leadership. Johnson et al. (2001) studied attributes of effective elementary schools and found significance in the care ethic. Noddings (2005) also identified "an ethic of care" (p. 147), or a need to be treated with respect and understanding, as a foundational attribute for educators to meet the needs of students. Research consistently identified high expectations as an attribute that is essential for student success (Cooper, 2003; Johnson et al., 2001; Kannapel, Clements, Taylor, & Hibpshman, 2005).

The attributes of the Community Opinion Inventory, or COI questionnaire, included descriptors of qualities that schools possess, including Quality of the Instructional Program, Support for Student Learning, School Climate/Environment for Learning, Community/School Relationships, and Resource Management. This study chose and applied the COI because the attributes addressed student needs academically, socially, emotionally, and financially. The COI uses a Likert scale to identify degrees of opinion for 40 statements regarding school attributes. Some examples of these attributes include statements on education quality, educational expectations, differentiated instruction, equity, use of technology, staff diversity, school safety, discipline, bullying, community values, and financial resources. This survey was chosen because it was specifically designed for community members, and it diversely covered attributes

necessary for student success within the subtopics and, more specifically, within each attribute.

This study was conducted in rural counties because much of the attention related to the achievement gap has been focused on urban areas, where necessary solutions for educational reform may differ in nature. A research study by Williams (2002) found that students who attended schools in large metropolitan areas were most segregated, and "those who lived in rural areas, towns and small cities were by far the most integrated" (p. 102). Additionally, the Rural School and Community Trust, a non-profit based in Washington, DC, suggested that there are unique issues in schools in rural areas and that "rural students in urban states are out of sight, out of mind" (Rural School and Community Trust, n.d., p. ii). All of this research points to a demonstrable need for research in rural counties.

This researcher intended to study the African American community perspective to provide a voice as it relates to elementary African American student achievement. These community members' opinions provided clearer insight into their perceptions as to how elementary schools are meeting the needs of African American students in their communities. Delpit (2006) clearly stated the need for establishing a voice from within the community:

> This can only be done, however, by seeking out those whose perspectives may differ most, by learning to give their words complete attention, by understanding one's own power, even if that power stems merely from being in the majority, by being unafraid to raise questions about discrimination and voicelessness with people of color, and to listen, no, to hear, what they say (p. 47).

Irvin et al. (2010) conducted a middle school study in the Deep South, and their findings illustrated that it is important to consider activities and contexts outside of school, such as

participation in church activities, because achievement can be supported from within the community. This suggests that researchers should attend to the feedback from community members.

The problem addressed in this study focused on: (1) the perceptions of African American community members in rural, Maryland counties related to positive attributes of elementary schools within a given county; (2) the current perceptions of attributes that need to be addressed and improved in elementary schools; and (3) the current attributes that need to be continued because they support student success.

The questions that guided the study were:

1. What attributes of Maryland's rural public elementary schools do African American community members perceive as the most significant in serving the academic needs of African American students?

2. Were there statistically significant differences among the five subscales: Quality of the Instructional Program, Support for Student Learning, School Climate/Environment for Learning, Community/School Relationships, and Resource Management?

3. Was there a statistically significant relationship between community members' perceptions of their local elementary public school and fifth-grade Maryland State Assessment (MSA) reading and math scores?

The achievement gap between African American students and their counterparts has persisted for decades (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Coleman, 1966; Maryland Partnership for Teaching and Learning, PreK-16, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). All elementary students implicitly and explicitly deserve a public

education that prepares them to graduate from high school. For these reasons, this study seeks to identify attributes that will meet the needs of students so all elementary educators can focus on student-centered practices that support educational growth.

Definition of Terms

African American – an American of black African descent; this social categorization acknowledges that "African ethnic groups developed out of historical circumstances in which groups of people over long periods of time shared experiences out of which they created common or similar cultural practices" (Appiah & Gates, 1999, pp. 23–24).

Black – of or relating to the African-American people or their culture; "Historically the group, or race, has encompassed both Africans and Africans mixed with other groups, notably Europeans and indigenous Americans" (Appiah & Gates, 1999, p. 253).

Note: The terms African American and black will be used interchangeably in this document depending upon the usage applied in given documents, dissertations, journals, and publications.

Community – African Americans make up many communities, are diverse, and may have common historical roots and ethno-cultural identities (Harris, Kamhi, & Pollock, 2001, pp. xxi–xxii). For the purpose of this paper, community will be considered to be a group of people who reside in a specific locality and share a common historical and cultural heritage. Parents of schoolchildren may be included as community members.

Community Opinion Inventory (COI) – a questionnaire developed by AdvancED that was divided into these seven sections: Quality of the Instructional Program, Support for Student Learning, School Climate/Environment for Learning, Community/School Relationships, Resource Management, Open-Ended Items, and Demographic Characteristics. The open-ended items were not addressed because they were not pertinent to this research, and this researcher intended to focus solely on quantitative data.

Maryland State Assessment (MSA) Test – a test of reading and math achievement that meets the testing requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The test is given each year in early March in reading and math at grades 3 through 8" (Maryland State Department of Education, Testing Overview, n.d.).

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Test – "NAEP assessments are administered uniformly using the same sets of test booklets across the nation, the assessment stays essentially the same from year to year so that NAEP can provide data regarding student academic progress over time" (National Center for Educational Statistics, NAEP Overview, 2011). For this study, reading and math test scores will be discussed based on grade 4 results because it is the only grade tested at the elementary level.

Rural – Counties included in this study are jurisdictions that are "state-designated rural," which is mandated by Maryland's Annotated Code. These counties have representatives on the Rural Maryland Council and are also identified as rural in the Maryland Rural Health Plan (Rural Maryland Council, n.d.).

Limitations

The study was limited to five rural counties in Maryland, and the number of returned surveys varied from 20 to 45 for each county. Participants were found using snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling technique. Evidence of knowledge regarding the attributes was limited to participant perceptions for this study. Many participants had family attending the local public schools. The survey was self-reporting, so the validity was based upon each participant answering each question honestly. Responses to the survey were on a Likert scale in rank order.

Organization of the Study

This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter I includes the problem and its significance and the background, rationale, research questions, theoretical perspectives, definition of terms, limitations, and organization of the study.

Chapter II includes a review of the literature related to the achievement gap. Characteristics of quality schools and effective instructional practices will follow as they relate to the five subcategories of the AdvancED questionnaire (2003). The subcategories are: Quality of the Instructional Program, Support for Student Learning, School Climate/Environment for Learning, Community/School Relationships, and Resource Management (of funds and facilities).

Chapter III discusses the methodology used in the study, including the purpose, the population and sample, the instrumentation and its reliability and validity, the procedures for the selection of participants and data collection, the research questions, and the analysis of the data. Chapter IV provides a thorough presentation and analysis of the data. Chapter V presents the findings as they relate to Quality of the Instructional

Program, Support for Student Learning, School Climate/Environment for Learning,

Community/School Relationships, and Resource Management. Implications for future

research, limitations, and conclusions complete the chapter.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the perceptions of African American community members regarding positive attributes within rural elementary schools in Maryland to help improve the quality of education African American students receive. Literature indicates that the achievement gap that exists between African American students and white students has impacted the quality of education for African American students (Applebaum, 2003; Craig & Washington, 2006; Delpit, 2006; Hale, 1994; Howard, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Kunjufu, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Noguera, 2003; Ogbu, 2003; Perry et al., 2003; Thompson, 2004; Williams, 2003). The majority of research on the achievement gap focuses on urban or suburban African American students (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Collins, 2010; Ferguson, 2002; Ogbu, 2003) instead of rural African American students (Irvin et al., 2010; Tilghman, 1997).

This literature review begins with a brief summary of the existence of an achievement gap in rural areas, followed by research concerning gaps in urban and suburban areas to provide context and contrasting findings. Characteristics of quality schools and effective instructional practices (Comer, 2001; Glasser, 1998; Johnson et al., 2001; Kannapel et al., 2005; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Schmoker, 2001; Waxman, Huang, Anderson, & Weinstein, 2001) will be included as they relate to the

five subcategories of the AdvancED questionnaire (2003) that was distributed to garner information for this research. The subcategories are: Quality of the Instructional Program, Support for Student Learning, School Climate/Environment for Learning, Community/School Relationships, and Resource Management (of Funds and Facilities).

<div align="center">The Achievement Gap</div>

The Maryland State Department of Education (2011a) defines the achievement gap as "the differences in levels of achievement among groups of students" and goes on to note that the definition becomes more accurate when stated as "the difference between the performance of each student group and the standards" (p. 1). This distinction seeks to have each student group, versus each individual, reach the same high expectations. Anderson, Medrich, and Fowler (2007) define the achievement gap as "the differences in scores on state or national achievement tests between various student demographic groups" (p. 547). For this study, the achievement gap will be reviewed based upon standardized tests as a measure of the academic performance of African American and white students.

Specific reasons for the gap were noted in an archived document from the U.S. Department of Education titled How No Child Left Behind Benefits African Americans (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), including the idea that the achievement gap went unaddressed between white and African American students even "forty years after the Brown v. Board of Education decision" (p. 1). It also stated there were two educational systems in place, which were "separate and unequal," and that "some schoolchildren were taught well, while others – mostly poor and minority – were left to struggle or drop

out" (p. 1). To ensure accountability, schools specifically became responsible through the required use of report cards and annual state assessments with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. Schools that failed to meet state academic standards after two sequential years were identified as "in need of improvement," and parents were then given the option of sending their child to another school with provided transportation. NCLB contains accountability provisions that require districts to make "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) based on these three factors: standardized test scores in reading/language arts and math, attendance rates for elementary and middle schools, and graduation rates for high schools. These provisions offered a means for tracking academic progress on a national level. Federal policy, through NCLB, now includes specific goals for increasing achievement for minorities and closing the achievement gap. The accountability provisions, established by NCLB, required districts to specifically document achievement according to demographics, which increased the visibility and urgency of the gap and eliminated complacency, on the part of politicians and educators, as an option for subgroups in need of improvement.

Educators should be cautioned against blaming at-risk students for the achievement gap that exists. Flores, Cousin, and Diaz (1991) believe educators must be aware of deficit myths for students who are at risk: "Blaming the children's parents, the culture, and their language for their lack of success in school has been a classic strategy used to subordinate and continue to fault the victim" (p. 372). Flores et al. state that this deficit view may be based on the fact that students who are not from an Anglo middle-class background are at a disadvantage due to the social, political, and economic policies of those who are in power. They also caution educators against misinterpreting parental

behavior based solely on school administrators' perspectives and encourage seeking an understanding of the cultural norms that exist for the families the school serves. The researchers indicate that successful educators reject deficit myths and unproductive beliefs and instead critically reflect upon constructive beliefs and a positive viewpoint that incorporates the assumption that children bring strengths to the classroom, including the value of cultural experiences, the ability to learn, and proficient language use. The challenge lies, therefore, in focusing on solutions.

<div align="center">The Achievement Gap in Rural Schools</div>

Current research has primarily focused upon urban schools, and Bauch (2001) suggests that the needs of rural communities differ from urban neighborhood communities. Her research on rural communities explores the school-community partnership model of school renewal for improving rural education. Bauch states that rural communities are more likely to embrace relational leadership: "Partnerships are built on social interaction, mutual trust, and relationships that promote agency within a community" (p. 205). The parent-teacher-community partnership model of school renewal includes shared decision making based on community goals and needs, with mutual trust and caring as norms for promoting action within the educational system. Bauch notes that rural communities usually exhibit close connections; strong intergenerational relationships; and norms, values, and attitudes that readily contribute to school renewal. She goes on to observe that community conversations regarding moral purpose and vision are unlikely to imitate urban reforms. Instead, rural communities – by acknowledging their own place and identity – can join together with their local schools and communities to best meet the needs of their students. This beckons the call for

documentation of community perceptions, concerns, and goals so interactive dialogue can purposefully occur and action plans can be implemented.

Tilghman (1997) surveyed the perception of black parents regarding the education of their children in six schools, grades second through sixth, in a rural, Maryland county and found that parents were concerned that the overall school climate was negative and that teachers had low expectations of the black child academically and behaviorally. However, satisfaction was evident regarding content of the curriculum and parental involvement within the school. All the parents felt that education and achievement were important and most frequently stated that equity in educational opportunities was crucial for the academic advancement of their children. Tilghman indicates that it is important to understand black parents' attitudes and values in regard to education because they are transmitted to their children. She also notes the importance of introspection from school administrators and suggests that models of interaction with black parents should be respectful, non-discriminatory, and that they should incorporate a multicultural perspective instead of placing blame on black parents and ignoring organizational causes for low achievement. Bauch (2001) and Tilghman (1997) both cite the importance of establishing community, home, and school relationships as the first step in seeking initiatives in closing the gap.

Jimerson and the Rural School and Community Trust (2006) proposed that, as cultural and civic centers, rural schools are like glue that joins communities together socially. They studied effective characteristics of schools and found that smaller, rural schools were more likely to exhibit a safe and disciplined environment, school connectedness or a sense of belonging, and a demanding curriculum with high

expectations. These attributes were cited as a means for increasing overall achievement. Jimerson and the Rural School and Community Trust identified three categories as necessary for a successful school: relationships, instructional strategies, and structural elements such as class and district size. However, they identified the "human factor" (p. 16) as the most common and most crucial element among the three categories. Bauch (2001) and Tilghman (1997) indicated that the power of close relationships was the most critical element that schools possess due to the value of interpersonal relationships in rural districts. Jimerson and the Rural School and Community Trust's (2006) findings suggest that close relationships are necessary for fostering policy changes and instructional reform, which are both needed to implement successful school initiatives.

<p align="center">The Achievement Gap in Urban and Suburban Schools</p>

Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum (2005) researched public schools and suggest that school failure is due to a lack of equitable treatment for students of color in urban settings. As industrialization declined, whites moved to suburban areas, thereby changing the tax base and subsequent financial support for tax districts and public schools. Because of this phenomenon, urban schools tend to be in high-poverty areas, which can lead to elevated teacher turnover; a large number of uncertified or provisionally licensed teachers; limited technology, resources, and extracurricular activities; and dilapidated school facilities. Blanchett et al. suggest possible solutions, including leadership that establishes a common vision with an effective team whose members are committed; equitable school funding; and the dedication of all educational stakeholders to ensure student success through a positive climate, equitable and fair district policies, teacher training, and financial resources.

Evans (2005) notes that the origins for the achievement gap in urban districts "lie neither in students nor in schools" and states that "skin color, ethnic status, or poverty – none of these by themselves, determine a student's performance" (p. 583). Evans also acknowledges a gap between urban and suburban resources and the structural characteristics of each, including economic and political challenges such as the ability to hire high-quality teachers in low-performing schools. Evans states that schools cannot control given social and economic factors, and he cautions against blaming schools for the achievement gap. However, Evans also documented a need for schools to adopt practices that focus primarily on creating a school climate where students and parents feel welcome, comfortable, and safe. He believes schools can ensure this by employing teachers who build personal relationships with students while committing to help them reach goals with high expectations. A need to individualize and differentiate instruction with varied methods was also proposed. Finally, Evans calls for curriculum that integrates and includes black and Hispanic culture.

Bainbridge and Lasley (2002) researched key attributes of effective, high-poverty, urban, Title 1 schools and found that they used standards to design curriculum and instruction, to assess student work, and to evaluate teachers. They also added instructional time for reading and math, allocated additional monies for professional development on instructional practices for staff and parents, and established comprehensive systems to monitor student mastery. They suggest that new approaches aimed at closing the achievement gap should take demographics, diversity, and accountability into consideration. They recommend restructuring schools that "offer rich programs to enhance student capital, create instructional practices that address the

inherent diversity of the student population, and create appropriate accountability mechanisms for what occurs in schools" (p. 435).

Collins (2010) researched an urban, high-performing, high-poverty elementary school in Maryland. Ninety percent of the students were African American and received free and reduced meals. The school restructured its efforts, and findings indicate that strong leadership; a positive school climate with a student-centered focus; and goal setting, with a focus on data, attributed to 90% of the student population scoring advanced or proficient on the Maryland State Assessment.

Research on urban schools called for some similar solutions as those suggested for rural districts, including the need for a positive climate, financial and academic equity, and high teacher expectations. Due to size, rural districts tended to differ with their more intimate approach that uses intergenerational relationships and relational leadership (Bauch, 2001). Urban districts tend to face structural differences in their approach based on the social and economic factors that exist within highly populated areas. Evans (2005) suggests that the immediate answer in closing the achievement gap is to stop denying urban students adequate resources and staffing by equalizing structural conditions in all public schools.

<div align="center">AdvancED Community Opinion Inventory</div>

The AdvancED (2003) Community Opinion Inventory (COI) is the survey used in this investigation. It was distributed to community members to document current public opinion based on the five subtopics; Quality of the Instructional Program, Support for Student Learning, School Climate/Environment for Learning, Community/School Relationships, and Resource Management. The COI lists 40 positively stated attributes

for participants to address on a Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Current research related to each subtopic, based on the attributes, will be discussed in the

following sections.

Quality of the Instructional Program

For the subcategory Quality of the Instructional Program, the AdvancED (2003)

Community Opinion Inventory questionnaire includes: quality of education, opportunities

to learn, comprehensive programming, citizenship, academic ranking, preparing students

to deal with problems, application between learning and everyday lives, and teachers

holding high expectations for student learning. Characteristics of a successful

instructional program are repeatedly noted throughout the literature. The characteristics

include strong instructional leadership, high expectations, nurturing relationships, a

caring environment, and trust (Cooper, 2003; Harmon, 2002; Johnson, 2006; Johnson et

al., 2001; Kannapel et al., 2005; Noddings, 2005; Noguera, 2003). The United States

Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (2000)

authored an indicators report on school quality. The findings acknowledge that school

quality depends upon interdependent elements, including school context, teachers, and

classrooms. Teacher excellence is more likely to be evident when they have high

academic skills, teach in the field in which they trained, have more than three years of

experience, and participate in high-quality professional development programs. The

study connected the need for technology in classrooms for effective and enhanced student

learning. The most critical school characteristics included:

> School leadership that provides direction, guidance, and support, goals that are
> clearly identified, communicated, and enacted, faculty that collectively takes
> responsibility for student learning, school discipline that establishes an orderly

atmosphere conducive to learning, and school academic organization and climate that challenges and supports students toward high achievement (p. 36).

This indicates a need for administrators to motivate faculty to effectively provide a disciplined environment that upholds high academic standards within a caring environment.

Considering the quality of an instructional program, Marzano et al., (2001) suggest that no strategy works equally well in all situations and that teachers who use their knowledge about students and the curriculum to identify the most appropriate strategies are most successful. The researchers identify the teacher as the key link to student learning and indicate that highly effective teachers can have a profoundly positive influence on students even if the school as a whole is unsuccessful. Effective and efficient classroom processes, according to Waxman et al. (2001), include more interaction between the teacher and students, quality student-and-teacher interactions, active student learning and instructional pacing, and a positive learning environment in an orderly classroom. Comer (2001) believes teachers who focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment within a culture of overall support for student development will succeed. Building good relationships, engaging students, and teaching them "the language of learning" will enable students to be independent thinkers who have a voice and see themselves as lifelong learners (Parsons & Harding, 2011).

Harmon (2002) conducted a study among inner-city, African American, gifted students who were temporarily bused to a predominantly white school regarding their opinions of effective teachers. Students identified teachers who were respectful and caring, while using a variety of teaching styles and differentiation, as exemplary. Effective teachers were also identified because they demonstrated culturally competent

characteristics and behaviors. For example, they established meaningful relationships with the community beyond the classroom; they advocated for student needs; they were socially responsive; and they sought to increase racial harmony and mutual respect within their classrooms. Each study identifies the importance of the teacher as the overall facilitator who establishes a positive and caring classroom climate so academic instruction can be specifically implemented.

The efficacy of any and all academic strategies, such as those outlined previously in this section, must be assessed. Assessment is a key component of academic achievement, according to Schmoker (2001), who states, "We are what we monitor, honor, and pay attention to" (p. 24). He suggests that teachers who use student achievement data to align actions and intended outcomes are likely to meet student academic needs by providing their classrooms with goal-oriented instruction. High-quality lessons include carefully aligned instruction based on data-driven results. Assessment provides teachers with the ability to appropriately align instruction with current student abilities so lessons challenge students within their range of development.

Walker-Dalhouse (2005) supports previous findings on school quality and indicates that there are key issues that must be assessed and addressed to meet the academic needs of African American students. They include equal access to materials, motivation using task goals that focus upon learning and improving, teacher preparation and training, instructional practices that connect the classroom and the home, and establishing positive teacher-student-parent relationships. Walker-Dalhouse goes on to propose that informed and caring educators can help close the achievement gap by implementing meaningful and interactive discussions in the classroom that support critical thinking, supporting

home-school connections, and helping students to build resilience through the support of sustained efforts. The critical balance of creating routines, expectations, and norms between home and school is evident in Walker-Dalhouse's recommendations for maintaining a high-quality instructional program.

Meyer (2005) proposes that student academic needs can best be met with a comprehensive student program that includes a complete curriculum of diverse subjects. While she believes nationwide standards-based reform may improve student achievement in academic subjects that are assessed, she indicates concern that teachers, schools, and districts may overemphasize tested subjects, therefore sacrificing a comprehensive education. Meyer claims that parents overwhelmingly support a well-rounded curriculum that includes core subjects such as English, math, and science, as well as the arts, history, civics, geography, and foreign languages. She notes that although "virtually every state has adopted standards in the arts, few have incorporated the subject into their state accountability systems" (p. 38). Fisher and McDonald (2004) suggest including a role for arts in a standards-based system because they believe students have a need to "establish purposeful, integrated learning connections" (p. 240) to increase understanding. They propose accomplishing this by setting comprehensive and integrated instructional goals through collaboration and staff training. Fisher and McDonald believe that well-established comprehensive programs can result in increased student interest and active involvement, and that teachers may experience increased job satisfaction. Comprehensive programs provide opportunities for educators to motivate students through integrated coursework.

The literature suggests that this comprehensive curriculum should include citizenship skills, which help students understand that they can ethically become a contributing member of their community. Citizenship that is taught effectively can establish the importance of each individual's role in society and can set expectations for becoming an active citizen in adulthood. Ozolins (2010) proposes that school communities can provide "positive moral habitats" so students can acquire the values of a "good citizen" (pp. 420–421). He claims that good citizens can be created in nurturing environments based on the moral values and principles of their school. Malone and Pederson (2008) suggest that social studies teachers prepare students for adult roles, such as becoming responsible, participating members of society. They suggest, "One of the most important goals for a social studies teacher is to equip young people with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to be active citizens at all levels of society" (p. 258). Malone and Pederson propose that teachers can help students become active citizens by providing instruction that allows them to "make logical decisions based on reliable information, undertake appropriate actions based on informed decisions while considering the beliefs and values of others, and reflect on personal decision making" (p. 258). Decision making is a skill that supports students in becoming productive citizens, and it can be integrated into all subject areas. For students to prepare for their future and to become active citizens, they first must see themselves as scholars. Fisher (2005) studied black student achievement and found that the following factors led to success: "high self-concepts, time-management skills, parental support and high expectations, the desire to prove stereotypes wrong, their own high expectations, and the desire to be responsible for their own lives and to control their own destiny" (p. 204). Citizenship and its intellectual

demands are assets that can empower students to internalize the fact that they are the stakeholders of their future accomplishments.

Setting these kinds of high expectations are a valuable asset, according to Kannapel et al. (2005), who note that high expectations can resonate through schools if principals hold high expectations for faculty and staff, who, in turn, hold high expectations for themselves and their students. Cooper (2003) studied effective white teachers of black children and found high expectations to be a valuable asset. High expectations resonate throughout the research on quality instructional programs. Setting the bar high begins with adults who initiate interaction that not only defines expectancies, according to the school's academic and social setting, but also model high expectations.

<div align="center">Support for Student Learning</div>

The AdvancED (2003) questionnaire includes attributes that address learning opportunities for a range of student abilities, student recognition, equity, media resources such as technology, school facilities, and the use of community resources. Learning opportunities for a range of student abilities can be addressed in various ways. Landrum and McDuffie (2010) suggest that individualized instruction and differentiated instruction are both meaningful ways that students can be taught according to their strengths and needs. They define individualized instruction as "the matching of instruction to individually identified needs" that can be administered "one-on-one, to a small group of students, or in the context of whole-class instruction" (p. 8) that is delivered to students with identified disabilities through the Individualized Education Program, or IEP, process. By law, this process requires that present levels of achievement are assessed and documented so goals can be established and accommodations can be implemented.

Landrum and McDuffie document a need for individualized instruction for students with disabilities, but they also argue that there are many students who could benefit from individualized instruction, especially those "who struggle in a given domain or content area" (p. 8). They summarize individualized instruction as "a planned way that builds on what individual students currently know and can do and targets meaningful goals regarding what they need to do next" (p. 9) through accommodations and modifications to teaching and testing. The researchers believe this individualized instruction provides a basis for differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction acknowledges that students come to the classroom with varied experiences, abilities, readiness levels, and modes of learning. Educators, "modify content, process, and product" (p. 10) and go "beyond the basic concepts of individualization" (p. 14) so they can meet the needs of a diverse classroom. Supporting student learning begins with identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each child and scaffolding learning so that it specifically builds on prior knowledge that connects to new concepts and results in mastery of a subject or skill. This ensures that all students have access to and will be motivated by continual progress and success.

Gifted-and-talented programs also address the need for students to have equal access to a quality education. Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Trotman (2002) believe African American students may be under-represented in gifted education programs because "educators interpret differences as deficits, dysfunctions, and disadvantages" (p. 52) rather than recognizing the strengths African American students possess. Deficit thinking in education limits access and opportunity for black students, and, in turn, the researchers propose, "The ultimate challenge is to create paradigms that take culture and context into

account to enhance possibilities for diverse students" (p. 58). Moore, Ford, and Milner (2005) suggest that recruiting African American students into gifted education is only the first step and that retaining them in gifted programs is a concern. The researchers note that white students disproportionately are enrolled in gifted-education programs in predominantly white schools. Students who are able to align their goals with the educational environment, while experiencing support, are most likely to remain in a gifted-talented program. Moore et al. document two kinds of support that play a role in student academic success in these programs: peer and teacher support. Students have a need to feel accepted by and connected to their peers; when they experience a sense of belonging, they tend to remain in the program. In addition, gifted African American students who had positive relationships with teachers who had high expectations did better in school. Gifted education is a form of student recognition that is significant because it acknowledges individual abilities and accomplishments within a group. This can be especially empowering for minority students.

Johnson's (2006) study of the perceptions of fifth-grade students also cites the importance of student-teacher relationships. Results indicate that students prefer a teacher who is caring and interested in their learning and that student trust and positive teacher expectations allow for caring interactions. These interactions can engage and motivate students, which can result in improved educational outcomes. This study acknowledges that student viewpoints and preferences can improve the classroom environment and positively contribute to enhancing education and student learning.

Irvine and McAllister (2000) researched the role of teachers' beliefs using empathy as an attribute in effectively meeting the needs of culturally diverse students. Three

themes emerged in their research. Teachers who displayed empathy established "more positive interactions with culturally diverse students, more supportive classroom environments, and more student-centered practices" (p. 433). The results from this study indicate empathy was a trait that enabled educators to provide a climate that was caring, supportive, and responsive. Irvine and McAllister suggest that for minority students to experience equal access to quality education, teacher preparation programs should be designed so that the predominantly white females, "who will most likely come from communities and experiences different from those of future students" (p. 442), will develop and nurture dispositions, such as empathetic and caring connections, with culturally diverse students to increase achievement for all. Moore et al. (2005) encourage educators to create learning environments that are culturally responsive by capitalizing on students' individual backgrounds. Establishing a classroom that emits a sense of community and belonging can occur through cooperative grouping, peer tutoring, and by encouraging social learning experiences. Recognizing the whole child, culturally, academically, and as an individual, can provide each student with a sense of pride for all types of accomplishments.

As evidenced by social media and other online forums, technology is an important and prevalent tool that can be used to help build community and create shared learning experiences. Additionally, the Maryland Instructional Technology Advisory Council (2011) suggests that technology's integration into the teaching and learning process is critical to the U.S. educational system as teachers prepare students for an, "ever-changing workforce" (p. 10). Technology supports student learning in a myriad of ways, and access to technology has dramatically increased in recent years. Miranda and Russell

(2011) researched factors that affect technology use at the elementary level. They found the strongest predictors of teachers using technology were teacher experience; teacher confidence; beliefs that technology supports instructional goals; instructional leaders, such as the principal, using technology; and established technology standards and teacher and student accountability standards. Perceived obstacles to integrating technology included, "a lack of easy access, lack of support for integration, and a need for access to timely technical support" (p. 318). Overall, the researchers felt that an individual list of factors for improved technology use is not enough: "Rather results point to the importance of an entire school district culture committed to instructional technology use" (p. 319).

The North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction (2000) studied schools where a culture of achievement and high expectations was evidenced by unusually high achievement scores for their black students. One of the key strategies implemented in each of the schools was targeted use of technology. Technology was used school-wide to teach core skills, and it was designed to match each student's ability level. Study participants attributed success in closing the achievement gap to the cumulative effects of many factors in addition to technology, including leadership and focused instruction, consistent assessment and review of data, and grouping strategies. They also note that their programs were not designed for minority students, but rather were focused on all students who were struggling academically.

Parsons and Harding (2011) compiled four research projects, including the findings from highly effective elementary schools in Alberta, Canada. They found that educational spaces should promote learning and technology. In addition to considering

where to place computers and planning for frequency of use, they suggest that technology should also be a curriculum tool for tracking student learning and that technology can aid faculty and students in engaging with the world as a whole to expand learning opportunities. Investing in technology can increase student proficiency and provides students with academic and professional skills for the rapidly changing future. Their research also found that support for student learning included the use of formative assessment to engage students, the establishment of positive relationships, teacher collaboration, and strong leadership.

<div align="center">School Climate/Environment for Learning</div>

The AdvancED questionnaire (2003) includes 11 topics for the subcategory School Climate/Environment for Learning: community respect for teachers; student respect for school and community property; a climate of respect regardless of race, religion, or gender; diversity of staff members; substance abuse; a safe environment; safe travel to and from school; adequate security; bullying; discipline; and school satisfaction. Cohen and Pickeral (2007) refer to school climate as "an emergent group phenomenon" and note that it includes assessment of major elements of school life, including "safety, relationships, teaching, and learning," and is associated with "predictive academic achievement, effective risk-prevention efforts, and healthy youth development" (p. 29). They believe that by understanding schools' strengths and challenges, a real sense of community can be fostered by working to promote attributes and skills that lead to success for students.

Glasser's (1998) initial requirement for teachers expecting quality schoolwork is to provide "a warm, supportive environment" (p. 18). He calls on all involved parties –

administrators, teachers, and students – to be respectful of one another and claims that

this relationship must be based on trust. Adams and Forsyth (2006) studied how to

promote a culture of parent collaboration and trust and found that parents and school

personnel are more likely to work together to achieve given objectives when trust has

been established through enabling structures. Enabling structural conditions remove

barriers and support a school culture that is "open, honest, benevolent, competent, and

reliable" (p. 20). Noddings (2005) discusses the importance of care ethics to meet

student needs. She goes on to point out the importance of treating students' requests with

regard and understanding, which sends the message that their needs are recognized and

facilitates the establishment of a caring relationship. Noddings acknowledges that skillful

educators are sensitive to the idea that children who have their needs met can then

concentrate and learn in school. This mutual respect, once established, will result in

students working "for teachers they like and trust" (p. 155). Hill (2008) studied the

common characteristics of effective schools for students who are disadvantaged, and the

results seem to align with Noddings' suggestion that students must have their basic needs

met so they can be present and attentive in school. Hill describes effective schools using

the following criteria:

> They have a moral core, coherent curricula and demanding academic
> standards, strong social cohesion, teachers with intellectual lives, bonds of trust
> between schools and parents, staff members who agree on goals and methods,
> adults who take responsibility for showing students links among subjects and
> between school and the adult world, and teachers who collaborate to figure out
> what struggling students need (p. 243).

Consequently, a respectful environment, among students and staff, is repeatedly cited in

the research as a means to create a supportive and safe climate that promotes academic

achievement.

Research indicates that a caring environment clearly supports learning and nurturing, respectful relationships (Jimerson and the Rural School and Community Trust, 2006; Kannapel et al., 2005; Noguera, 2003; Pershey, 2011). Jimerson and the Rural School and Community Trust (2006) consider "a sense of belonging" (p. 8) as a key aspect of school climate. They suggest that this connectedness is most common in schools where students respect one another and get along and that a positive school climate fosters engagement in schooling and less risky behavior. Noguera (2003) discusses the idea that if students believe their teachers care about them and show concern for academic performance, the likelihood of academic success is increased. He goes on to note that students who feel they can trust their teachers feel empowered, and that African American students, especially, are greatly influenced by social support. Noguera cites effective schools as having the following characteristics, "a clear purpose, high expectations, commitment to educate all, a safe and orderly environment, partnerships with parents, and the ability to problem solve" (p. 450). Noguera states that supporting students' identities, cultures, and aspirations will change the culture and structure within schools so high levels of achievement become the norm for all students.

An evident way of supporting students' sense of identity is to employ educators who reflect their culture and heritage. For this reason, the shortage of African American educators has also been a documented concern regarding the learning environment for students from diverse backgrounds (Chmelynski, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Tyson, 2003; Wilder, 2000). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010), only 9.3% of elementary and middle school teachers were African American in 2010. Because of this shortage, few African American students have the opportunity to cultivate relationships

with teachers from within the same culture who can relate to their social and emotional development. Students who participated in a study by Wilder (2000) stated that their teachers of African American decent, "cared for them, increased their confidence by including connections to African American culture, and helped them by connecting education to the world" (p. 214). The learners felt empowered because they saw themselves in the curriculum due to culturally relevant teaching, and they connected with their teacher. In addition, the shortage of African American teachers means students of all backgrounds have fewer teachers who are culturally diverse.

Tyson (2003) notes that educators have two primary goals. The first is to teach academic skills and knowledge, and the second is "to transmit to students particular cultural orientations, values, and attitudes" (p. 328). Tyson says that the hidden nature of the second goal may cause discontinuities between the home and school culture. She notes that what may be considered appropriate and expected in the home may not match the school context. She considers the point of view of black teachers: "Black teachers are in the position of walking a tightrope daily between imparting the dominant culture to their students and affirming their own black culture" (p. 339). She goes on to explain that students can understand racial differences and suggests that "letting them in on the 'culture of power' and helping them to understand the rules of the game may also ease the dilemma faced by teachers of minority students" (p. 340). Chmelynski (2006) documents this modeling need, not only for African American teachers, but more specifically for male African American teachers. She notes that boys who have male teachers are more likely to consider the teaching profession.

Butler (2000) suggests that because children's learning is a top priority, urgency is required to provide qualified teachers for poor and minority students. She measures a community's responsibility of providing medical care, clean water, and fire protection as equally important and urgent as meeting the educational needs of disadvantaged students. Puriefoy (2000) sums up the need for highly qualified teachers: "We cannot expect disadvantaged students to achieve high standards unless they have access to highly motivated, qualified, and accomplished teachers, and it will be difficult to acquire these teachers without massive public and community involvement" (p. 24). The appointment of highly effective teachers who are willing to reach all students using advanced standards, with a high-quality curriculum, will be a significant initiative for closing the achievement gap.

To have teachers better meet the needs of African American students specifically, Ladson-Billings (2000) indicates that possible solutions could include high standards for admissions into teacher programs, coursework in teacher programs that gives legitimacy to African American culture, field experiences that provide context regarding diverse communities and cultures, and recruiting African American faculty so they "can serve as a resource and counterbalance to prevailing notions of African American communities" (p. 212). She goes on to note that the ideals of high-quality education will only be realized if opportunities for a quality education are available to all.

Researchers have documented that high-quality education must be delivered in a safe environment that is well-coordinated among staff, students, and community members (Axelman, 2006; Bachman, Randolph, & Brown, 2011; Hall, 2006; Jimerson and the Rural School and Community Trust, 2006). School communities can establish a

safe climate through effective prevention, intervention, and crisis response strategies. Axelman (2006) says that the task of creating a safe school environment is one of the most important challenges an educator faces. He recommends establishing and nurturing a collaborative relationship of respect to improve relationships and reduce misunderstandings and conflict. Jimerson and the Rural School and Community Trust (2006) note that students who attend small schools tend to be safer because close relationships are fostered between staff and students and the students themselves. This makes it less likely for violent incidents to occur because students are less likely to act abusively toward someone they know and value.

Safety for students who are traveling to or from school can be a concern for parents, school administrators, and the students themselves. Bachman et al. (2011) studied perceptions of fear at school and incidents regarding traveling to and from school for African American and white students. They identified three categories of prevention strategies that are commonly implemented for overall school safety. The first category is direct services, which include distributing information and materials, interventions to prevent negative behavior and promote order, and counseling services for families. The second category is organizational and environmental arrangements, which can include the restructuring of classes and schedules, the use of external personnel, and implementation of barriers and surveillance measures. Discipline or safety management activities are the final category, and they include discipline and safety management activities, such as school suspension for breaking school policies. Certain predictors of fear were noted for both African American and white students. White students felt increased fear when security guards were present. African American students were more fearful while

attending school in suburban and rural areas, and white students were more afraid while attending school in urban areas (Bachman et al., p. 706). Prevention strategies need to be implemented to establish a culture of safety so fear is alleviated.

It is important to help create a school environment where all children feel safe and learn to the best of their abilities. Sampson (2002) acknowledges that bullying is a serious concern because it affects a student's sense of security. She defines bullying:

> Bullying occurs when one child or group of children repeatedly hurts another child through actions or words. Bullying may involve physical aggression, such as fighting, shoving or kicking; verbal aggression, such as name-calling; or more subtle aggression, such as socially isolating a child (p. 29).

According to Bachman et al. (2011), another key predictor of fear among all students in their research was "previous victimization experiences, including bullying" (p. 705). The Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (n.d.) characterizes bullying using these three criteria: intentionally aggressive behavior, interaction that happens over time, and an interpersonal relationship where an imbalance of power exists. Jimerson and the Rural School and Community Trust (2006) note that students who feel safe are more likely to learn, stay focused, and feel good about school in general. Learning environments that are free of threat, violence, and bullying provide the optimal learning environment for students. Hall (2006) acknowledges that bullying can be a major obstacle during the school day for a student. Her research indicates that bullied students who are taught to be assertive using problem-solving skills effectively over a period of time may gain confidence and be less likely to be victimized. Bachman et al. (2011) found bullying to be the strongest predictor of fear in their study of crime prevention in schools and indicate that "well-defined and communicated school discipline codes are very important in producing safety in schools" (p. 721). Bullying affects not only the bullies and their

direct victims; it affects everyone who attends a school. Students who attend a school that harbors a safe climate are more likely to want to attend school and are more likely to have confidence that the adults in the building will protect them so they, subsequently, can focus upon academic instruction.

Perceptions of safety also hinge on substance abuse, another attribute that can negatively impact school climate. Substance abuse can be defined as a pattern of harmful use of any substance with the intent of a mood-altering experience. Battistich and Hom (1997) found that "in schools where there is a strong sense of community, students are more strongly bonded to the school" and would be less likely to engage in risky behavior "where the social context promotes bonding" (p. 1997). They also found that the social context of the school is related to student attitudes, motives, and behaviors and is a determinant in children's developmental outcomes. Andrews, Tildesley, Hops, Duncan, and Severson (2003) found a gap in the research for elementary school-aged children and note that it was most likely because of the low prevalence of substance abuse of children so young. They studied the intentions related to trying cigarettes, chewing tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and inhalants and found that boys were more likely than girls to intend to use alcohol and tobacco when older. This three-year longitudinal study found a prevalence of trying substances as students approached the late elementary years. The researchers' findings show that intention is related to subsequent use of alcohol and cigarettes and indicate that substance-use prevention programs should be implemented prior to the time when students are initially introduced to the substance. McLaughlin and Vacha (1993) suggest that school counselors can play an active role in reducing substance abuse by providing counseling services, serving as a liaison between

community agencies and the school, and becoming a strong proponent of substance-abuse

prevention in the schools. McLaughlin and Vacha also note that counselors have

extensive training in techniques for building rapport and meaningful relationships

between agencies, families, and the school to support student needs related to substance

abuse. Education and early intervention seem to be significant initiatives that can assist

in preventing substance abuse.

<div align="center">Community/School Relationships</div>

The subcategory Community/School Relationships has nine areas that were

included by AdvancED (2003): community members feel welcome, a responsive school

board, consideration for community members' opinions, the alignment of school goals

with community values, event notification, opportunities for community involvement,

school-sponsored open activities, and community support. Perry et al. (2003) caution

against visualizing school as a singular educational institution: "Failing to understand that

for a school to be a powerful institution for African Americans, it must also function as a

cultural, social, and political institution" (p. 99). The researchers identified the need for

education to acknowledge the emotional, social, cultural, and academic needs of the

whole child and their community. To clearly meet the needs of African American

students in elementary schools, Delpit (2006) recommends that educators use the

perspectives and advice of those who are the experts on their own lives and experiences.

She believes the most effective educators must seek the advice from adults who are the

same culture as the students. Jenkins (2006) supports Delpit's claims and challenges

educators to value the black community. Jenkins notes, "Respect for the black

community and the role it plays in shaping the education and life outcome of its youngest

citizens is a missing ingredient in the education of black children" (p. 46). Jenkins believes the community is an extension of home. Educators who respect and value the community of the child provide a connection to the homes of the students they serve, thereby fostering relationships.

Thompson (2004) cited Glasser's Quality School Reform Model (1998) when she stated that schools could succeed "only when they improve the relationships among the individuals within the school community" (p. 3). Thompson also encourages educators to increase their efficacy with African American students by establishing a classroom climate that is safe, orderly, and conducive to learning. A secure climate that supports the social and emotional needs of students provides a consistent structure for academic consistency in individual classrooms. Johnson et al. (2001) examined the characteristics of good elementary schools that maintain a positive climate and that exhibit strong leadership. They found that schools were successful when they partnered with parents and emphasized that school and community relations were also meaningful for improving school climate. They suggest that educators who encouraged community members to be involved in school events and activities experienced a positive reciprocity because initial interactions involved a two-way exchange of ideas versus the typical practice of one-way communication through report cards or notes home. Harmon (2002) extends this idea and acknowledges that by developing social skills, teachers can help prepare students to successfully interface with the community and continue positive relations to create and maintain relationships.

Johnson et al. (2001) surveyed teachers, parents, and administrators and found that the characteristics of effective elementary schools include academic instruction that is

caring and encouraging, strong and supportive relations with parents and the community, and the establishment of a sense of community within the school. It is also essential for schools to establish positive relationships and a productive group dynamic among staff members. Tschannen-Moran (2001) studied collaboration and the need for trust in education, and she suggests that principals in excellent schools value collaboration with teachers by using their perceptions and insights to make decisions. She believes productivity is enhanced when collaboration among teachers is facilitated because debate, challenge, and conflict can transform practices to reap greater benefits. Once collaboration is an established norm within a school, direct participation that includes parents and community members is likely to be established in a genuine way. Tschannen-Moran cites authenticity of behavior and evidence of trust as expressive factors that foster an atmosphere that "pays significant dividends for schools" with outcomes of "improved effectiveness, communication, organizational citizenship, and student achievement" (p. 314). She notes that schools face challenges that are greater than any one group or person can solve and suggests that the possibility of higher-quality decisions are most likely to occur through collaboration. Epstein (2001) echoes a similar sentiment and states that students' lives are interconnected through the context of home, school, and community and indicates that learning the "most effective structures, processes, and practices will produce good connections and positive results" (p. 161). She encourages schools to establish community-based programs, which help coordinate support and resources so family involvement can be sustained and students have a better chance to succeed.

Positive community relations are the ideal expectation; however, there are instances within communities when prior circumstances may hinder relationships. Ogbu (2003) encountered this during his research about academic disengagement of African American students in a primarily white suburb. He proposes that joint responsibility must be taken between the black community and the school system so collective problems can be solved. He proposes that black community members should assume a proactive role to increase academic achievement for their children by establishing a framework for community action that would include supplementary programs, public recognition of local African Americans who could be role models, and parental support for implementing educational strategies. Ogbu suggests that the school system should initiate academic programs to support students and that teachers should have ongoing workshops on how to increase teacher expectations and parent involvement. Finally, Ogbu states that there is a need to actively build and maintain trust between the black community and the school system to help initiate an ongoing dialogue with community organizations. He noted that this dialogue could facilitate initiatives based on joint decision-making.

Perry et al. (2003) believe schools must establish a culture from within so that being a member of the school means being an achiever. They note that:

> Even in schools that are neither responsive to nor pay attention to African-American culture, if the entire school community is organized around a culture of achievement, if the culture is sufficiently strong, and if African-American students are seen as full members of these communities, these schools seem to be able to counter the larger society's ideology about the intellectual incompetence of African Americans (pp. 100–101).

The authors challenged schools, families, and communities to help African American youth develop "identities of achievement" through peer groups, such as community-

based programs, at churches, and within schools. The authors suggest that expectations

for achievement be "explicitly and regularly communicated in public and group settings"

(p. 107) so exceptional academic results could be systematically recognized and affirmed.

Simply stated, effective schools connect with people who are within the community they

serve. Boyer (1995), who was president of the Carnegie Foundation for the

Advancement of Teaching, summed up and defined an effective school as, "one that

connects people, to create community; one that connects the curriculum, to achieve

coherence; one that connects classrooms and resources, to enrich climate; and one that

connects learning to life, to build character" (p. 119).

<div align="center">Resource Management (of Funds and Facilities)</div>

Cleanliness and maintenance of school grounds, the school's impact on property

values, effective use of financial resources, support of tax dollars spent on the school, and

the participants' decision to live in this community were addressed on the questionnaire

for this subtopic. Parsons and Harding (2011) believe that building a school is more than

just a construction project. Their research has led them to the conclusion that schools are

culturally significant and that "Good schools build spaces that promote learning" (p.

103). Wagner and Gordon (2010) propose the idea that outdoor spaces can provide a

positive educational impact when they are integrated into the curriculum. They believe

that school grounds that are well-maintained can provide flexible learning environments;

they give a safe place for students to connect with nature; and they present a space for the

surrounding community to connect to through school and social events. Funnel et al., in

conjunction with the Architects and Building Branch for the Department of Education

and Employment in London (1997), indicate that well-kept grounds provide access to

outdoor environments and contribute to the needs of students and their mental and physical well-being. The school can be a focal point within a community, and the design and management of the grounds can convey messages, positively or negatively, that can influence student attitude and behavior. Funnel et al. (1997) documented benefits and outcomes of well-kept school grounds. They include:

> Improved relationships between pupils and staff, improved relationships with parents, enhanced image and greater popularity with the local community, reductions in the incidents of bullying, accidents, and vandalism, more effective teaching and learning, development of care and a stronger sense of ownership, and more efficient use of existing resources (p. 12).

Well-kept school grounds are a valuable resource because they can have a significantly positive effect on the climate of the school and the community at large.

Effective, well-kept schools are indispensible assets for a community's vitality and economic strength. Hungerford and Wassmer's (2004) research related to schools and property values tend to indicate that homes in districts with better schools are often sold at a higher price because sellers capitalize on quality public school services. They also found that homebuyers generally judge the quality of a school based on standardized test scores and that they value access to the best schools and are willing to pay higher rates for a home in a district that grants access to a quality public school. In addition to standardized test scores, the researchers found that there is a link between homebuyers who consider home prices and the amount of spending allocated per student in public K-12 schools. Overall, they note that the value of housing increases based on the quality of education that is provided in that community.

Effective use of financial resources is a topic addressed on the questionnaire that is specifically connected to the elementary school. However, school spending encompasses

federal, state, and local dollars based on tax income, grants, and standardized testing

scores. Maryland funds public education based on a minimum per-pupil expenditure

using a combination of state and local revenue (Carter, 2010). Hill (2008) acknowledges

that states and localities must keep track of how dollars are allocated and effectively

spent. He believes school districts should abandon unsuccessful educational programs

and focus on spending that is carefully monitored and only fund educational programs

that are proven to be successful. He claims that inconsistencies in spending are evident

and that spending is based on funding sources that may have specific goals. Hill

challenges districts to justify their spending:

> The amounts we spend and the ways we spend them do not derive from
> analysis of what is needed and what it should cost. Instead, school spending is a
> result of many small disjointed decisions made by different levels of government,
> legislative committees, courts, licensing boards, citizens in bond elections, and
> school boards in collective bargaining agreements (p. 239).

Hill's main argument indicates that educators could establish a financing system that

imitates successful programs. According to Hill, "The greatest barrier to knowing how to

spend money is our lack of a mechanism for developing, testing, and improving methods

of instruction" (p. 241). He suggests that responsible spending and instructional

effectiveness is most likely to occur when the majority of funds are applied to instruction

and student services.

Rural school funding can be challenging due to lower population density and the

need to provide services to larger geographic areas than urban districts. Farmer (2009)

cites transportation costs, inadequacy in funding, and declining enrollment as possible

challenges for rural districts. He also acknowledges the challenge of attaining sufficient

tax dollars within rural districts: "In addition to adopting the local tax rate for school

maintenance and operation, the passing of school bond issues to finance school facilities can become very politically charged at the local school district level" (p. 30). Farmer states that school boards with limited resources will have to make difficult financial decisions and suggests that attaining organizational objectives – such as clear communication, collaboration with the community, and including stakeholders in decision making – can assist in simultaneously balancing the diversity of political interests and the allocation of financial resources. School boards in rural districts face the challenges of serving larger geographic areas and may encounter insufficient funding due to low population density. Establishing community collaboration and support will enable political stakeholders to financially support education funding.

Crampton and Thompson (2011) cite their concerns about the impact the current economic situation is having on school funding. They acknowledge that financial reform at the state level will be challenging, and they attribute revenue shortfalls and budget deficits to high unemployment rates, discontinued stimulus programs, and reduced tax revenues. Silverman (2011) researched property tax at the local level and found that local property tax increases were most likely to be approved in school districts with larger populations. For example, his research showed that more than 90% of proposed school budgets were approved in New York from 2003 to 2010. He recommends that school districts will have to create frameworks to establish financial policies that are sustainable because "Voter resistance was linked to issues of local autonomy and community control" (p. 309). To avoid opposition, Silverman believes school board members and administrators should establish partnerships within the community to fund public education. He proposes incorporating "citizen participation into the budget formation

process and the use of public deliberations to prioritize budgeting decisions" (p. 309).

Community involvement and partnerships play a key role in citizens agreeing to spend

their tax dollars on education. Schools rely on revenue to provide adequate staffing and

resources. Well-maintained and high-performing schools tend to increase property

values, which positively impacts the community, thereby establishing an interactive

relationship of reliance between each entity.

Conclusion

Nationally, African American students continue to lag behind their white peers in

academic achievement. This trend is true in predominantly white, rural districts. Data

revealed that African American students who attend rural schools do not perform as well

as their white peers (Maryland Report Card, 2009; Maryland State Department of

Education Achievement Initiative for Maryland's Minority Students, 2001; National

Center for Education Statistics, 2004; Tilghman, 1997). The achievement gap between

African American students and white students appeared not only in standardized testing,

but also in other academic areas (Collins, 2010; Evans, 2005; Ferguson, 2002; Ladson-

Billings, 2000; Manning & Kovach, 2003; Ogbu, 2003). Research indicates that the

achievement gap is related to a myriad of factors and that an emphasis on high

expectations, positive relationships, a caring environment, support for student learning,

and strong leadership (Parsons & Harding, 2011) can increase student achievement.

Research also revealed that students were more likely to be engaged and motivated

by teachers who expected quality schoolwork, who were caring and personally interested

in student achievement and its processes, and who established a relationship of trust

(Glasser, 1998; Johnson, 2006). Trust was a valued attribute between the student and the

teacher and between parents and school personnel. Parents and school personnel were more likely to work together within an established culture of collaboration (Adams *&* Forsyth, 2006). Educators who demonstrated respect for the child's community successfully fostered relationships (Jenkins, 2006) and saw the importance of education that addressed the whole child emotionally, socially, culturally, and academically within the community (Perry et al. 2003). The management of physical resources was documented as having a significant impact on student achievement because schools are the focal points within the community, and the design and management of school grounds can positively or negatively influence student attitudes and behaviors (Funnel et al., in conjunction with the Architects and Building Branch for the Department of Education and Employment in London, 1997). Silverman (2011) suggests that communities rely on school performance, based on standardized test scores, for local property values and that schools depend on communities for financial revenue. This partnership requires communities to value their local schools.

The intent of this study was to partner with the African American community to identify attributes that would provide necessary support and positive solutions regarding elementary schools that serve African American students in predominantly white, rural school districts in Maryland. The current study collected African American community members' opinions of school attributes, attempted to identify weaknesses for given areas so they could be addressed, and tried to identify areas of strength and acknowledge their significance. This researcher believes African American community members can help initiate solutions that will benefit African American students within the elementary

school walls by identifying school characteristics that are seen as positively impacting

instruction.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Using a survey design, the purpose of this quantitative study was to learn more about the perceptions of African American community members regarding perspectives of their local elementary schools. This chapter describes the methodology and procedures used to determine African American community member perceptions in five rural counties throughout Maryland. This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section restates the purpose of the study. The second section includes the study population and sampling procedures. The third section discusses instrumentation; the fourth section discusses the data analysis procedures undertaken in the study; and the fifth section includes a summary of the methods presented.

Purpose of the Study

Previous research regarding African Americans' perceptions of their school systems has predominantly focused on urban communities (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Collins, 2010; Evans, 2005). The purpose of this study was to expand upon previous studies by exploring the perspectives of African Americans living in rural Maryland. Of specific interest was how these community members perceive the educational assets of their local public elementary schools, including quality of instructional programs, support

for student learning, school climate, and community-to-school relationships. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What attributes of Maryland's rural public elementary schools do African American community members perceive to be most significant in serving the academic needs of African American students?

2. Were there statistically significant differences among the five survey subscales: Quality of the Instructional Program, Support for Student Learning, School Climate/Environment for Learning, Community/School Relationships, and Resource Management?

3. Was there a statistically significant relationship between community members' perceptions of their local elementary public school and fifth-grade Maryland State Assessment (MSA) reading and math scores?

Population and Sample

The target population for this study was African Americans living in five rural Maryland counties where these community members were a minority of the population, based on U.S. Census Bureau statistics retrieved as of 2009. Community members were initially contacted through social organizations, church groups, schools, and service clubs. From there, snowball sampling was implemented to have participants help contact additional potential contributors. For example, surveys were delivered to leaders in the community, who distributed them among their colleagues and peers. Participation requirements limited volunteers to people who were 18 years or older; self-declared as African American; and a resident of one of the five designated, rural counties in Maryland. This researcher mailed study materials to each participant using the U.S.

Postal Service or personally delivered packets to individuals. The counties were

Allegany, located in western Maryland; Frederick and Carroll, located in the north-

central part of the state; and Calvert and St. Mary's, situated in southern Maryland.

Figure 1 depicts a map of Maryland counties with the participating counties demarked

with a star.
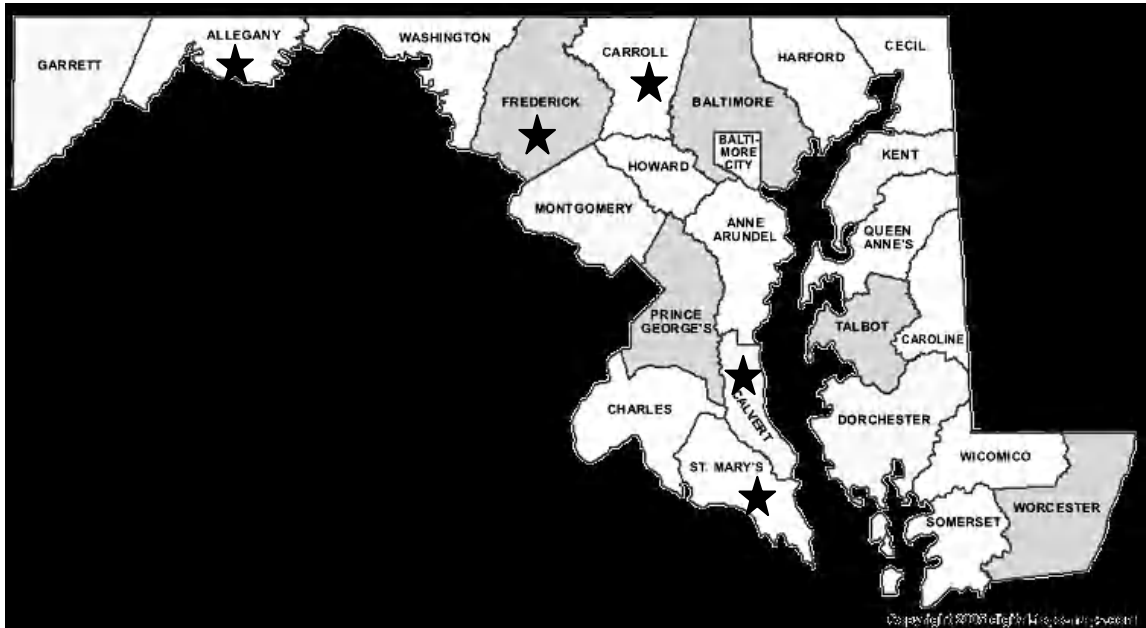
Figure 1. Map of Maryland Counties

All participants received a cover letter from this researcher and a consent form (see

Appendix A) outlining the study and participant rights, which followed the Institutional

Review Board rules established by the Notre Dame of Maryland University. The packet

also included the Community Opinion Inventory (COI) survey instrument (see Appendix

B) and a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the participant to return the completed

materials to this researcher.

Table 1 lists the number of surveys sent and returned, as well as the calculated rate

of return. The lowest return rate was from Frederick County (19%), followed by

Allegany County (25%), St. Mary's County (51%), Carroll County (61%), and Calvert

County (75%). The average return rate was 41%. This is an acceptable return rate for

social science (Iarossi, 2006).

Table 1

Frequencies and Percent of Participants From Each District

	Frequency	Percent	Sent	Return Rate (%)
Allegany	21	13.4	85	25
Calvert	45	28.7	60	75
Carroll	30	19.7	49	61
Frederick	20	12.7	105	19
St. Mary's	40	25.5	79	51
Total	156	100.0	378	41

Instrumentation

Participants expressed their satisfaction of their public elementary school using the

Community Opinion Inventory, which was a two-page, self-administered, selected-

response questionnaire based on a Likert scale. The COI was developed by AdvancED in

1995 and subsequently updated in 2003. AdvancED staff updated the survey questions

based on information gathered in a review of literature and an examination of key topics

of teaching practices and learning of high-performing schools. The revised COI

questions were field-tested, and AdvancED's panel of experts used the results to finalize

survey items. Items with a corrected item-total correlation of less than .50 were revised,

reworded, or discarded. Based on final recommendations by a committee of AdvancED

staff members, the inventory was shortened, and items were revised based on current research findings and user input.

Validity and Reliability of Survey Instrument

To ensure validity of the COI, the questions were reviewed, based on the literature review of high-performing schools. Focus groups, including individuals from throughout the United States who worked in urban, suburban, and rural schools, convened to review items. AdvancED staff concluded that the COI had acceptable validity, based on expert opinion, user input, and literature review (Advanced, 2007).

Reliability of the revised instrument was established by using Cronbach's alpha for measuring the internal consistency of the COI. AdvancED (2007) computed Cronbach's alpha statistics for each subscale and for the overall survey. Subscales, corresponding items, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients are listed in Table 2. The coefficients indicated that the instrument had acceptable internal consistency, which means respondents tended to answer the items in a similar way. For example, a participant may have consistently answered "strongly disagree" on these items.

Based on the reliability statistics and results from the pilot test, the publishers were confident that the survey "can be used to compare opinions among different report groups" (AdvancED, 2007, p. 2). According to AdvancED, all validity and reliability evidence, as listed above, suggested that the COI is an appropriate tool for studies seeking community feedback.

Table 2

AdvancED Subscale Cronbach Alpha Coefficients of the Community Opinion Inventory

Subscales/Topics	Items	Alpha Reliability Coefficient
Quality of Instructional Program	items 1–8	alpha = .94
Support for Student Learning	items 9–15	alpha = .81
School Climate/Environment for Learning	items 16–26	alpha = .93
Community/School Relationships	items 27–35	alpha = .94
Resource Management	items 36–40	alpha = .82
Composite	40 items	alpha = .98

Note: From Validity and Reliability of AdvancED Surveys, p. 7, Copyright 2007. Adapted with permission.

Survey Layout

The Community Opinion Inventory survey used in this study was divided into seven sections. The first section requested information related to demographic characteristics, including gender; ethnicity; and the participant's experience with his or her local public elementary school, specifically inquiring about attendance by self or a family member. Sections two through six contained the COI questions that obtained participants' perceptions of their local public elementary school. These questions used a six-point Likert scale (i.e., NA = does not apply or does not know, SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, N = neutral, A = agree, and SA = strongly agree). The second section contained eight questions based upon the quality of the instructional program.

The third section had seven questions regarding support for student learning. The fourth

section, titled School Climate/Environment for Learning, contained 11 questions. The

fifth section, Community/School Relationships, contained nine questions, and the sixth

section, Resource Management, had five questions. The seventh section, with three

open-ended items, was not relevant to the study and, therefore, was not used or coded.

Data Analysis

This researcher collected the completed surveys and entered the responses into an

Excel spreadsheet. The Likert values were recoded using the following method: Strongly

Agree = 5, Agree = 4, Neutral = 3, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly Disagree, and 0 = Does

Not Apply or Do Not Know. The data were then imported into SPSS, version 18 for

analysis (Field, 2005).

The first analysis generated frequencies and percents for the demographic

questions; these results were used to describe and summarize the characteristics of the

study's participants. Demographic variables that were analyzed were gender, ethnicity,

and "My Experience With This School." Under "My Experience With This School,"

participants chose from "I, or a family member, attended this school" or "I have not had a

family member attend this school."

The research questions were subsequently addressed. The first research question

identified African American's most important school attributes, which were selected by

generating frequencies and percents for each COI question. These results were organized

into the five subscales of the COI. Thus, this researcher was enabled to compare and

contrast responses within each subscale. The second research question analyzed the

differences between the COI subscale scores using a repeated-measures Analysis of

Variance (ANOVA). In other words, the scores were used to determine which school-related topics were more favorable or unfavorable among this sample. The first step in the ANOVA was to determine the normality of data. The data were found to be normally distributed; therefore, parametric repeated measures ANOVA procedures were followed. The third research question investigated the correlation of participants' overall satisfaction with their local elementary school and the school's performance on fifth-grade, state-mandated reading and writing tests. This research question was evaluated by computing Pearson correlation coefficients between the COI measures and the state reading and math scores.

This researcher chose the survey instrument for the contents of the five selected response subscales, not for the open-ended items. The responses to these latter questions were not addressed in this study because they were not pertinent to the research, and this researcher intended to focus solely on quantitative data.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions African Americans living in rural Maryland have regarding their public elementary schools. Thus, this study was conducted in rural counties in the state. The Community Opinion Inventory (COI) was the instrument used for collecting these perceptions because it is commercially available and had published acceptable reliability and validity. Moreover, it was specifically designed to obtain community members' opinions of their school system. The first data analysis generated the participants' demographic characteristics. Next, to answer the first research question, survey item frequencies were calculated by subtest to facilitate comparisons among the specific topics within each COI subscale. Then, the

second research question was analyzed using a parametric repeated-measures ANOVA to identify significant differences among the mean subscale scores. Lastly, the third research question computed Kendall tau correlation coefficients between the COI measures and state reading and math scores to determine the relationship between school satisfaction and performance on state-mandated tests.

This research study is the first on record to use the COI with members of the African American community living in rural Maryland. It specifically was designed to chronicle the perceptions rural African Americans have about the public school system to differentiate it from previous research, which has been limited to the perceptions of the educational achievement gap affecting African Americans living in urban areas. By initiating this dialogue, this research study aims to present solutions to the practices and perceptions that can truly encumber rural African American students' academic success.

Chapter IV

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The perceptions of local public elementary schools held by African Americans living in rural areas have not been extensively investigated. Many studies have focused on the experiences and opinions of urban African Americans, and much of the attention related to the achievement gap has been focused on urban areas, where necessary education reform solutions may differ from those needed in other settings (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Collins, 2010; Evans, 2005). This study was the first on record to ascertain the opinions of African American community members living in rural areas regarding the efficacy of their public elementary schools. Thus, this study was conducted in rural counties in Maryland. A research study by Williams (2002) found that schools in large, metropolitan areas, were the most racially segregated and suggested that schools in rural areas were the most integrated. The Rural School and Community Trust, a non-profit based in Washington, DC, suggested that schools in rural areas contend with distinct issues and have been consistently overshadowed by the needs of schools in urban areas. According to the organization, "Rural students in urban states are out of sight, out of mind" (Rural School and Community Trust, 2007, p. ii). Students experience school within the socio-cultural contexts of school, home, and community (School of Physical Activity and Educational Services, 2009), and for this reason there is an established need

to include the perceptions of the African American rural community. Additionally, there is a lack of current literature regarding the academic achievement of African Americans in rural areas, and the achievement gap is a concern that has been documented nationally (Collins, 2010; Ferguson, 2002; Howard, 2006; Manning & Kovach, 2003; Perry et al., 2003; Williams, 2003).

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of this study. The chapter is organized into four sections. The first presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. The next three sections describe the results of each research question.

Demographics of the Sample

This researcher obtained 156 Community Opinion Inventory (COI) surveys from African American adults living in five rural school districts in Maryland. School districts are organized to represent 23 counties and Baltimore City in Maryland. The participating counties in this study were Allegany, Calvert, Carroll, Frederick, and St. Mary's (see Chapter 3, p. 61, for a map of Maryland). The number of surveys obtained from each school district ranged from 20 to 45, and the response rate overall average was 41%. Forty-seven males (30%) and 103 (66%) females completed the surveys. Six surveys (4%) did not have an identifier chosen for gender. Many families stated that the female head of the household had more experience and knowledge of the school and district; therefore, the female family members were more inclined to complete the survey. The other demographic question asked if "I or anyone else in my family attends the local public school." Twenty-eight (17%) participants indicated no family members were attending, whereas 111 (71%) reported at least one family member attended a local

school. In summary, the sample was primarily African American females with at least one family member attending their local rural public school.

Scale Reliability

The COI authors report the reliability of the instrument ranges from .81 to .94, with a composite of .98 (AdvancED, 2007). The Cronbach's alpha composite score in this rural Maryland study (.93) was lower than the composite score reported by AdvancED because the participants in this study tended to answer the questions more diversely than those reported by the authors of the COI. This could be because African Americans' perceptions regarding their public elementary schools may be more varied than populations previously studied by AdvancED.

The Cronbach alpha statistics for each subscale are presented in Table 3. The subtest reliabilities were lower than the composite, which could be due to the higher number of questions in the total composite when compared with the lower number in the subscale. The subscales School Climate and Community Relations had the highest internal consistency, followed by Quality of Programs, Support for Learning, and Resource Management. The reliability values of the COI with this sample of participants were acceptable and indicate that this research tool has acceptable internal consistency, as determined by Warner (2009) and Salkind (2008). Moreover, these values are similar to those published in AdvancED reliability studies for all of the subtopics, except Resource Management, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Table 3

Cronbach Alpha Statistic for Each Subscale

	Alpha	Number of Items
Quality Programs	0.81	8
Support for Student Learning	0.78	7
School Climate	0.83	11
Community Relations	0.83	9
Resource Management	0.56	5
Total	0.93	40

Findings for Research Question One

The COI survey was organized into five sections: Quality of Instructional Programs, Support for Student Learning, School Climate, Community and School Relations, and Resource Management. The results of the survey items will be addressed by these subscales. As stated in Chapter 3, higher survey scores signify greater satisfaction with the participants' local schools. For the following results, positive perceptions combine the responses "agree" and "strongly agree" and negative perceptions combine the responses "disagree" and "strongly disagree." Percentages, based on 156 surveys, are reported in the following results by percentage and by frequency.

Quality of Instructional Programs

Participants generally had positive perceptions about the Quality of Instructional Programs (see Figure 2). Participants identified the highest positive response for schools having a comprehensive program (85%; n = 132). This was followed by a positive response for learning opportunities (83%; n = 129) and affirmation that the education offered to students is one of high quality (79%; n = 124). Closely ranked to high-quality

instruction was the acknowledgement of high teacher expectations (75%; n = 117).

Academic ranking scored in the mid-range (69%; n = 108), while only about half of the

participants agreed that citizenship (51%; n = 80), application related to instruction in

everyday circumstances (51%; n = 79), and preparing students to deal with problems of

the future (49%; n = 77) were adequately addressed in their local schools' instructional

programming.
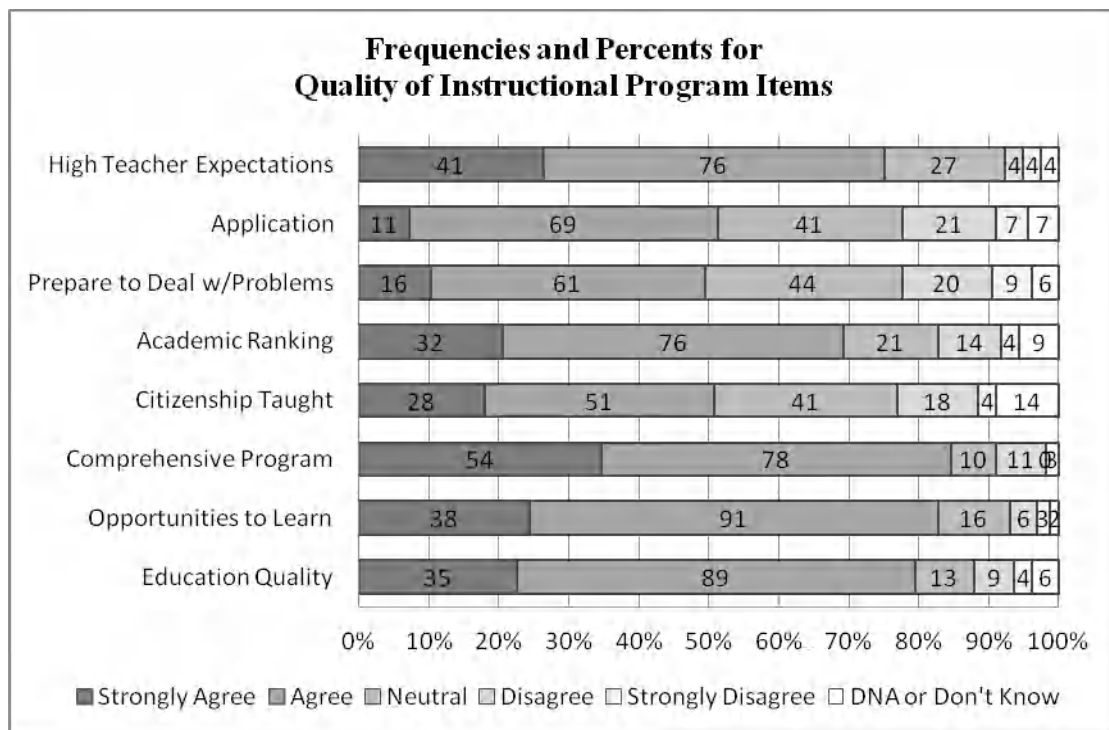
Figure 2. Frequencies and Percents for Quality of Instructional Program Subscale

Support for Student Learning

Most participants agreed that students have access to a variety of media resources

(83%; n = 129) (see Figure 3). The majority of participants also identified current

technology (79%; n = 123) and adequate school facilities (77%; n = 120) as supports in

place that positively influenced learning. Student recognition (74%; n = 115) and

differentiated instruction (72%; n = 112) were identified as areas of strength for student

learning by the majority of participants. Over half of the participants agreed that students

have access to quality education, or equity (65%; n = 101), and that schools use

community resources (63%; n = 98). However, these two questions elicited the fewest

responses in agreement overall.
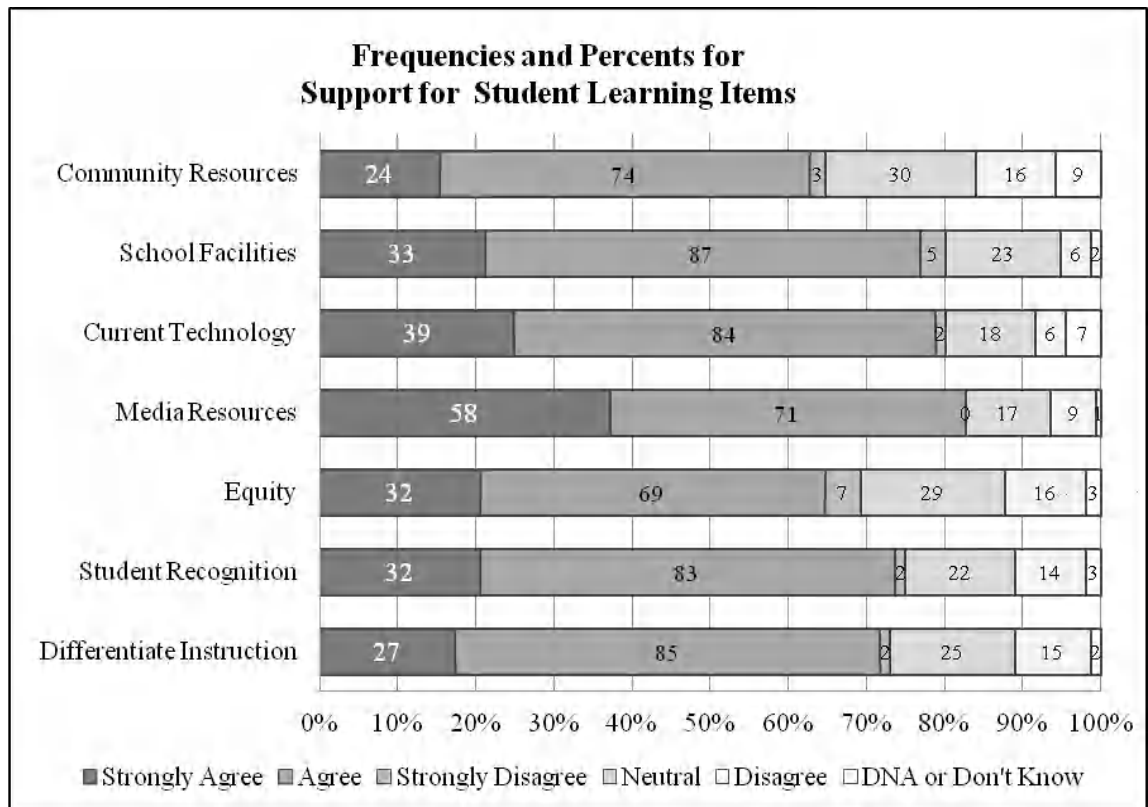
Figure 3. Frequencies and Percents of Quality of Support for Student Learning

School Climate/Environment for Learning

Participants most strongly agreed with the statement that safety measures for

children traveling to and from school are in place (81%; n = 126) (see Figure 4).

Following closely in agreement were responses for learning in a safe and orderly

environment (79%; n = 123), community respect for teachers (77%; n = 120), and

adequate security (74%; n = 115). School satisfaction (69%; n = 108) and student respect

for school and community property (65%; n = 101) scored in the mid-range, along with

discipline being appropriately maintained within the school (62%; n = 96). About half of

the participants agreed that all students and staff are treated with respect regardless of

race, religion, or gender (51%; n = 79) and that substance abuse generally within the

school is not a problem (46%; n = 72). A low number of participants agreed with the

statement that staff members reflect the diversity of the community (36%; n = 56).

Specifically, staff diversity scored as the second-biggest concern overall based on

responses of "disagree" and "strongly disagree" combined (44%). Bullying (22%; n =

35) was identified as being the most pressing concern in the school in the entire survey.
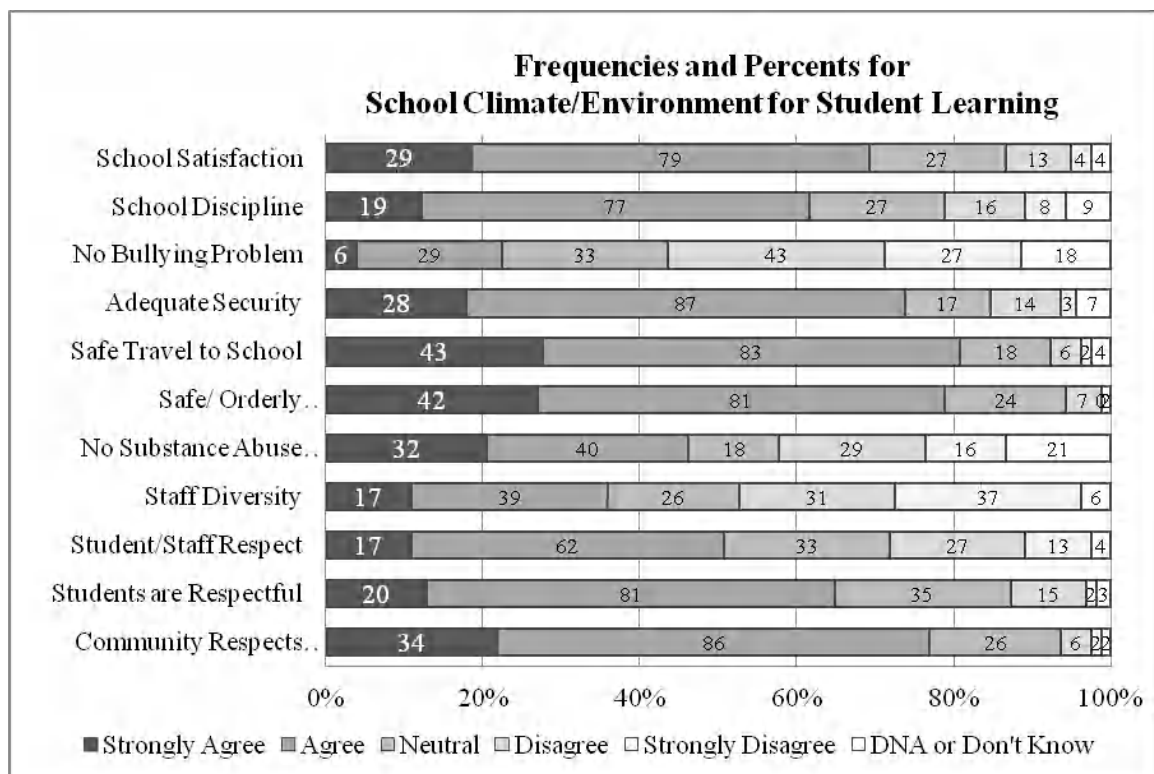
Figure 4. Frequencies and Percents of School Climate/Environment for Student Learning

Community/School Relationships

The highest-scoring responses were in agreement that community members felt welcome at school (77%; n = 120) and that community members are supportive of the school (76%; n = 118) (see Figure 5). In addition, school-sponsored activities being open to the community (75%; n = 117) and media used to provide the community with school information (73%; n = 114) were noted as areas of strong agreement. Mid-range agreement was noted for community involvement (67%; n = 105), current event notification (66%; n = 103), and community values (60%; n = 93). The lowest-scoring statements were those related to a responsive school board (54%; n = 85) and consideration for community opinions (51%; n = 79), which were agreed to by about half of the participants.
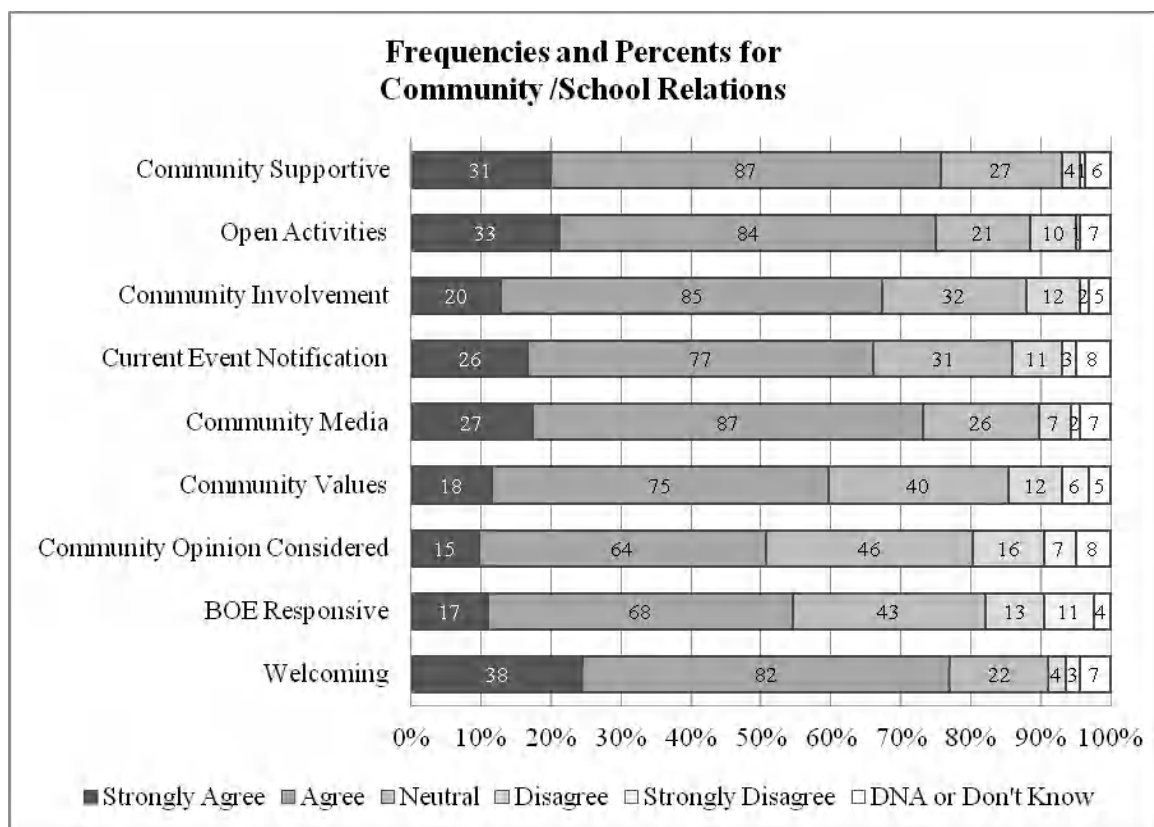
Figure 5. Frequencies and Percents of Community/School Relationship

Resource Management

The COI survey identifies Resource Management with maintenance of school grounds, school quality and its impact on property values, financial responsibility and resources, the use of educational tax dollars, and school quality influencing residents to move into the community (See Figure 6). Only one participant disagreed with the statement that the school and grounds are well-maintained; all other participants were either neutral or in agreement with that statement. Well-maintained school grounds had the highest positive response rate overall (93%; n = 145). Most participants agreed that schools had a positive impact on property values (79%; n = 124) and that school tax dollars were a wise investment for the community (76%; n = 119). Effective use of financial resources (63%; n = 99) was in the mid-range, while the quality of schools influencing the participants' decision to live in the community scored the lowest, with about half of the participants agreeing to this statement (53%; n = 82).
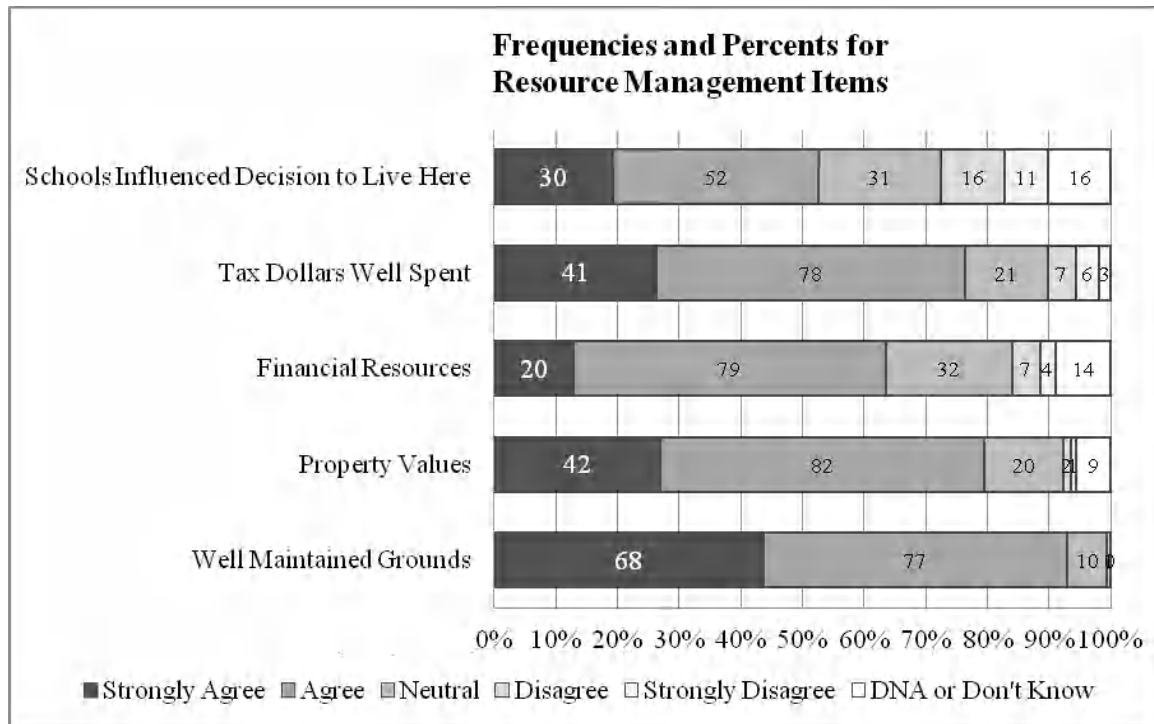
Figure 6. Frequencies and Percents for Resource Management

In summary, African Americans in rural public elementary schools identified attributes in each subscale with the highest responses for overall agreement. They include a comprehensive program for Quality of the Instructional Program, media resources for Support for Student Learning, safe travel to and from school for School Climate/Environment for Learning, community members experiencing a welcoming environment for Community/School Relationships, and well-maintained grounds for Resource Management. Overall survey responses, comparing all 40 attributes, revealed that the following received the highest scores for agreement: school grounds were well-maintained; students were offered a comprehensive program; students had opportunities to learn; and students had access to media resources.

Findings for Research Question Two

The second research question determined if there were significant differences among the five subscales (see Table 4). Support for Student Learning had the highest mean (3.77), followed by Resource Management (3.73), Instructional Program (3.62), Community Relations (3.59), and School Climate (3.38). The standard error provides an indication of the variability of the responses. School Climate (.062) had the highest variability, followed by Instructional Program (.061), Community Relations (.059), Resource Management (.058), and Opportunity for Student Learning (.057). Next, a repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted to determine if the differences among these means were statistically significant.

Table 4

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Confidence Intervals for the Subscales

| | | | 95% Confidence Interval | |
| | | | Lower | |
	Mean	Std. Error	Bound	Upper Bound
Instructional Program	3.621	.061	3.500	3.742
Support for Student Learning	3.767	.057	3.656	3.879
School Climate	3.375	.062	3.253	3.496
Community Relations	3.589	.059	3.472	3.706
Resource Management	3.727	.058	3.613	3.841

A repeated-measures ANOVA technique was selected because each participant had five scores to compare. The goal of the analysis was to determine if, on average, the participants tended to rate a particular subscale higher or lower than the others. The ANOVA technique compared the between-subscale variance to the within-subscale variance. When the variance or separation between the subscale scores is greater than the

variability within the scores (error), then there is a significant difference among the subscales.

The ANOVA (see Table 5) found that there were significant differences among the mean subscales values (F = 15.77, p < .001. ŋ = .092). The eta of .092 revealed a low effect size or correlation among the participants' scores. According to Coe (2002), the effect size quantifies the differences between the groups or the measure of the significance of the difference (p. 1). Effect size provides the ability to detect differences when they exist and to acknowledge effectiveness of a given comparison. There did not seem to be an overall trend among the participants' responses because the effect size was only .092. The effect size was closer to 0, instead of 1; therefore, the effect size did not line up for the participants' responses. However the p-value of less than .001 indicated that there was less than a 0.1% chance that the null hypothesis was true. Because of this low probability, it was concluded that one or more of the subscales were significantly different. The follow-up, post-hoc test was subsequently conducted to identify which subscales were statistically significantly different.

Table 5.

Repeated-Measures ANOVA Results for the Subscale Scores

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Factor1	Sphericity Assumed	14.695	4	3.674	15.776	.000	.092
	Greenhouse-Geisser	14.695	3.816	3.851	15.776	.000	.092
	Huynh-Feldt	14.695	3.924	3.745	15.776	.000	.092
	Lower Bound	14.695	1.000	14.695	15.776	.000	.092
Error (factor1)	Sphericity Assumed	144.378	620	.233			
	Greenhous-Geisser	144.378	591.418	.244			
	Huynh-Feldt	144.378	608.206	.237			
	Lower-bound	144.378	155.000	.931			

Table 6 lists the differences among the specific subscales, and Figure 7 lists the differences between the subscales. Student Learning (mean = 3.767) was significantly higher than all the other subscales ($p < .01$) except Resource Management (mean = 3.727). Resource Management was not significantly different from Student Learning or Student Instructional Program ($p > .05$), but it was significantly higher than Community Relations ($p < .03$) and School Climate ($p < .001$). Instructional Program (mean = 3.621) was significantly lower than Student Learning ($p < .003$) and significantly higher than School Climate ($p < .001$). Community Relations (mean = 3.589) was significantly lower than Student Learning ($p < .001$) and Resource Management ($p < .027$), but it was higher than School Climate ($p < .001$). School Climate (mean = 3.375) was significantly lower than all of the other subtests ($p < .001$).

Table 6

Pairwise Comparisons for the Subscale Means

(I) factor1	(J) factor1	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	*p*-value	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[a]	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Instructional Program	Student Learning	-.146[*]	.048	*.003*	-.242	-.051
	School Climate	.246[*]	.052	*.000*	.144	.349
	Community Relations	.032	.059	.588	-.084	.148
	Resource Management	-.106	.055	.055	-.214	.002
Student Learning	Instructional Program	.146[*]	.048	*.003*	.051	.242
	School Climate	.393[*]	.049	*.000*	.296	.489
	Community Relations	.178[*]	.052	*.001*	.075	.282
	Resource Management	.040	.055	.460	-.067	.148
School Climate	Instructional Program	-.246[*]	.052	*.000*	-.349	-.144
	Student Learning	-.393[*]	.049	*.000*	-.489	-.296
	Community Relations	-.214[*]	.058	*.000*	-.329	-.100
	Resource Management	-.352[*]	.056	*.000*	-.462	-.242
Community Relations	Instructional Program	-.032	.059	.588	-.148	.084
	Student Learning	-.178[*]	.052	*.001*	-.282	-.075
	School Climate	.214[*]	.058	*.000*	.100	.329
	Resource Management	-.138[*]	.062	*.027*	-.260	-.016
Resource Management	Instructional Program	.106	.055	.055	-.002	.214
	Student Learning	-.040	.055	.460	-.148	.067
	School Climate	.352[*]	.056	*.000*	.242	.462
	Community Relations	.138[*]	.062	*.027*	.016	.260

Basically, the subscales fell into three groups (see Figure 7): Support for Learning is one group; Instructional Program and Community Relations were grouped together, and Resource Management could be grouped with either Support for Learning or the second group because the mean was not significantly different from these subscales. School Climate was the third separate group with the least favorable ratings. This subscale was significantly lower than all the others. The next least favorable was Community Relations, which was significantly higher than School Climate, but still lower than the others. Support for Learning was the most favorable. It was significantly

higher than all of the other subscales; therefore, it comprised the subscales with the highest ratings. Interestingly, Instructional Program and Resource Management were not significantly different from Community Relations, on the lower end, or Support for Learning, on the higher end. In conclusion, the order of subscales, from least to most favorable, was School Climate; followed by Community Relations, Instructional Program, and Resource Management; then Support for Learning.
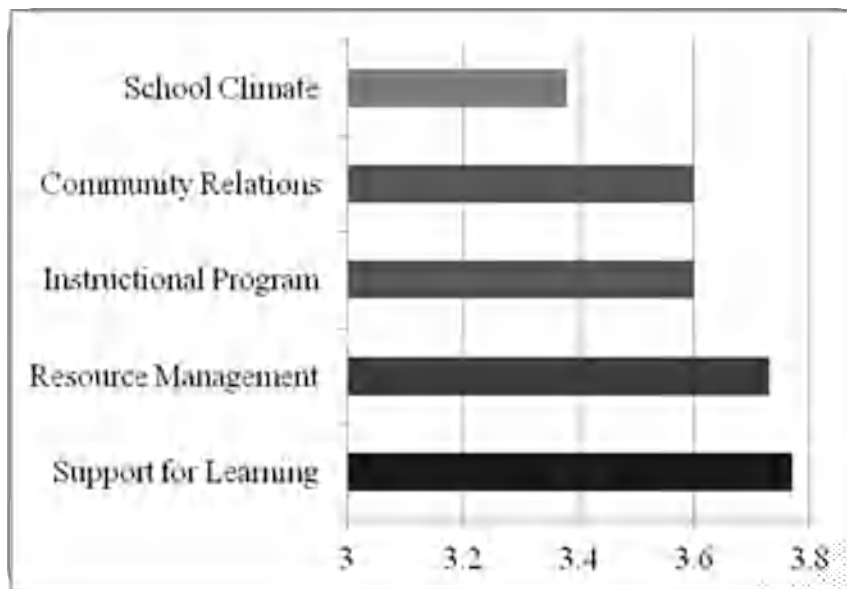
Figure 7. COI Subscale Means

In summary, there were statistical differences among the five subscales. Student Learning scored with the most favorable results and had the highest mean score. Resource Management followed, along with the Instructional Program and Community Relations. The lowest scoring subscale was School Climate.

Findings for Research Question Three

The third research question investigated the relationship between 2010 fifth-grade math and reading MSA scores and community perceptions of their school district. The COI survey composite score and the domain summative scores were correlated with the districts' MSA math and subsequently with MSA reading scores. The MSA math and reading scores are listed in Tables 7 and 8, respectively.

Gap Between African American and White Students' MSA Scores

The gap between white and African American students in the counties included in this study was greater for the MSA math than MSA reading (see Table 7). The average gap was nearly 17 points, with a range of 10 points for Allegany County and 21 points for Carroll County. Reed (2010) studied the demographics of proficiency cut-scores of median students on the NAEP 2009 math test and found that the median African American student faces a lower proficiency cut-score than all other groups. In other words, the median African American fourth-grade student who achieves proficiency, according to state definitions, is a half-year behind the median white fourth-grader who achieves proficiency on the same test. Dee and Jacob (2010) used data from NAEP to evaluate No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability and testing systems and found that substantial gains were made in math skills for all students since NCLB was established, but minimal headway was made in closing achievement gaps for minority students as a whole. The U.S. Department of Education NAEP results show parallel findings to MSA results. The 2009 NAEP Mathematics Average Scores by Ethnicity Report for fourth-grade students respectively shows that white students averaged 248, while black students averaged 222, thus resulting in a gap of 26 points (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a).

Table 7

Mean 2010 MSA Math Scores for Participating School Districts

County	Math (all students)	African American	White	White-AA
Allegany	80.7	71	81.1	10.1
Calvert	88.6	75.1	91.5	16.4
Carroll	88.5	68.3	89.4	21.1
Frederick	87.2	72.2	90.5	18.3
St. Mary's	86.5	72	90.3	18.3
Average	86.3	71.7	88.6	16.8

Similar to math scores, the difference in the mean MSA reading scores between white and African American students also showed a great disparity (see Table 8). On average, there was an 11.5-point gap. Allegany posted the lowest difference of five points, whereas St. Mary's had nearly an 18-point difference. These gaps are in line with the 2009 NAEP Reading Average Scores by Ethnicity Report for fourth-grade students, which indicated that white students averaged 230, while black students averaged 205, thus resulting in a national gap of 25 points (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b). This gap appears to be consistent at state and national levels.

Table 8

Mean 2010 MSA Reading Scores for Participating School Districts

County	Reading (all students)	African American	White	White-AA
Allegany	86.1	81.3	86.3	5.0
Calvert	91.9	83	93.7	10.7
Carroll	92.7	82.7	93.2	10.5
Frederick	91.4	80.7	93.9	13.2
St. Mary's	87.9	73.8	91.7	17.9
Average	90.0	80.3	91.76	11.5

Correlations Between COI and MSA Scores

The MSA scores were correlated with the COI composite and subscale scores for determining the association between the participants' responses and their school districts' test scores (see Table 9). Higher responses on the COI inferred higher satisfaction with the county school district. Therefore, high positive correlations indicated direct or positive relationships between perceived school satisfaction and higher MSA scores. These results should be interpreted with caution because there were only five school districts in the analysis. Given that limitation, the participants' survey responses showed higher correlations with the African American students' mean math test score than with the reading score.

Table 9

County COI Composite and Domain Means and Kendall Tau Correlations With the African American Reading Means and the Average Gap Between White and African American Students

County	Com-posite	Instruction Quality	Support for Student Learning	School Climate	Comm-unity Relations	Resource Managem ent
Allegany	3.59	3.67	3.83	3.20	3.71	3.72
Calvert	3.80	3.89	4.00	3.70	3.61	3.93
Carroll	3.32	3.36	3.33	3.15	3.37	3.51
Frederick	3.48	3.39	3.65	3.23	3.65	3.64
St. Mary's	3.60	3.61	3.86	3.34	3.64	3.70
Read Gap Corr.	-0.01	-0.19	0.04	0.16	-0.08	-0.09
Read AA Corr.	-0.07	0.04	-0.25	0.09	-0.32	0.08
Math Gap Corr.	-0.47	-0.54	-0.57	-0.05	-0.75	-0.45
Math AA Corr.	0.92	0.77	0.87	0.88	0.60	0.92

Math MSA Scores and COI Responses. All subscales showed high positive correlations between the two measures. Consequently, higher local school satisfaction ratings were associated with higher math MSA scores. The Composite COI was highly correlated with the African American math score (r = .92), followed by Resource Management (r = .92); School Climate (r = .88); Support for Student Learning (r = .87); Instructional Quality (.77); and lastly, Community Relations (r = .60). In terms of math scores, African American community members' satisfaction ratings of the local school were highly related to the performance of children in their community.

Gap Between African American and White Students' Math MSA Scores and COI Responses. Moderate negative correlations were found between white and African

American students' math MSA scores and the COI measures. The negative correlations reveal an inverse relationship between local school satisfaction and the white-black test score gap. In other words, higher school satisfaction ratings were related to larger gaps between white and African American students. This may have been due to the fact that African American community members were more aware of MSA results from their own communities. Moreover, the achievement gap was greater for math than for reading. These negative correlations were strongest for Community Relations ($r = -.75$), followed by Support for Student Learning ($r = -.57$); Instructional Quality ($r = -.54$); Composite ($r = -.47$); Resource Management ($r = -.45$); and lastly, School Climate, with virtually no correlation ($r = -.05$). Community Relations may have scored such a high negative compared with the others because of deficit myths that blame minority students.

Reading MSA Scores and COI Responses. In contrast to the relationships with the math MSA scores, the reading MSA scores showed little or no connection to the participants' satisfaction with their local school. These coefficients ranged from .01 to .19. And the direction of the relationship was positive for some subscales and negative for others. There appeared to be no consistent pattern between success on the reading MSA and perceived school satisfaction.

Gap Between African American and White Students' Reading MSA Scores and COI Responses. Similar to the MSA reading scores correlations, the gap between ethnicities showed very little correlation with the COI measures. The strength of these correlations ranged from $r = .01$ to $r = .25$. These coefficients indicate little or no relationship between the two variables.

In summary, there was a statistically significant relationship between community members' perceptions of their local public elementary school fifth-grade math scores. Analysis of the COI scores with MSA math scores showed high to moderate correlations, which indicate that higher school satisfaction ratings were related to higher MSA scores. However, there was little to no relationship between local school satisfaction and the reading MSA scores.

Summary

The results of this rural Maryland study indicate that the scale and subscales had acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .93). This statistic also revealed that participants in this study were generally positive and relatively uniform in their opinions of their local public elementary schools. The reliability was similar in this study to the COI validation studies (Cronbach's alpha = .98).

The survey responses revealed participants strongly agreed that school grounds were well-maintained, that students were offered a comprehensive program, that students had opportunities to learn, and that students had access to media resources. Respondents most strongly disagreed with the statement that there were no problems with bullies in their schools, that staff members reflected the diversity of the community, and that substance abuse was not a problem in their school.

The repeated-measures ANOVA showed that there were significant differences among the subscales ($p < .001$). Support for Student Learning had the highest mean (3.77), followed by Resource Management (3.73), Instructional Program (3.62), Community Relations (3.59), and School Climate (3.38). School Climate, particularly bullying, had the least-favorable ratings. The order of subscales, from least to most

favorable, was School Climate; followed by Community Relations, Instructional

Program, and Resource Management; then Support for Learning. Support for Student

Learning includes attributes such as differentiated instruction, student recognition,

current technology, equal access to a quality education, and adequate school facilities.

The analysis of the COI scores with the MSA reading and math performance data

showed high to moderate correlations between the math scores and the COI measures.

Higher school satisfaction ratings were related to higher math MSA scores and higher

gaps between African American students and white students. Conversely, there was little

or no relationship between local school satisfaction and the state reading scores or the gap

in scores between African American students and white students.

Chapter V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study sought to learn about African American community members'
perceptions regarding their satisfaction with local elementary schools in predominantly
white, rural school districts in Maryland. Delpit (2006) proposed that seeking answers
from those who are culturally similar to the students would enable educators to genuinely
understand the needs of diverse populations. She voices concern that this dialogue has
been silenced and believes educators must communicate across cultures so those who
know children of color best can have their voices heard. She suggests that teachers are in
an ideal position to initiate dialogue "by seeking out those whose perspectives may differ
most, by learning to give their words complete attention," and "by being unafraid to raise
questions about discrimination and voicelessness with people of color" (p. 47). She calls
on teachers not only to listen, but ultimately to hear exactly what members of the
community say. By initiating a dialogue, this research study aimed to give a voice to
African Americans, particularly those in rural school districts.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings, limitations, and implications
of this study, as well as recommendations for future research, followed by conclusions.
The study was designed using survey research, and the Community Opinion Inventory
(COI) was used to collect data regarding participants' perceptions of their school system.

This researcher chose this tool because it was specifically designed to obtain community members' opinions, and because it was commercially available and had published acceptable reliability and validity. This AdvancED (2003) survey was distributed to African American community members in five rural school districts, as defined by the Rural Maryland Council, in Maryland. Snowball sampling, or chain referral sampling, was used to secure respondents. Respondents were initially contacted through church groups, social organizations, schools, and service clubs.

The number of surveys obtained from each school district ranged from 20 to 45. The sample was primarily African American females with at least one family member attending the local rural public school. A total of 156 community members responded and returned surveys to this researcher. The total response rate of the study was 41%. The survey used in this study was divided into seven sections. The first section requested information related to demographic characteristics, including gender, ethnicity, and the participant's experience with his or her local public elementary school, specifically inquiring about attendance by self or a family member. Sections two through six contained the COI questions based on the five subtopics that obtained participants' perceptions of their local public elementary school using a six-point Likert scale. Sections two through six contained questions based upon the Quality of the Instructional Program, Support for Student Learning, School Climate/Environment for Learning, Community/School Relationships, and Resource Management. The seventh section, with three open-ended items, was not relevant to the study and, therefore, was not used or coded.

Discussion of the Findings

Research Question One

Based on the first research question for the study, which read, "What attributes of Maryland's rural public elementary schools do African American community members perceive to be most significant in serving the academic needs of African American students?," this researcher concluded that community members generally had positive perceptions of attributes throughout the five subscales of the COI: Quality of the Instructional Program, Support for Student Learning, School Climate/Environment for Learning, Community/School Relationships, and Resource Management. The following attributes were most positively identified based on the entire questionnaire:

- Schools and grounds are clean and well-maintained (93%).

- Schools offer students a comprehensive program, including music, art, and foreign language, as well as English, math, science, and social studies (85%).

- Students are given opportunities to learn important knowledge and skills in each subject (83%).

- Students have access to a variety of media resources including technology, media centers, and libraries (83%).

Discussion. African American community members who took the COI survey most commonly agreed that their local elementary school had well-maintained grounds. A school's environment influences the multitude of activities that occur daily. Funnell et al. (1997) believe that well-planned and -maintained school grounds provide a safe environment and that they can "significantly contribute to the mental and physical growth

of pupils and their needs" (p. 11). Wagner and Gordon (2010) emphasize that the natural environment supports social skill development through outdoor play, and they also suggest that outdoor school sites provide cultural connections for communities that surround schools. According to the high degree of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with this attribute, it appears that school facilities are routinely used and well-maintained, based on the perceptions of community members from the five rural counties surveyed.

Secondly, participants strongly agreed that schools offer a comprehensive program that includes music, art, and foreign language in addition to English, math, science, and social studies. Fisher and McDonald (2004) indicate that purposeful and meaningful instruction integrates the arts and core subjects, which results in greater depth and application for student understanding and mastery. They also suggest that student interest and involvement increases when curriculum is connected. Increased student interest and involvement promotes motivation and helps establish a positive climate for cross-curricular accomplishments. Meyer (2005) also states that the inclusion of arts in core curriculum increases student engagement and academic achievement. She promotes a well-rounded education as a means for reaching the ultimate goal of providing students with an interdependent and culturally diverse educational experience. She cautions that a curriculum with the sole emphasis on reading, math, and science is detrimental to other curricular subjects and ultimately students:

> Overwhelmingly, parents and the public at large support a comprehensive education: one that includes the arts, history, civics, geography, and foreign languages, in addition to other core subjects such as English, mathematics, and science. Whether the label is a well-rounded education, a liberal arts education, or a comprehensive education, the goal is the same: to prepare students for the working world, and for their roles and responsibilities as citizens in a democracy,

and to prepare them for life in an increasingly interdependent and culturally diverse world (p. 35).

Comprehensive, school programming was acknowledged as a common characteristic of rural elementary schools based on the high response rate of agree and strongly agree by community members.

The next attribute that participants were most likely to agree to stated: "Students are provided with opportunities to learn important knowledge and skills in each subject" (AdvancED, 2003). This attribute implies that students are provided with a curriculum that is balanced, includes literacy, and presents instruction for proficiency in reading. Sanacore (2002) suggests that when teaching and learning include lifelong literacy efforts, "students are in a better position to learn effectively and, equally important, to develop the love of learning" (p.163). He goes on to suggest that teaching students to read is only the first step because the ultimate goal is to promote the lifetime habit of reading so students can immerse themselves in diversely rich resources and skillfully apply strategies in meaningful contexts across the curriculum. Kannapel et al. (2005) studied high-performing, high-poverty schools and proposed that single educational programs did not dominate the curriculum; instead they found that schools were successful when "the entire faculty and school community had focused consistently over time on academics, instruction, and student learning" (p. 17). At the study schools it was also noted that the entire school community collaborated to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment, therefore supporting opportunities for all students to learn.

Participants also identified students having access to a wide variety of media resources as a strength in elementary schools. Darrow (2009) acknowledges that libraries

are essential because they provide students with equitable physical and intellectual resources as they develop learning skills. He goes on to state that media specialists must transform libraries to meet virtual-access needs for the 21st century. Baumbach (2009) agrees that library-media services should reach beyond the school walls and suggests that learning to interact using Web 2.0 tools, such as blogs, social networking sites, video-sharing sites, and wikis, will provide students with "new ways to access, explore, and create information" (p. 19). According to Saljo (2010), "Technologies do not merely support learning; they transform how we learn and how we come to interpret learning" (p. 53). He argues that developments in technology exert pressure on education to integrate collaboration between students' minds and mastery of technological tools.

It appears that respondents generally feel satisfied with key components from within the subtopics of resource management, quality of the instructional program, and support for student learning. It is noted that well-maintained grounds was the attribute most likely to score agree or strongly agree. Respondents also felt strongly that students were offered comprehensive programs and opportunities to learn, and that they had access to a variety of media resources. These attributes imply that key initiatives are in place in these rural school districts in Maryland.

Research Question Two

The second research question for the study sought statistically significant differences among the five survey subscales. This researcher concluded, based on mean scores, that Support for Student Learning had the highest mean (3.77), followed by Resource Management (3.73), Quality of the Instructional Program (3.60), Community/School Relations (3.60), and School Climate (3.38).

Participants may have responded most positively to the subcategory Support for

Student Learning due to the visibility of the attributes included. For example, the

Maryland Instructional Technology Advisory Council (2011) has implemented a plan to

accelerate educational reform in Maryland that includes three primary goals: student

learning through technology, educator proficiency, and equitable access. School systems

statewide provide computer access to students, and MSA science testing has been

conducted online for fifth- and eighth-graders since 2007. Participants may also have

scored Support for Student Learning as the highest subcategory based on the fact that

Education Week magazine has named Maryland as the top-ranked state in the nation for

its annual education report card three years in a row (Education Week, 2011).

Possible factors for the subcategory School Climate receiving the least favorable

ratings are discussed below.

Discussion. Within the COI survey, School Climate, primarily includes statements

concerning respect among students, staff, and community; staff diversity; substance

abuse; safety and security; bullying; discipline; and satisfaction within the school. The

results of the study indicated that School Climate was the subscale with the lowest mean

score, which means that respondents felt least satisfied or were more likely to choose

disagree or strongly disagree for attributes within this subtopic. The most likely reason

for this outcome was that this subscale included the three attributes with the lowest

scores: bullying, staff diversity, and substance abuse. The attributes pertaining to

bullying, staff diversity, and substance not only had the least amount of agree and

strongly agree percentages, but they also had the highest percentages for disagree and

strongly disagree.

Cohen and Pickeral (2007) believe that "positive school climate is associated with and/or predictive of academic achievement, effective risk-prevention efforts, and healthy youth development" (p. 29). School communities that respond to the "atmosphere" of the school and address the "quality and character of school life" (p. 29) acknowledge the needs of all members within the community. Lewis and Kim (2008) studied elementary African American children's attitudes toward learning and found that students wanted teachers who were caring and attentive to their learning. They found that teachers who provided nurturing environments were most likely to have students who use productive classroom behaviors.

The participants' greatest concern, based on the results of the COI survey, indicate that school climate is particularly relevant to the prevention of bullying. Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, and Konold (2009), report that bullying can damage school climate by creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation that may result in a detrimental effect on learning. A positive school climate that provides student access to guidance and support from teachers enables students to seek help for problems related to bullying. Jimerson and the Rural School and Community Trust (2006) addressed security measures in her research on successful traits of rural schools. She noted that students were better able to, "learn, feel good about school, and focus on instruction" (p. 8) when they feel safe and security measures are in place. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (2000) published an indicators report on school quality and found that one of the most critical school-level characteristics was, "discipline that provided an orderly atmosphere that is conducive to learning" (p. 36). The report also identified the cause-and-effect relationship in quality schools between

high levels of student learning and educationally productive activities with high levels of orderliness and discipline. Adult supervision and intervention are key initiatives that will lessen the extent of victimization. Sampson (2002) suggests that there is an inverse relationship between the number of adults supervising and the number of bullying incidents that occur because it usually happens when adult supervision is low in areas such as the playground, lunchroom, bathrooms, in the hall, or on the stairs. Sampson also suggests that schools should assess and measure current prevention effectiveness on a periodic basis. Sampson states that a comprehensive approach, "including a school-wide policy; clear staff guidelines; educating staff, students, and parents; developing a reporting system to track incidents; teaching students strategies to counter bullying; and post-intervention surveys to continually monitor progress" (pp. 19–20), will reduce bullying incidents from occurring.

Participants also indicated on the COI survey, within the subtopic of School Climate, that staff diversity is a concern. According to Frankenberg (2006), today's teaching force is largely segregated because the majority of the nation's teachers are white. She suggests that this is a concern because "white teachers were the least likely to have had much experience with racial diversity and remain remarkably isolated" (p. 3). She recommends that the teaching force should be diversified to provide students of all backgrounds with "racially integrated, highly qualified faculty" (p. 3). Schools with integrated faculties provide students with diverse experiences, which can prepare them for today's society. To change the trend and prepare more minority teachers, Frankenberg suggests a comprehensive approach that should include:

> increasing the number of college graduates among African Americans and Latinos, targeting recruitment of students of color for teacher-preparation

programs, re-evaluating admissions requirements, restructuring teacher preparation programs, and clarifying the definition of a "highly qualified teacher" and state certification requirements" (p. 43).

The shortage of minority teachers is a nationwide concern that impacts all students.

The third attribute identified as a concern, overall and within School Climate, was substance abuse. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.), illegal drug use for students 12 years and older was 8.7% in 2009. Data from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) (n.d.) indicate that research-based prevention programs that "intervene early in a child's development to strengthen protective factors before problem behaviors develop" (p. 1) can help children develop positive and appropriate behaviors before they take negative risks. According to NIDA, the advancement from elementary to middle school, the transition to early adolescence, is when students are most likely to initially encounter drugs. Risk factors that heighten a child's risk can include "a lack of attachment and nurturing by parents, ineffective parenting, caregivers who abuse drugs, poor classroom behavior or social skills, academic failure, and association with drug-abusing peers" (p. 2). Protective factors that families can provide include "a strong bond between children and parents, parental involvement in the child's life, and clear limits and consistent enforcement of discipline" (p. 2).

A study by Andrews et al. (2003) noted the importance of targeting prevention programs in elementary school. Battistich and Hom (1997) found that schools that established a community climate for their students, where students felt bonded to the school, had lower incidents of problem behaviors, including substance abuse. Beets,

Flay, Vuchinich, Snyder, Acock, Li, Burns, Washburn, and Durlak (2009) studied the use of a social behavior program designed to prevent substance abuse, violent behaviors, and sexual activity among elementary students and found that, "a consistent, comprehensive, school-based program can positively influence student behavior" (p. 1438). Beets et al. noted these key features that were instrumental in ensuring the program's success: an interactive student-teacher atmosphere; a comprehensive approach that involves all grades, staff, and parents; an emphasis on social and emotional needs, including identification of positive behaviors; and an intensive delivery of at least one hour a week.

School climate, based on the attributes on the COI questionnaire, can have a profound impact on the school, the classroom, and especially individual student's emotional, social, and academic wellbeing. Battistich and Hom (1997) studied the relationship between students' sense of their school as a community and their involvement in problem behaviors. Their findings indicated that the social context of the school is a determinant to children's developmental outcomes, including attitudes, motives, and behaviors. The social context of schools encompasses safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the environment as a whole. Cohen and Pickeral (2007) suggest that monitoring school climate can bring together the school and community so that a learning community is established, "one that explicitly recognizes the cognitive, social, emotional, civic, and ethical dimensions of school life" (p. 30).

Collins (2010) researched factors that attributed to improved achievement for a high-performing, high-poverty, urban elementary school in Maryland and conducted interviews with African American staff members, students, and parents. He found that four themes emerged. A positive school climate was shown to be crucial for student

success, along with strong leadership, a student-centered focus, and goal setting with a focus on data. These themes align with the findings from the COI in the areas of School Climate, Support for Student Learning, and Instructional Quality. School Climate granted a safe and positive atmosphere; Support for Student Learning aligned with Collins' study because the focus remained upon the needs of students; and Instructional Quality included the importance of high expectations.

Tilghman's (1997) study of rural Maryland black families' perceptions of elementary schools indicated that they value the climate of the school and that they would like to see schools move toward a climate that includes collaboration, trust, problem solving, and the inclusion of all parties involved, including administrators, teachers, parents, and support staff. The higher ranking of School Climate aligns with two studies conducted in Maryland, and this subscale is identified throughout the literature as a necessary component of an effective school (Cohen & Pickeral, 2007; Jimerson & the Rural School and Community Trust, 2006; Johnson et al., 2001; Pershey, 2011).

The mean for School Climate was significantly lower than all of the other subtopics, which indicates it is an area that needs further study and attention. The myriad of characteristics that encompass School Climate may be attributes that community members see as non-negotiable, therefore providing a possible explanation for it receiving the lowest subscale score.

Research Question Three

Based on the third research question, which read, "Was there a statistically significant relationship between community members' perceptions of their local

elementary public school and fifth-grade Maryland State Assessment (MSA) reading and math scores?," this researcher found little or no relationship between the two variables.

Discussion. The difference in the mean MSA reading scores between white and African American students in this study showed an average gap of 11.5. The gap between white and African American students averaged nearly 17 points for math scores. The COI survey composite score and the domain summative scores were correlated with the districts' gap MSA reading and, subsequently, the gap MSA math scores. For reading, the strength of the correlations for gap ranged from $r = 0.01$ to $r = 0.19$, which indicates little or no relationship with the COI measures. Likewise, correlations between the MSA reading scores and the COI showed low correlation coefficients ranging from $r = .07$ to $r = .32$. Consequently, there appeared to be no consistent pattern between perceived school satisfaction on the COI and the gap between white and African American students or success on the reading MSA.

No other study has researched the correlation between COI and any MSA group. However, MSA proficient reading scores for fourth-grade students have steadily reported a gap between African American and white students. The gap has consistently closed while showing some variation over time. During the first year that the MSA was administered (2004), the gap between African American and white students was 23.9%. From 2005 to 2007, the gap continued to close, and by 2007, African American students only experienced a gap of 15.4%. In 2008, the difference was only 12.3%, although in 2009, the difference dipped to 14.5%. Most likely, participants' satisfaction with their local school is based on a variety of results versus reading test scores in isolation. This may have influenced participants' responses.

In contrast to the reading results, moderate correlations were found between math MSA scores and the COI measures. Four out of five correlation coefficients between the gap between white and African American students MSA math scores and the COI were larger than $r = .45$. These coefficients are considered moderate to high, and they were all negative. The subtest with the lowest correlation was school climate ($r = -.05$). The negative correlations reveal an inverse relationship between local school satisfaction and the white-black test score gap. Conversely, the correlations between the MSA math scores and the COI were all positive and had high coefficients. These coefficients ranged from $r = .60$ to $r = .92$. This indicates that higher school satisfaction ratings were related to higher MSA math scores. This finding is in contrast to both the reading score findings and the math gap results.

Because this is the first known study to research the correlation between COI and any MSA scores, additional research may provide an explanation as to why there is a correlation for math and almost no correlation for reading. This could be accomplished by replicating the study with a larger sample size. A second possible reason could be that this research resulted in a statistical anomaly that may be replicated if repeated with another group. A third possible reason for the study not resulting in a clear-cut correlation for both measures could be that the local press may have published and emphasized positive math results, which may have raised community awareness and influenced community opinion. A final possibility for the anomaly may have been due to the data that indicated that the majority of the respondents attended the school or had relatives attend the local school. Scores reflecting satisfaction could have been overinflated due to personal beliefs and allegiance to local community schools.

Limitations of the Study

To meet the needs of minority elementary school students, educators can gain insight from community members who know these young people's experiences best. Examining the perspective of community members can affirm attributes that are perceived as appropriately meeting the needs of students. Attributes that community members identify as being weak can be reviewed and documented as areas of concern that need to be addressed. This study was limited to five school systems in Maryland, and it was the first on record to use the COI with members of the African American community living in rural Maryland. Previous research was limited primarily to the perceptions of the educational achievement gap affecting African Americans living in urban areas. The number of returned surveys varied from 20 to 45 for each county, and many participants had family attending the local public school. The survey was self-reporting, so validity was based upon each community member answering each statement honestly on the Likert scale. The sampling technique used in this study was snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling technique. These results cannot be generalized to all African American community members living in rural areas where students in schools are predominantly white.

Implications for Research

Based on the findings of this study, areas for further investigation are suggested. Researchers may want to further investigate caring and safe environments, staff diversity, and high expectations when seeking initiatives for closing the achievement gap and increasing the quality of instruction and learning within elementary schools.

- A caring environment provides students with an emotionally safe place to take academic risks while learning. Classrooms where adults model mutual respect, understand cultural norms, and invite students to learn tend to be most successful because adults approach education from a student-centered perspective. Students want to be a part of a classroom that puts their emotional, social, and academic needs first by creating a caring environment that provides a sense of excitement, belonging, and accomplishment. Overall, a caring environment meets the needs of the whole child.

- A safe environment, free of bullying and threats, requires adults to create a climate that proactively includes safety measures that are logistically sound, emotionally protective, and physically safe. Clear discipline procedures and a staff presence during transitions and recreational activities provide students with specific rules and necessary adult supervision that impede aggression and support a safe environment. Adults who model, and expect, respectful interactions among all members within a school help protect students from name-calling, hurtful accusations, and physical or verbal abuse. Physical safety is supported by a school environment that is well-maintained, where students are expected to be a part of the learning community whose members care for, not only the physical structure, but also the emotional wellbeing of the school as a whole. Students who take pride and feel as if they belong to a school community are more likely to protect it, and one another, from harm.

- Staff diversity is important for minority students because they are most likely to personally connect with an educator who has a similar cultural background.

Students who see education in a positive light, from the perspective of someone within their own community, are more likely to be motivated to do well in school. Diverse staff members also provide a point of view, based on their personal schooling experiences, that enables them to advocate for the needs of minority students.

- High expectations are not simply stated as a final goal or accomplishment, which may seem overwhelming, impersonal, or unreachable. Instead, high expectations are set in realistic, scaffolded steps so they are attainable and relative to students' interests and needs. They are clear and transition to future initiatives and goals so student success is manageable, mistakes are seen as a means to improvement, and students experience a feeling of empowerment. In addition, students who learn how to reach high expectations are able to set their own goals and often assist peers in establishing objectives and making positive decisions, which can benefit school climate as a whole.

Recommendations for Research

With increasing demands to close the achievement gap and high-stakes testing accountability, educators can no longer turn a blind eye to the needs of minority students. Consideration for, and collaboration with, all stakeholders will provide more solutions for school improvement. This researcher recommends five areas for further investigation.

- Future studies should attempt to collect data from more African American community members in more counties within predominately white rural school districts. This will increase generalizability.

- This study could be replicated using a sample of parents of African American students in counties where their children attend schools in predominantly white, rural districts.

- Although it was an objective of this research to collect perceptions of community members, it may be insufficient to rely solely on data based on their opinions to identify areas of need. Future researchers may want to collect data directly from African American elementary students.

- Replication of the study could employ a larger sample that includes community members from all ethnicities to identify perceptions that may be specific to race.

- Future research could include disaggregating data between urban and rural counties in one state using the COI with African American community members.

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study, based on the previous discussion of the results. African American community members' perceptions revealed that they are most satisfied with well-maintained school grounds, comprehensive programs, learning opportunities, and media resources. They were most concerned with bullying, a lack of staff diversity in schools, and substance abuse. Support for Student Learning resulted in the highest mean subscale score, and School Climate resulted in the lowest score because it was the subscale that resulted in the lowest degree of satisfaction. Surprisingly, the participants' survey responses showed higher correlations with the African American students' mean math test score than with the reading score.

The findings of this study supported a need for educators to collaborate with African American community members in predominantly white rural school districts to

document their perceptions regarding satisfaction with elementary schools to further

investigate the cause of the achievement gap. Ladson-Billings (2006) believes that

educators must address the education debt because it impacts present academic progress

and because this inequity must be understood to ensure a better educational future. This

study sought to identify risk factors, such as bullying and substance abuse, and resiliency

factors, such as caring environments and high expectations. Data collected from this

study demonstrated a need to continue to collect, to hear, to listen to, and to respond to

the needs of African American students by documenting school attributes that will meet

the needs of diverse populations. Future initiatives will require continued collaboration

between invested educators, parents, and community members who are willing to

establish relationships with one another based on the common goal of closing the

achievement gap.

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Appendix A

CONSENT FORM

Project Title	Perspectives of African American Communities in Rural Maryland: How are public elementary schools meeting the needs of African American students?
Why is this research being done?	This is a research project being conducted by Joan Sattler (Faculty Advisor) and Melaney Sanchez (Student Investigator) at the College of the Notre Dame of Maryland.
	Perspectives of the African American community are absent from current research because the rural community is not represented. The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of the African American community in rural Maryland in relation to educational assets of public elementary schools, including the quality of the instructional program, support for student learning, school climate, and community and school relationships. These assets contribute either to academic excellence or deficit for elementary students.
	The purpose of this research project is to describe your perspective regarding the performance of elementary schools in your county through the use of a survey. The researcher intends to identify significant elements in rural schools that affect the academic achievement of African American elementary students.
	Members of the African American community are being invited to participate in this research project because their voices have been absent from the current research. You are being invited to participate because you are a member of an African American community in a rural area.
What will I be asked to do?	The procedures involve completing a community survey that will take approximately 15 minutes. The study will be conducted in a large group setting with responses being recorded independently by each individual. The Community Opinion Inventory survey has 40 multiple choice items.
	In the "Community Opinion Inventory" you will read statements about your school and decide to what extent you agree or disagree with each statement. Choices range from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." "Your school" is defined as the elementary school that is closest to your home.
	There are 5 categories for each set of statements. They are:
	1. Quality of the Instructional Program
	2. Support for Student Learning
	3. School Climate/Environment for Learning
	4. Community/School Relationships
	5. Resource Management

Appendix A

Project Title	Perspectives of African American Communities in Rural Maryland: How are public elementary schools meeting the needs of African American students?
What about confidentiality?	Your personal information will be kept confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, surveys will be stored in locked filing cabinets and storage areas. Only identification codes will be used on data forms, along with password-protected computer files. The surveys are anonymous and will not contain information that could identify you.
What are the risks of this research?	While reflecting upon the statements on the Community Opinion Inventory participants may recall upsetting information or memories. This may cause participants to feel uncomfortable. Participants can opt out of completing the survey at any time.
What are the benefits of this research?	Although there are not direct benefits for participants it is hoped that future students might benefit from this study. The intent is to provide an improved understanding of the perspective of the African American community related to the performance of rural elementary schools. This study will add to the present body of educational research.
Do I have to be in this research? May I stop participating at any time?	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time.
What if I have questions?	The principal investigator is Joan Sattler, Associate Professor, at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland. If you have any questions about the confidentiality of the research, please contact the Chair of the IRB, Dr. Christa de Kleine, College of Notre Dame, 4701 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD, 21210, by phone at 410-532-3157, or by e-mail at cdekleine@ndm.edu
Statement of Age of Subject and Consent	Your signature indicates that: 1. You are at least 18 years of age 2. The research has been explained to you 3. Your questions have been fully answered 4. You freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project
Name, Signature, and Date	**NAME OF SUBJECT** (please print) **SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT** **DATE**

Appendix B

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Purpose: The purpose of this survey is to find out your opinions about your school.

Instructions: Read each statement about your school. Decide to what extent you agree or disagree and blacken the corresponding circle. This is not a test. Please answer each question honestly. Your answers will be completely confidential.

Thank you for taking the time to complete and return this survey!

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable
1. The education offered to students at our school is of high quality.	O	O	O	O	O	O
2. Students are provided with opportunities to learn important knowledge and skills in each subject.	O	O	O	O	O	O
3. Our school offers students a comprehensive program that includes music, art, and foreign language, as well as English, math, science, and social studies.	O	O	O	O	O	O
4. Citizenship is effectively taught in our schools.	O	O	O	O	O	O
5. Our school ranks well academically when compared to other schools.	O	O	O	O	O	O
6. Our school is preparing students to deal with issues and problems they will face in the future.	O	O	O	O	O	O
7. Students see a relationship between what they are studying and their everyday lives.	O	O	O	O	O	O
8. Teachers hold high expectations for student learning.	O	O	O	O	O	O
9. Our school offers learning opportunities that support the full range of student abilities.	O	O	O	O	O	O
10. Our school recognizes the achievements of students for all types of accomplishments.	O	O	O	O	O	O
11. All students in our school have equal access to quality education.	O	O	O	O	O	O
12. In our school, students have access to a variety of resources to help them succeed in their learning, such as technology, media centers, and libraries.	O	O	O	O	O	O
13. Up-to-date computers and other technologies are used in our school to help students learn.	O	O	O	O	O	O
14. Our school's facilities are adequate to support students' learning needs.	O	O	O	O	O	O
15. Our school uses community resources to help students with their schoolwork.	O	O	O	O	O	O
16. The community respects teachers in our school.	O	O	O	O	O	O
17. Students are respectful of school and community property.	O	O	O	O	O	O
18. All students and staff are treated with respect, regardless of race, religion, or gender.	O	O	O	O	O	O
19. School staff members reflect the diversity of the community.	O	O	O	O	O	O
20. Substance abuse (e.g., drug/alcohol) is not a problem at our school.	O	O	O	O	O	O
21. Our school provides a safe and orderly environment for learning.	O	O	O	O	O	O
22. Safety measures are in place to protect students traveling to and from school.	O	O	O	O	O	O

Gender
O Female O Male

Ethnicity (select only one)
O African-American
O Asian/Pacific Islander
O Hispanic
O Multi-Racial
O Native American
O White
O Other

Experience with this school
O I, or a family member, attended this school
O I have not had a family member attend this school

Continued >>

Appendix B

Community Opinion Inventory

23. Adequate security measures are in place at our school.

24. There are no problems with bullies at our school.

25. School discipline is appropriately maintained at our school.

26. For the most part, I am satisfied with our school.

27. Community members feel welcome at our school.

28. The school board is responsive to our community.

29. Community members' opinions are considered when important school decisions are made.

30. The goals of the school are consistent with local values held by the community.

31. Our school uses technology to provide community members with information about our school.

32. The school keeps local media current on events at the school.

33. Our school provides sufficient opportunities for community involvement.

34. School-sponsored activities are open to members of the community.

35. Community members are supportive of our school.

36. Our school and grounds are clean and well maintained.

37. Our schools have a positive impact on the community's property values.

38. Our school makes effective use of the financial resources available.

39. Tax dollars spent on this school are a wise investment for our community.

40. The quality of schools influenced my decision to live in this community.

Response options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Not Applicable

41. What do you like best about your school?

42. What do you like least about your school?

43. What is one suggestion you would like to offer to improve your school?

Thank You!

If you have been provided with additional items, please respond in this area

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For School Use Only
Do not complete this section unless told to do so.

32823

March 23, 2009

Professor Joan Sattler

Principal Investigator

School of Education

College of Notre Dame of Maryland

Baltimore, Maryland   21210

RE: **IRB-09- 02-111102**

Dear Professor Joan Sattler & Melaney Sanchez (student)

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland has reviewed your proposal and has **approved** it as submitted. Your proposal is **exempt from continual review** unless the project is amended in a manner that no longer meets the federal requirements for exemption.

During the course of carrying out your research, you are responsible to promptly report to the IRB any unanticipated problems involving risks to study participants, investigators, or staff during the course of carrying out research. In addition, any changes in research activity during this approval period may not be conducted without IRB review and approval.   Please refer to your unique IRB proposal number on all responses to the Board.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact my office at, (410) 532-5328.

Sincerely,

Stephen Vicchio

Stephen Vicchio, Ph.D., Chair (Pro Tem),

Institutional Review Board

College of Notre Dame of Maryland