

A CASE STUDY OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FACTORS AT SOUTHWEST MIDDLE SCHOOL

By

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ABSTRACT

In this a case study of school improvement factors at a Southwestern Middle School the researcher examined the demographics of the Southwest Unified School District and Southwest Middle School, the school's academic performance history, school leadership, teachers and the school improvement process it was mandated to follow for five years. Also, she included a discussion of the reasons Southwest Middle School moved into school improvement, the number of years it remained in school improvement, the leadership during these years, and the mandates imposed on the school from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal legislation and the Arizona Department of Education state mandates. The mandates were determined by the school's level of improvement. In this case study Southwest Middle School had been at a serious level of improvement for the previous five years 2008 - 2013. Therefore, a visit from a team of Arizona Department of Education school improvement experts called the Solutions Team was initiated. This initiated visit was to be an evidenced based inquiry that generated four school improvement recommendations to be followed as a framework for continuous school improvement. Also, the researcher examined the documentation generated through the Solutions Team visit and the impact it made on the Southwest Middle School improvement process.

Quantitative outcomes in the area of student achievement are presented in this case study that shown continuous decreases in the standardized test results generated from the State mandated test known as the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS Test) results until the school remained open till spring, 2013. The interviews with school personnel showed improvement efforts with differing perceptions of success in efforts before the school closure.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2001 the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was reauthorized by the 107th Congress with various modifications and renamed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB became law in January 8, 2002 with its primary purpose being to close the achievement gap that exists among students, particularly between minority and majority students, and high and low income students in American public and charter schools. Each state was required to set academic standards in reading, math and in 2013, in science and to develop measures to assess how children in each state were achieving those standards. Since 2002 NCLB has become the primary federal component affecting education from kindergarten through high school. It is based on four principals; (1) accountability for results; (2) more choices for parents; (3) greater freedom for states and communities, and; (4) increased local control and flexibility. NCLB purports to use scientifically researched based education methods and these federal mandates have affected many schools in most States based on important factors such as accountability, including teaching methods that have been scientifically proven to work, flexibility, local control, and parental choice.

This study took place in Arizona which had developed and implemented its NCLB accountability plan in 2001. With the above mentioned accountability framework in mind, the study focused on one middle school in the state and researched how the school implemented its mandated accountability plan. The researcher chose to conduct a case study in order to understand the implementation and final outcome of the school improvement process in this one middle school, named Southwest Middle School. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions related to Southwest Middle School's improvement plan:

Question 1: How did the Solutions Team visits to Southwest Middle School make an impact and affect the school improvement process as mandated by the Arizona Department of Education?

Question 2: Was there evidence that the Southwest Middle School Improvement Team followed their School Improvement Plans through the mandated years as a framework for improvement?

Question 3: How and did Southwest Middle School acquire and utilize the resources to implement the School Improvement Plan

Statement of the Problem

Southwest Middle School is located in a depressed neighborhood in the heart of the poor side of town, which is historically plagued with a 71% - 79.2% unemployment rate. The school's ethnic breakdown is 92.2% Latino, 4.8% Native American, .2% Asian, 9% African American, and 3.1% White (SMS, 2013). The homes near and around the school are run down and there are serious problems with gangs, drugs and prostitution that occur daily all around the perimeter of the school. The school has a Title I Program therefore labeling it a School-Wide Title I School. The United States Department of Education calculates the school's ranking by the poverty scale that encompasses free and reduced lunch, and allows for additional funding programs for schools that fall under that label. All students enrolled at West Middle School participated in the free lunch program as mandated by United States Department of Education.

Administrators at Southwest Middle School had changed several times between 2008 -2013 and the teacher retention rate had been 58% during these same years, due to differences in educational philosophies, a challenging population, and the school improvement status which was consistently failing. For years it had an instructional program that had been perceived as lacking due to poor test scores. The Southwest Unified School District had repeatedly tried to assign academic staff they felt could improve that problem however, they had not been successful. In the last 5 years the school improvement mandates that had been imposed upon the school were focused on five "scientifically research based" areas of literacy and problem-solving math, and in 2012-2013 this was augmented by

the new mandated-common core. NCLB. The Arizona Department of Education and Unified School District mandated continuous improvement for instructional and organizational effectiveness at Southwest Middle School by having the academic staff:

- address their limitations and areas in need of improvement,
- examine District goals and student achievement,
- strengthen the alignment between data and instructional practices,
- using data to drive instruction, and
- differentiate instruction, by all teachers.

In spite of the mandated plans for improvement, Southwest Middle School did not improve and in fact, was closed spring, 2013 due to its failure to improve test scores. This researcher sought to understand what happened, why, in spite of all the mandated effort and allocation of resources to improve the school, it still did not improve and was ultimately closed. The case study explored teacher preparedness, parent awareness and educational outcomes of students and drew from information learned through the literature review on school improvement particularly related to NCLB. The literature review included a review of the current state of the Arizona School Improvement process. Ultimately, the findings can contribute to the formulation of recommendations to improve the current school improvement process in the State and in the Southwest Unified School District.

Context of School Reform in Arizona

Currently, the population in is Arizona 6,500,125, which includes 1,044,785 public school students, that equates to 16% of our state population. Also, there are 951,117 or 85% of these students attending traditional k-12 schools, 92,668 or 8% of these students attend charter schools and 234 public school districts, 364 charter districts, 2,270 public and charter schools that are comprised of 50,747 non-certified and certified teachers. Of those same schools there are 1,922 identified as being in Arizona

School Improvement as identified by NCLB and Arizona Department of Education guidelines.

Moreover, there are 540 of those same schools that did not reach the minimum state benchmark by making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (ADE, 2011). As stated prior, when public schools do not make AYP they moved into school improvement and received supplemental Title I federal grant dollars. This funding enables districts and schools to build on the teacher's motivational understanding and their willingness to support students through extended learning time, before and after school tutoring and Saturday School. The teachers used strategic professional development, carefully planned academic interventions, ongoing evaluations and monitoring so as to full fill all the school improvement mandates.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Proficiency Goals

The primary purpose of NCLB is to ensure that all children in the United States have a fair and equitable, public education regardless of their citizenship. Also, NCLB ensures that all students have the same opportunity for a high-quality education and become proficient on challenging State achievement standards and high stakes State tests. The goal of NCLB is to have all public school students performing at grade level in reading, math and science by 2014. The general NCLB goals set by the US Department of Education are for states to prepare students to meet the mandates listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1: NCLB Achievement Goals by Year (Listed for all AZ Public School Students)

School Years	Math Proficient	Reading Proficient
2002 – 2004	38%	38%
2004 – 2007	53%	48%
2007 – 2010	68%	65%
2011 – 2013	83%	83%
2013 – 2014	100%	100%

The federal accountability system (NCLB) is comprised of a one year synopsis of student performance based on Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) scores, it includes the percentage of students assessed, their attendance and graduation rates. Further, schools are identified by a yes/no system meaning that if Adequate Yearly Progress-AYP (the measure mandated by the U.S. Department of Education to hold districts and schools accountable for student performance) is not met the first year then the school is classified as being in the warning year of Arizona School Improvement (Arizona State Intervention Handbook, 2007). If this failure is repeated the next year then the school is in Year I of Arizona School Improvement, and the administration is responsible to recruit a team of

community members, parents, staff, administrators, teacher and students to write an Arizona School Improvement Plan for that school. If this situation persists and moves into the second year of Arizona School Improvement, then the Arizona School Improvement Plan must be revisited and appropriate modifications must be made.

After that year, if the school still does not improve then it moves into corrective action and is visited by a group of education experts assigned and trained by the Arizona Department of Education known as a Solutions Team. Year four and five then moves the school to restructuring where it is taken over by the Arizona Department of Education and either closed or turned into a charter school.

NCLB and (AZ LEARNS in Arizona)

Because Arizona is among the states that accept NCLB funding, it must comply with all the NCLB mandates. NCLB mandates all states receiving federal education funding must develop a system of accountability that encompasses all the federal mandates and engages in reporting that must occur in a timely manner. Arizona has two accountability systems; the NCLB system as required by federal law and the Arizona Education Accountability Results Notification Systemic Support (AZ LEARNS), as required by state law, and must be practiced by every public and charter school in Arizona. AZ LEARNS is a longitudinal examination of student performance that encompasses several evaluations pieces; Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) scores, graduation and dropout rates, and AYP. Schools that do not make AYP, according to results on of the AIMS Test and are in the AZ LEARNS system of improvement and are identified on a graded scale as failing to meet Arizona Department of Education academic standards, underperforming, highly performing, or excelling are moved to the school improvement status. The evaluation system for AZ LEARNS is much more lenient than the NCLB accountability system. However, in both of these systems there must be significant progress made every year in every subgroup (of thirty or more) e.g. English Language Learners (ELLs), Special Education Students (SPEDs), Migrant Students and Homeless Students, etc. in order to make Adequate

Yearly Progress (AYP). The federal accountability (NCLB) is comprised of a one year synopsis of student performance based on AIMS scores, including the percentage of students assessed, their attendance and graduation rates.

This federal legislation was intended to support the school district efforts to provide strong standards based educational programs for students, along with teacher accountability for student achievement. NCLB identifies a strong academic program as one composed of best practices and taught by Highly Qualified Teachers because it is the only way we can reach our proficiency goal by 2014 (Strahan D., 2003). These best practices are identified through improving the academic performance of disadvantaged students, boosting teacher quality, moving Limited English Proficient students to English fluency, promoting informed parental choice and innovative programs, increasing funding for Impact Aid, and by encouraging freedom and accountability. Arizona's implementation of NCLB is effected every time the Arizona Department of Education requests a modification from the US Department of Education in any of the four NCLB mandates; e.g. the Highly Qualified Teacher mandate that dictates that Arizona educators be Highly Qualified in order to teach our students. Currently, in Arizona 85.4% of Elementary teachers are Highly Qualified Teachers, and 90.6% Highly Qualified Teachers educating Arizona's secondary students (ADE, 2006). Also, the state has a rate of 92% Highly Qualified Paraprofessionals assisting in the instruction of our students and many volunteers that also help in this area.

Arizona Data Shows Highly Qualified Mandates Did Not Make a Difference in

Test Scores - A Measure of Success

As of September 2009, the Arizona Department of Education reported all-inclusive data from public and charter schools, and identified 339 schools that did not make AYP using a system of rating that determines how every public school district in the country is performing academically, according to

results on the state mandated standardized tests. Moreover, placing these schools in School Improvement Warning Year that include modifying former mandates, required the formation of a school improvement committee, and the writing of a school improvement plan. Also, reported were 83 schools in Year I of School Improvement where parents were given a choice to move their student to a school making AYP, and 106 schools in Year II of School Improvement that entitled parents this choice, allowing them to move their child to a performing school that also mandated to provide tutoring or supplemental education services for their students. Additionally, there are 17 schools at the Plan to Restructure stage, whose mandates include parental choice, tutoring, and other NCLB monitoring mandates, 17 schools are in the implementation Restructuring Plan Process, and 24 in Corrective Action meaning that they have been taken over by the Arizona Department of Education (*Arizona Daily Star September 17, 2009*). The consequences for the 106 schools that are in their third year of school improvement or that do not make AYP for three consecutive years are serious. Again, the most serious mandate is the intervention set by Arizona Department of Education, is a three-to four-day visit by a group of Arizona Department of Education professionals, carefully selected and trained education experts known as Solutions Teams.

Solutions Team Responsibilities

The Solutions Team Members are responsible for visiting the schools that are in school improvement and conduct an evidence-based inquiry to determine the school's capacity for sustained improvement. Prior to the first day at the school site Solutions Team members individually and collectively read, reread, and analyze the school's most recent Arizona School Improvement Plan that they will monitor. Their visit also includes a visit to each department that entails a complete audit, a review of all school financial records, curricula, assessments, stakeholder interviews that are inclusive of all school support staff from all departments, and focus group surveys for all (including community

members). Also, in the 3-4 day visit The Solutions Teams members observe the teachers in every classroom. This establishes validity, as those observations use the same protocol and observational instruments for every teacher.

For additional information the Solutions Team compiles the four factors which the Arizona Department of Education must provide for the schools:

- technical assistance,
- professional development addressing the specific school improvement issues,
- progress Monitoring, and
- compliance monitoring.

This new focus of turning around schools has provided an opportunity for Arizona Department of Education to define a more comprehensive system of support and regulations. The visit culminates with the Solutions Team coding the data and developing about four common strands/themes that are clear and then they generated The Statement of Findings for the awareness of the Arizona Department of Education, the school, and the community at large. The Solutions Team recommends that the Statement of Findings be used as the school's framework for improvement. There may be, and usually is clear evidence that the Arizona School Improvement Plan has to be rewritten (ADE Solutions Team Update, 2009) or modified. In spite of this mandate, the Arizona Department of Education is non-compliant in facilitating long-term support to provide enough funding or technical assistance as the rewriting process is completed, and financial hardships are experienced by the schools. Because this is school improvement, the only money that can be used to fund this improvement is highly competitive federal grant dollars that schools have to reapply for almost every year.

AIMS & AZELLA

In academic year 2005-2006 Arizona Department of Education made a strong effort to define provisions that transformed the state's educational instruction criterion, and implemented a process that mandated testing of all public school students in grades 3-8 in the core subjects of math, reading and writing as well as, testing students at least once in grades 10-12 in the same subjects. However, today Arizona Department of Education mandates that all 2nd grade students be tested with the Stanford Ten Tests and all 3rd grade students and beyond be tested with the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS). This transformation includes an Arizona Department of Education supplemental requirement that all Arizona public and charter schools administer Arizona English Language Learners Assessment (AZELLA) proficiency tests that measure oral language, reading, math and writing skills to all limited English proficient students (<https://www.ade.state.az.us/azlearns/nclb>).

Measure of Highly Qualified Teachers

In 2006, all Arizona schools that received NCLB funding had to create a district rubric that determined which teachers were considered Highly Qualified. This rubric simply consisted of points a teacher received for attending any college and having a degree in any discipline. By the end of 2007, the US Department of Education decided that the miniscule State created Highly Qualified rubric mandates were ineffective, and that many teachers teaching in certain content areas did not know their content area (subject) well enough to teach it. Realizing this, the US Department of Education revisited the issue and placed major emphasis upon teacher quality as a factor in improving the achievement of all students. The Highly Qualified credentialing was redesigned and it was decided that this credentialing information must be consistent and readily available for parental and public review. They determined that parents have the right to know if a teacher teaching their child/ren is Highly Qualified, emergency

certified, or has temporary credentials, and if their child/ren have been taught more than four weeks by said teacher or paraprofessional that is not Highly Qualified. If that is the case, there will be serious consequences for the school in the form of consistent monitoring, and in program and funding cuts at the State level.

The principal in each school has to sign a Declaration of Compliance that identifies the professional status of all teachers, and paraprofessionals teaching in his building, as mandated by NCLB. Each district has a similar plan that indicates how Highly Qualified teachers are equally distributed among all the schools in the district. In that venue, the federal government assists by allotting Title II monies for use in training teachers to become High Qualified through retraining, additional schooling, and recruiting qualified academic support providers, teachers, principals and paraprofessionals (Wright, 2004).

Difficulties with NCLB Compliance on a National Level

Unfortunately, this very complex law composed of several hundreds of pages has posed growing concerns from many Americans in general, as to its effects on education in the years after its implementation (K. Goodman, Shannon, Y. Goodman, Rapport, 2008). Also, a concern is the many times it has been modified. Ken Goodman (2008) accuses NCLB of running a campaign that is transforming our state educational system into “a third world education system, where there is little concern for the students.” There is even a part in NCLB that requires that states send the names of high school dropouts to the Department of Defense for possible military recruitment. Actions such as these endorse the notion that American public education is a failed social experiment and that the NCLB authors have deviated from the real problem of American public school systems, which is funding. NCLB mandates standards that one curriculum be followed by each state that receives federal funding. Another relevant piece of NCLB background is its articulation of standards for excellence, fairness and

equity through the elimination of the achievement gap. NCLB clearly states that districts, schools and teachers need to be held accountable. NCLB supporters claim that prior to NCLB the experience of educational success for many students was non-existent, and many parents and their children never understood the academic performance requirements. Because of reasons like this NCLB claims to have established standards that clearly describe the academic goals for each respective grade that guide instruction and assessment, and serve as a means to determine academic success and the ability of students to analyze, synthesize and evaluate information. The ultimate purpose of standards based education is to inform us if students are learning what they are supposed to be learning at a specific grade level and are intended to identify the goals that dictate this (Kymes, 2004).

Difficulties with NCLB Compliance in Arizona

In theory, if a student has a teacher that uses standards to ensure that the curriculum and assignments are challenging and at grade level, the student should be successful, unless he is identified as having special needs. Conversely, a student who has a teacher, who does not teach to the standards, will not likely reach grade level. However, both children may get A's on their report cards but, when instruction and grading are not linked to the standards there is no systemic way to know that the first student learned much more than the second.

In NCLB guidelines if there is a student that is not performing according to the standards, NCLB mandates academic interventions be developed and immediately implemented for them to achieve academic success. Some examples of standard based curriculum in different states e.g. in Alabama where they have content standards in language arts for all students in grades k-12, and has math content standards k-8 and in most high school math courses. Alaska also has language arts/reading, and math content standards in all grade levels from grade 3 –10. California has content standards in language arts/reading for all grades k - 12 and Arizona has them for the same grades in in the same subject and also, in writing.

Many teachers in Arizona feel the standards are not clear and there is a lot of variation as to which methodologies work best with various subgroups e.g. special education students, English Language Learners, Homeless and Migrant Students. These students have been held to different standards (Wright, 2004) and this has often worked against students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those of color. Arizona state standards are consistent with common core, other states and mandate consistent goals for the knowledge and skills students should learn by a certain grade. Though teaching styles and materials may vary, the educational goals remain the same.

NCLB has key stipulations that were enacted making state governments primarily responsible, with limited assistance from the federal government, for providing public education. However, with its implementation the federal government is now actively involved in the education of American public school students. As noted above, this mandate holds states accountable by stipulating that they must increase accountability for student performance. States, districts and schools that show improved achievement will be rewarded and failure will be sanctioned. Moreover, a serious attempt will be made to keep parents consistently informed as to how well their children are learning and to make them an active part of their school entirely.

Schools are held accountable through the use of annual state reading, writing and math assessments in grades 2 – 12. In 2004 the Arizona Department of Education formed an ad hoc committee that engaged in extensive science curriculum research, and decided to add science as an AIMS test requirement in the upper grades. Currently, it is being piloted and appears to be well accepted by parents, students and teachers in twenty-one school districts throughout Arizona. Meanwhile, AIMS is administered in April to students in grades 3-12. Interestingly, seniors do not have to pass the Science AIMS Test to graduate but, must pass the reading, math and writing portions of AIMS to graduate, plus complete the 20 mandated credits to graduate.

Further, NCLB stipulations focus on what works as federal dollars are spent on effective scientifically research-based programs and practices. Funding is targeted at improving schools and teacher quality as it reduces bureaucracy and increases flexibility. Additional flexibility is provided to Arizona Department of Education and school districts, through flexibility funding such as moving money from one service line item and increasing money generated to the local school districts, and making it possible to provide more services to academically needy students. Parents are to be provided more information about the quality of their children's teachers and school. If a school is not making AYP parents have the right to send their child to a school that making AYP and the underperforming school must pay the students' transportation costs. That is the definition of Parental Choice.

These key stipulations do not address reforms in every federal education program, but do constitute a general plan for reforming/reshaping the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965), as NCLB. This creates a link between performance and compensation from underperforming to performing, and supports the intent of Arizona Department of Education to establish school accountability. Moreover and contrary to the past, it holds Districts, schools, administrators and teachers accountable.

Title I, Title II and NCLB

The effects of NCLB are present in more than 90% of American school districts and 97% of Arizona school districts (Hombo, 2003) that receive federal funding for various educational and support services programs. NCLB funding is provided to the schools through Title I, is the federally funded program in high poverty schools that targets students classified as underachievers. Title I dollars are designated to be used for various school needs such as books and materials, professional development, educational excursions, the rent of suitable facilities to conduct specific classes and tutoring. Many Title I programs include, but are not limited to, after school academic enhancement programs, daily scheduled

pull in and pull out intervention programs, Summer School and Saturday School.

Again, these federally funded programs include Supplemental Educational Services (SES, tutoring), family literacy, parenting classes/materials, technology services, education of migrant children and their parents, homeless education, safe and drug free school programs. Title I and Title II programs are those that are most generously funded of the nine education Title programs that NCLB encompasses, with Title II receiving the second most generously funding Title program for NCLB, the primary purpose of which is to provide professional development opportunities for school administrators, teachers and paraprofessionals (<http://www.publication.org>).

Successes & Failures of NCLB Nationally

The following is a summary of NCLB's successes and failures, as identified by the reviewed literature (www.carlton.edu). A number of studies have been conducted to ascertain the effectiveness of NCLB on learning outcomes that effect school improvement. Ongoing discussions about the successes and failures surround NCLB, as follows:

Evidence of NCLB Successes

- Nationally, test scores have been increasing since NCLB took effect in 2002.
- Overall, achievement gap between minority students and the white majority has decreased between 2002 and 2009.
- Approximately 450,000 eligible students have exercised their right to supplemental education services (tutoring) and public school choice.
- Regular testing has allowed schools to identify the individual students in need of additional aid to reach grade level proficiency.
- The increased school choice for parent provides an additional incentive for both schools and teachers to reform ineffective educational practices.

- Results have proven that though the nation is lagging behind in reaching our universal grade level proficiency goals of 2014 in reading and math, we are making successful strides.
- In 2007 the number of schools nationally, that met AYP has increased.

Evidence of NCLB Failures

- NCLB has received bipartisan support. Both political parties say it is being implemented effectively.
- In 2005 the US Department of Education made slight, but necessary adjustments to this regulation.
- Achievement is measured only by a student's performance on annual multiple choice reading and high stakes math tests.
- Teachers fearing for their jobs are teaching to the test and because of this many students receive a creative, personally relevant and well-rounded curriculum.
- All the students are held to the same standards regardless of their label.
- NCLB focus is only on math and reading therefore, the other subjects are not taught with the same rigor.
- Reports from unaffiliated organizations have come to mixed conclusion as to the success of NCLB.
- The term "scientifically based research" is not specifically defined and allows ample room for interpretation.
- In 2012 more schools have been identified as needing improvement, than in previous years.
- Many school districts continue to have a difficult time interpreting ambiguous Federal School Improvement mandates.

While the educational outcomes gap has decreased since enactment of NCLB, the achievement

test only measures students' math, writing and reading proficiencies. Expanding achievement metrics to include a well-rounded and relevant curriculum could improve educational and developmental outcomes. Despite achievement testing scores increasing since NCLB was started, this could be an indication of educators teaching students how to take the test, rather than an indication of improved outcomes that involve higher order thinking skills and cognitive global preparation. The additional time spent focusing on teaching methods and subject matter for taking achievement tests decreases time spent on other subjects. Overall, the most impressive gain for students since NCLB was enacted is the ability for teachers and schools to identify students with special needs.

No Child Left Behind Effectiveness

As the accountability requirements outlined by NCLB return mixed and contradictory results on student achievement, the overall effectiveness of the policy has been examined in recent studies. One study determined that the changes in achievement since implementation of NCLB have been insignificant (Lee & Reeves, 2012). Equally important, the study confirmed prior studies that teacher-pupil ratio "has stronger effects for disadvantaged low-achieving students" (Lee & Reeves, 2012, p. 220). Another study indicates that teachers' human and social capital has a direct impact on student performance (Pil & Leana, 2009). Unfortunately, NCLB addresses curriculum issues, teacher training and standardized achievement scores. Addressing such issues as determining the most effective measures for teacher performance could help ameliorate the achievement gap between socioeconomic groups (Pil & Leana, 2009).

Pil and Leana (2009, p. 1118), state "Student eligibility for free lunch is associated with a 7.6 percent reduction in achievement growth". This must be taken into consideration when establishing NCLB mandates for low-income areas. Specifically, generalizing predictors across and between high- and low-income areas will frustrate schools' efforts for minimizing the achievement gap. The findings

indicate that improving a teacher's horizontal tie strength/relationships with other teachers of similar seniority by just one standard deviation results in a 5.7 gain in student achievement (Pil & Leana, 2009). With schools' improvement measures failing around the United States, policy makers must take this into consideration for developing effective improvement plans in the future.

This case study will explore the ties between and among students, teachers, administrators and parents of Southwest Middle School in an effort to determine why the planned improvement guidelines failed to prevent the school from closing. One primary disadvantage noted by researchers and policymakers alike is that NCLB views any school, regardless the degree of falling under NCLB levels, receiving the same sanctions. Efforts for adapting the NCLB guidelines to a contextual framework led to the waivers of NCLB option.

No Child Left Behind Waivers

Arizona was recently and conditionally granted waiver from NCLB standards (Chang & Owen, 2012). The waivers allowed Arizona a greater flexibility for addressing problems within its borders on a contextual level not granted through NCLB. Arizona's waiver is conditional. The state can now take control of its public education system. This study aims to provide evidence of teacher preparedness for achieving stated goals according to the low-achieving schools' specific situation.

With the NCLB waiver, Arizona's public education system is granted leave to delay the 2014 deadline for reaching 100% set standards for math and reading (Chang & Owen, 2012). Additionally, rather than focusing on teachers' educational level, the NCLB waivers require Arizona teachers' be measured for effectiveness and ability for engaging their students (Chang & Owen, 2012). Furthermore, rather than setting the goal for students to graduate high school, under the NCLB waiver, Arizona must focus on preparing students for College and Career Readiness (Chang & Owen, 2012).

According to NCLB waiver, Arizona must "pilot new ways to measure how educators help

students learn” (Chang & Owen, 2012). This will allow the Arizona Department of Education to focus on research-based initiatives for teacher effectiveness at the local level. Addressing the needs of low-income areas remains a primary concern for many of Arizona’s problem schools, and as indicated previously, the socioeconomic factor is a primary driver of student achievement.

Measuring Teacher Effectiveness

Recognizing that effective teaching goes beyond the rote learning, and requires that the teacher enable his or her students develop “the knowledge and critical thinking skills that enable them to compete on an international scale” (Ayers & Owens, 2012, p. 4), the Arizona Department of Education must develop a method for measuring teachers’ ability for preparing their students for College and Career Readiness choices. As indicated by the NCLB waiver stipulations, “states have to adopt teacher and principal evaluation systems...with student growth being a significant factor” (Ayers & Owen, 2012). This is critical for improving Arizona’s most problematic schools, as it removes the socioeconomic status of the schools’ area from the equation. As indicated earlier, teacher effectiveness is the one aspect of public education that has widely been ignored (Pil & Leana, 2009).

In an effort for gaining NCLB waivers, Arizona implemented a requirement that all Arizona teachers must be certified for teaching Structured English Immersion (Pil & Leana, 2012). With a focus on teacher effectiveness, rather than teacher’s level of education, it seems the gap will be reduced between socioeconomic groups. This explored the teaching effectiveness of the teachers at Southwest Middle School under investigation to determine the role their level of effectiveness played in the schools’ problems. Implementing such programs as close reading at the middle school level can help develop both the teachers’ and the students’ early critical thinking and research skills (Fisher & Freye, 2012).

Increased awareness of the students’ social environment is proven to increase the child’s learning

capacity (Aguirre, et al., 2012). Adapting Aguirre, et al.'s (2012) methodology, teacher effectiveness across every subject can be measured according to his/her ties to their students, families and community-at-large. Moreover, increasing a teacher's "opportunities to interact with children/families about their out-of-school mathematics practices can help Prospective Elementary Teachers (PSTs) consider ways to respond" to possible confusion with new theories (Aguirre, et al., 2012, p. 188). Such models are proven effective among diverse groups of students (Aguirre, et al., 2012), which is key to decreasing the gap in effective education practices. While Aguirre, et al. (2012) focused primarily on multiple math knowledge bases, the paradigm can be easily implemented to improve teacher effectiveness in other subjects.

The problem remains, how best does the state of Arizona measure teacher effectiveness? Some states proposed or implemented report cards that go beyond the traditional 'A-B-C-D-F' grading. Such programs could prove effective in measuring student progress and teacher effectiveness. Teachers today must explore methods for tracking baseline and progression of teacher effectiveness through comprehensive report card measures.

Teacher Expectations

A study conducted in New Zealand determined that teachers possess preconceived notions about their students' potential according to ethnicity (Rubie-Davies, Hattie & Hamilton, 2006). Accordingly, the teachers tended to base their expectations on ethnic origin "independent of social class and student achievement" (Rubie-Davies, Hattie & Hamilton, 2006, p. 439). The study concluded that teachers' adherence to certain prejudicial stereotypes, combined with coworkers' experiences formed their level of expectation for each ethnic group (Rubie-Davies, Hattie & Hamilton, 2006).

Drawing from organizational research, if the teacher's horizontal ties (to other teachers) are strong, and the anecdotal responses to various ethnic groups is negative the overall expectations of the

group will also be negative. Improving teacher awareness about ethnic and multi-cultural sensitivity, and providing an objective assessment tool for measuring teachers' expectations of students, can help ameliorate negative stereotypes and eliminate the "self-fulfilling" prophecy that certain students are destined to fail (Rubie-Davies, Hattie & Hamilton, 2006).

Dee (2005) determined that "the odds of a student being seen as disruptive by a teacher are 1.36 times greater when the teacher does not share the student's racial/ethnic designation" (p. 162). As minority populations in the U. S. are increasing in numbers, the current policies directed toward providing non-white teachers are inadequate for meeting the future demands (Villegas, Strom & Lucas, 2012). One might argue that an effective teacher, regardless of his or her ethnic designation will improve education outcomes for minority students.

Parents' Expectations and Involvement

A recent study by Yamamoto and Holloway (2010) indicated that parents' expectations of their child's potential academic achievement is closely tied to the relationship established with the teacher. Specifically, it is noted that minority parents tend to distrust teachers' assessments of their children's performance, which leads to them overestimating their child's potential (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). While this can increase a child's achievement level, it can also place unrealistic expectations on the student and result in decreased academic outcomes. Equally important, surveys indicate that many parents blame the lack of resources as the primary problem with America's educational system (Lips, Watkins & Fleming, 2008). On the contrary, k-12 spending has increased by 23.5% and 49% over the past 10-20 years respectively (Lips, Watkins & Fleming, 2008). Correcting mistaken perceptions is an important step to garnering parent support for and trust in educators and the system. Establishing and maintaining a trusting relationship with parents within the school community can help alleviate the misaligned expectations between parents, teachers and students. Removing teacher's prejudiced attitudes

toward ethnic groups is necessary for establishing trusting relationships. As indicated in a recent study (van den Bergh, et al., 2010), when teachers hold implicit negative attitudes toward an ethnic group, the students in that group perform poorly when compared to other students in the same class. Furthermore, as Villegas, Strom and Tamara (2012) determined, the ethnic gap between students and teachers increases, the ability for establishing the important relationships between teachers and parents suffer, as well.

Parent participation in a student's early learning was determined as a positive indicator of mathematical competency in first-grade students (Powell, et al., 2012). Specifically, the study found that parental involvement in math-related learning activities at home helped improve the learning outcomes for students with poor pre-k mathematical skills (Powell, et al., 2012). Interestingly, the study determined that at-home involvement was a more positive correlate than in-school parent involvement (Powell, et al., 2012). Regardless whether the parental involvement occurs at home or in school, student predictors for academic success prove a positive correlation between degree of parental involvement and educational outcomes (Powell, et al, 2012; Brueck, Mazza & Tousignant, 2012). Inspiring parents in low-performing school districts can help reduce the gap in educational outcomes. Improving educational outcomes early can help improve high school graduation and advanced education in general. Studies have reaffirmed students' performance in the elementary and middle school grades. Further, they support the idea that "it is a critical indicator of their likely performance in high school" (Kemple, Segeritz & Stephenson, 2013, p. 21). Clearly, parental involvement at the pre-school stage will help improve educational outcomes across the board.

How Neighborhoods Impact Student Success

While the evidence is clear that socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural measures provide a clear indication of academic achievement and reaffirming that the problems associated with the educational

gap is a multipronged one. Specifically, as indicated in a study conducted by Deluca and Rosenblatt (2010), parental attitudes and knowledge of school systems provided a negative influence for their children's achievements. When offered the opportunity for moving to lower poverty, more segregated neighborhoods a large number of families chose new neighborhoods with similar characteristics (Deluca & Rosenblatt, 2010). This indicates a need for educating and garnering the parents' increased involvement in each student's education.

Citing the need for providing their children stability, many families chose to stay close to or remain at the same low-performing school, even when granted the option of sending their child to a higher-performing school (Deluca & Rosenblatt, 2010). It can be deduced from such studies that funds are better spent in improving teacher effectiveness, parent involvement and community awareness for educational initiatives than on relocation efforts.

Predictors of High School Graduation

Students with proficient mathematics and reading scores in eighth-grade proved one-and a-half times more likely to be on track for graduating high school by the end of grade 12 than their classmates who were proficient in either one or the other area, but not both (Kemple, Segeritz & Stephenson, 2013). Further, those 8th graders proficient in both math and reading were four-times as likely to be on track for completing high school as their classmates who were not proficient in either math or reading (Kemple, Segeritz & Stephenson, 2013). Equally compelling, regardless of a student's eighth-grade proficiency level, if the student is on-track by the end of 9th the chances of him graduating high school in 4 years increased substantially (Kemple, Segeritz & Stephenson, 2013).

Students who entered 9th grade lacking proficiency in either math or reading but on-track by the end of 9th grade were more likely to graduate on-time than students rated proficient in both math and reading but off-track in 9th (Kemple, Segeritz & Stephenson, 2013). Specifically, the graduation rate for

students lacking proficiency in either math or ELA but on-track by the end of ninth grade, had graduation rates of 79% and 78%, respectively (Kemple, Segeritz & Stephenson, 2013). On the other hand, students proficient in both math and reading when entering the 9th grade, but off-track by the end of 9th grade, had a graduation rate of only 49% (Kemple, Segeritz & Stephenson, 2013). With 81.5% and 25.6% graduation rates, respectively, for on- and off-track students, effective teachers must concentrate on helping students remain on-track.

Perceptions of NCLB and Arizona's Learning Initiatives

Recent opinion reveals that American economists denounce the NCLB program (Weissberg, 2010). Specifically, Weissberg (2010) indicates that learning programs serve as social welfare systems predicated on faulty assumptions. Unfortunately, under current programs focused on students achieving high school graduation fall short of helping our youth attain college or career readiness. This researcher explored the social and familial attitudes toward current education goals. Interestingly, although President Obama has pledged to pour billions of dollars into the country's educational reform efforts (Weissberg, 2010), many parents blame inadequate funding for their children's poor academic outcomes (Lips, Watkins & Fleming, 2008).

Longitudinal research indicated that, "simply increasing education spending does not appear to improve American students' academic achievement (Lips, Watkins & Fleming, 2008). Specifically, students' reading scores remained flat despite spending per pupil being more than twice between 1970 and 2004 (Lips, Watkins & Fleming, 2008). Equally compelling is that graduation rates have remained steady at approximately 74% in spite of increased spending (Lips, Watkins & Fleming, 2008). Furthermore, although federal programs targeting educational outcomes for minority students continue to lag behind their nonminority peers (Lips, Watkins & Fleming, 2008). Clearly, the goal for improving educational outcomes of and decreasing disparities between American students lies not with increased

spending but with increased teacher effectiveness, student preparedness and parent involvement. As stated by Lips, Watkins and Fleming (2008), “expenditures on academic outcomes depend on how the money is spent, not on how much money is spent” (p. 5).

The future of a school is negotiated with its constituents largely upon presentation of its image, and the opportunity for improvement and growth depended on the effectiveness of this activity (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991). A commonly reached conclusion was that a school a child attended did affect his development and achievement (Rutter et al., 1979). About 26 years ago, the US Department of Education hired James Coleman, a prominent education researcher, to investigate the effectiveness of American education and addressing the issues that contribute to student’s lack of success in education. His research concluded with the publication of a controversial paper that indicted children from poor families could not learn, regardless of what the school did.

Needless to say, this paper raised controversy from many people. One of these people was Dr. Ronald Edmonds, who was then the Director of the Center for Urban Studies at Harvard University. Dr. Edmonds and his team did acknowledge that family background does indeed make a difference, but it is not the sole reason why poor kids cannot learn. The Harvard Team conducted research in schools throughout the United States that had populations of students from poor background that were successful students. They studied achievement data for at least three-years and found that many schools populated by poor children were effectively teaching and these poor students were learning.

Conceptual Framework for School Effectiveness and Arizona’s School Improvement Plan

The theoretical framework Arizona School Improvement is based on is the concept of school effectiveness. As far back as 1969 Americans began to adopt a pessimistic attitude about the country’s public school systems, believing that background and social influence determined academic achievement more than formal schooling (Madaus, Airasian & Kellaghan, 1980). There was a strong

need for research that promoted a clear understanding of the process of education in American public schools. School effectiveness was defined “as a strategy in which schools embody both effectiveness and goodness” (Glickman, 1987, p.73). This has been of significant importance in the United States since 1995, when schools began conversations about the core framework of school effectiveness and school improvement (Edmonds, 1979; Goodlad, 1984, Europe (Creemers, 1992).

The future of a school was negotiated with its constituents largely upon presentation of its image, and the opportunity for improvement and growth depended on the effectiveness of this activity (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991). A commonly reached conclusion was that a school a child attended did affect his development and achievement (Rutter et al., 1979).

Recent Research on School Effectiveness

The question still lingered as to why certain schools made a difference and others did not. The Harvard Team worked hard to answer this question conducting research in schools that led them to conclude that public schools can and do make a difference even if their student body is comprised of students that are from high poverty backgrounds. They reached conclusions that indicted that;

- Students from poverty backgrounds can learn at high levels even if they attend public schools.
- There are unique characteristics and processes common to learning. Successful learning occur in large schools in poverty stricken areas with success.

These correlates initiated the discipline of Effective School Research. Thus, it is believed positive determinants to guiding effective school improvement led by school effectiveness include the following correlates:

- 1) effective instructional leadership,
- 2) clear purpose,
- 3) safe and orderly climate,

- 4) expectation of minimum mastery by all students,
- 5) testing for program evaluation and redirection,
- 6) clear academic goals,
- 7) parental involvement, and
- 8) evidence of collegiality (Rutter et al., 1079; Goodlad, 1984).

Most recently, school effectiveness research has been redirected toward providing strong consideration to the organizational culture and the development of conditions conducive to creating an effective school culture (Rosenholtz, 1989, Barth, 1090; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991). This challenge is in the hands of leadership to develop such an environment (Barth, 1990; Fullan; 1992a; Sergiovanni, 1992a). Leithwood (1992) argued the need for transformational school leaders that will develop and maintain collaborative cultures, empowering teachers through shared decision making and collective problem solving. This is a principal transition to becoming a guide, not the traditional gatekeeper (Fullan, 1992a). It is unfortunate that much of the literature addresses the traditional educational contexts and not the substantive findings concerning school effects, size, consistency across outcome measure and time, and the process associated with them.

It has been determined by many school administrators that school effectiveness and school improvement are two concepts that are now much closer and one cannot occur without the other. Insights from both disciplines must be applied to determine the direction of school improvement which to date, has been fragmented, partial, unsystematic, and frequently undermined by shifting political climates. School effectiveness and school improvement must contain a knowledge base that is central in the educational discourse of the American public schools. It is recommended that there be further work done on expanding the outcomes measured in school effectiveness research. School effectiveness is determining what has to be changed in order to become effective while school improvement is trying to

find out how much schools have to change in order to improve. Of particular importance are skills and performance of complex tasks, rather than knowledge content. School effectiveness literature argues that we need to study the implications of the constructivist perspective on learning, and the associated notions of learner empowerment at the classroom level.

Arizona School Improvement

The concept of restructuring at the school level to improve educational effectiveness and direct instruction models to which some educators have been committed for many years. Arizona School Improvement must make teacher effectiveness the underlying premise upon which it is built. Schools must identify a clear understanding of the categories in which they are failing in order to reach NCLB and state mandated academic standards. Also, they must identify what area(s) are the most serious regarding academic and social deficits, which mandated the current level of school improvement.

Professional development must be carefully planned, data driven, and executed. Lastly, how will the school improvement process begin so as to meet the federal NCLB and Arizona Department of Education mandates, and who will finance such an expensive task?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This researcher utilized a case study design because its intent was to understand what happened at this particular school from all relevant perspectives. The researcher sought to conduct a detailed investigation of the administration and teachers involved in the School Improvement process for the 5 years (2008 – 2013) preceding the school closure. Further, a case study analysis of the variables relevant to the subject would help understand what happened in this effort at improvement in Arizona and could provide recommendations for other efforts at school improvement. The case study focused on a bounded system, under natural conditions so that the system can be understood in its entirety, under its own conditions (Stake, 1988) and its own environment.

In an effort to answer the research questions stated in Chapter 1, this researcher recruited a group of nine participants that consisted of teachers and administrators who were employed at Southwest Middle School during the last five years that the school was in school improvement through 2008 - 2013. These individuals helped the researcher better understand what happened at Southwest Middle School that culminated in its closure by the Southwest Unified School District in spring, 2013. The study was conducted in three different Phases beginning with Phase I – Phase III. This was done to create a better understanding of the mandated processes in place prior to the school's closure and the reaction and effects it had on nine participants.

Phase I

The first phase of recruitment for this study involved making numerous phone calls and sending many emails to a total of twenty-one potential participants. After many attempts to enroll participants in this case study there were only nine that made the commitment. Two participants were administrators, six were teachers, and one was a school improvement coach. They were all willing to be interviewed for

this case study. Five of the participants were Euro-American (1 male and 4 females) and four were Latinos/as (three females and one male, inclusive of the School Improvement Coach that is a teacher also). The participants who did participate seemed excited and one said “This is good therapy for me. I feel like I brought this issue to closure now.”

Phase II

The second phase of the study was to meet with the participants, at a neutral location, to explain the study and Institutional Review Board guidelines for the study. At the very beginning and after a formal introduction, the study process and procedures were explained using a standard script and participants were given the right to waive participation if for some reason they were uncomfortable with any part of the process. Each participant reviewed the consent form, the researcher answered all participant questions, and after participants signed the consent form, they completed the questionnaire that provided background data needed for this study.

Phase III

The third phase of this study consisted of data collection which included the following three sources:

1. Archived Documents related to Southwest Middle School’s improvement efforts
2. Interviews with participants in the school improvement efforts, and
3. Field notes and reflections.

Archived Documents that were reviewed included the following Statement of Findings (4/4/2013) from the Arizona Department of Education Solutions Team.

As stated in the research question/s this study addressed the NCLB mandated school improvement processes that were imposed on Southwest Middle School for the last 5 years as a result of being identified in Arizona School Improvement during that time. The Arizona Department of Education

Solutions Team visited the school and issued a Statement of Findings as per the State's plan addressing NCLB mandates. This researcher reviewed the recommended implementation process generated through the Statement of Findings and asked about the accompanying funding in the participant interviews. This was done to better understand if the participants actually were made aware of the how the recommended Statement of Findings should be used and to know about available funding for school improvement.

As stated, the Arizona Department of Education's School Improvement Plan calls for school visits by a Solutions Team composed of carefully selected education experts that had the primary responsibility of conducting an evidenced based inquiry and issue a Statement of Findings, outlining what they discovered and recommend steps for improvement. On 4/4/2013 after the Arizona Department of Education Solutions Team visit to Southwest Middle School the Team issued said Statement of Findings as per A.R.S. 15-41(P). The visit indicated the school was in a serious state of failure again. This evidenced based inquiry determined that the school's capacity for leadership, instructional practices and organizational conditions for sustained improvement was not acceptable by Arizona Department of Arizona guidelines. Further, the Solutions Team Visits served to provide redirection of the school's improvement efforts and suggestions were narrowed down to four specific recommendations for improvement that focused on student achievement.

1. Portions of School Improvement Plans dating back to 2008-2009 through 2012-2013

- FY 2008-2009
- FY 2009-2010
- FY 2011-2012
- FY 2012-2013

Southwest Unified School District was to have archived School Improvement Plans related to

Southwest Middle School, but after several weeks of waiting, they could not locate them and the school did not have copies either. Further, none of the interview participants had copies of school improvement plans.

All other miscellaneous available artifacts and documents pertaining to Southwest Middle School's school improvement process, including planning and execution for the last 5 years, were also examined in an attempt to answer the who, what, where, when and how, the school improvement process was instituted and implemented at Southwest Middle School. There were also repeated reviews of documents and archives to see if additional information could be extracted that would answer the research questions more thoroughly.

2. Participant Interviews

An important method of data collection in Phase III included audio-taped interviews with the nine participants (two administrators, six teachers and one school improvement coach-also a teacher). The participants had the liberty to choose the locations where the interviews were conducted. They all chose convenient and comfortable locations with which they were familiar because this would maximize their engagement throughout the interview and minimize environmental issues that could impact these interviews. Participants had the comfort to speak freely about their experiences in the School Improvement Team process. Most of the interviews were held at local libraries, coffee shops or restaurants in central locations and were attended by the participant only. The exceptions were two of the younger teachers who had to bring their children with them. The children remained near their mothers and behaved well as the interviews took place.

The interviews were viewed as practical action research (Schmuck, R. (2006), in a comfortable environment. All the interviews were completed in one sitting. A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized to determine the successes and challenges experienced in the school improvement efforts

(Krueger, 1994). Interviews also were used to determine the school improvement process, the reasons the participants acted in the ways they did, and why the school closure actually occurred. An interview protocol (See Appendix A) consisting of thirteen questions was used to ensure consistency and the interviews were audio-taped. Following the audio-taping of the interviews, they were transcribed and reviewed in order that a full understanding occurred during the interviews and after, as the data was analyzed. Every participant was treated as outlined in the University of Arizona ethical guidelines and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the American Psychological Association (APA) ethical guidelines. Considerations and sensibility practices were implemented when dealing with current or former administration, teachers, students, parents, etc. If for any reason a participant felt uncomfortable discussing his or her experience/s or discussing sensitive issues, they were given the option to pass on that portion of the study. Participant pseudo names were used so that no one could be identified.

3. Field Notes and Reflective Journal

Finally, data collection included field notes and a journal where the researcher's recorded reflections on aspects of the data collection. The researcher decided to use a journal to reflect on data as they were collected because of her own extensive experience in the State's school improvement process. The researcher is a certified teacher and administrator, teacher trainer, reading specialist, Title I Program Manager, State and Federal Grant Program Manager and teacher mentor, for the last twenty years provided for her a strong platform to build off of as she remained objective through her field work. Field notes and the reflective journal were particularly useful for the researcher as she was seeking more comprehensive information in relation to school improvement efforts and the impact on Southwest Middle School's closure.

Data from all sources were coded, sorted into common themes, and analyzed for how they related to Southwest Middle School's improvement or failure. All data were used to identify trends and key

points related to improvement. Throughout the study, the researcher's goal was to gather as much information as possible from the participants and to review and process it immediately following the reviews and interviews.

Yet, another goal was to capture information about the participants' day-to-day experiences as they served on the School Improvement Team. In spite of her own experience in the State's school improvement efforts, the researcher sought to remain open-minded about this school's process, the participants and the components that impacted the study. She also wanted to include the environment as described by participants, and to document as many of the social issues observed as possible e.g. was the participant easily distracted by activity occurring nearby during the interview or was the participant easily distracted by answering their cell phone or texting during the interview? These issues were imperative for the researcher to be aware of because they could have influenced the participant's responses and ultimately, impacted the study. Also, the field notes allowed the researcher reflection on her own personal experience and feelings related to participation in the State's school improvement programs.

The researcher felt competent in conducting the interviews having been a consultant for the Arizona Department of Education for the past 11 years in the area of School Improvement, served as a School Improvement Instructional Coach, School Improvement External Facilitator, Solutions Team Leader/Member, Reading Coach, and Master Teacher Trainer, the researcher had extensive knowledge in teaching and of the State's school improvement programs. Additionally, she serves on the Arizona Department of Education Committee of Practitioners, one of the highest honors for an Arizona teacher. This part of the study (field notes/reflection journal) afforded the researcher an opportunity to reflect on how the past eleven years of

working in school improvement affected her understanding of the complete failure of a school and helped diminish potential bias in the study's results.

Following the data collection in Phase III, data were kept in a secure file cabinet until all the information from it could be utilized and then destroyed.

Additional Data Collection

For purposes of multiple perspectives this case study used the maximum variation sampling strategy. After many attempts the researcher successfully acquired permission for interviews from 9 teachers and administrators that were directly involved in the school improvement process sometime in the last 5 years. Some of these individuals were part of the school improvement process more than once at Southwest Middle School and most of them were working in similar roles at various other Southwest Unified School District schools. Questions on the questionnaire related to the number of years the participants were in practice, their particular areas of practice, the times they participated in a Solutions Teams visit/s, their understanding of the work of the Solutions Teams, their attitudes toward them, and their longevity at the school.

Data Analysis

For purposes of multiple perspectives a case study approach was used because it was the most comprehensive methodology to answer the type of questions asked, and the researcher was able to assess participant's attitudes and behaviors toward the school improvement process. Also, it drove the interviews and the degree of focus from the participants on past historical events that led to the school's closure. Prior to the data being analyzed, all recorded interviews, observations, artifacts, and field notes were transcribed. The transcribing helped the researcher become more familiar with the data (Stake, 1988) and reach meaningful reflections about the interviews. Files were created for the interviews, documents, artifacts and journal entries that were protected by a password and saved on a laptop. The

data were analyzed and coded using thematic analysis of all documents, observations, artifacts and field notes. This ensured the researcher was familiar with the data and helped establish themes. As a validation strategy, this researcher relied on a critique checklist to assess quality and revisit important points in this research. (Appendix B)

CHAPTER 4 – RESEARCH, FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

In this case study the researcher aimed to understand the school improvement process at one southwest middle school. The following discuss what she learned from archived documents, interviews with participants, and reflections/field notes in a journal. She wanted to understand the effectiveness of federally mandated school improvement guidelines at one Southwestern Middle School. Specifically, the research study sought to identify factors that would explain why school improvement efforts at the Southwest Middle School failed and to identify teachers' problems with the outlined school improvement mandated guidelines. An iterative thematic approach was used to determine overarching themes evident from analysis of data (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Themes identified through this approach included level of involvement, levels of knowledge about teaching in a school that was in school improvement and the basic purpose of a School Improvement Team. Results from each of the three data sources are reported below. Themes from each data source are then compared across data sources.

Findings from Review of Archived Documents Provided by Southwest Unified School

District Statement of Findings from the Arizona Department of Education Solutions Team

Visits

The various archived documents for this case study were provided by Southwest Unified School District. They were developed to facilitate professional guidance based on the school's evidence and the knowledge of the Solutions Teams members that focused on scientifically based research practices being implemented at the school. The Solutions Teams did not recommend any specific curriculum or educational programs e.g., a specific method of teaching, learning materials or assessments. It is through years of expertise that the Solutions Teams members came to identify the four priority recommendations that would were supposed to have led the school to sustained improvement if followed. The Statement

of Findings was divided into four standards as follows:

Standard I: School and District Leadership

Standard II: Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development

Standard III: Classroom and School Assessment

Standard IV: School Culture, Climate and Communication

The Solutions Team findings were based on answers to three guiding questions generated from their visit in 2012 – 2013:

1. Does the school's Arizona School Improvement Plan appear to be a sound plan for improving student performance?
2. Do the structures and conditions appear to be in place for a successful implementation of the school's Arizona School Improvement Plan?
3. What recommendations can be provided that will assist the school with implementation of its Arizona School Improvement Plan?

Solutions Team members were not authorized to release any information gathered during interviews, focus groups, financial record reviews and classroom visits. Upon completion of the visits all documented and recorded information was immediately sent to the Arizona Department of Education and destroyed prior to the Statement of Findings being announced. After this, there was the opportunity for a Southwest Unified School District official or the school principal to submit written response to the Statement of Findings. This response had to be postmarked within five days following the visit and all appropriate monitoring information was to be included. Once this response was reviewed by the Arizona Department of Education, a decision was reached and meetings followed to discuss how the situation at the school could be rectified in the best interest of high student achievement.

Ongoing School Improvement Goals

In her findings the researcher learned that throughout the years that Southwest Middle School was in school improvement it was striving to reach one common goal and that was to increase student academic performance through strengthening instruction for all students so they could surpass the State academic mandates. This would be done by:

- Implementation of Effective Schools by Larry Lezotte-Effective Schools Correlates through instructional leadership that would maintain a climate of high expectations for student success,
- A safe and orderly environment,
- A clear and focused mission,
- Positive school and home relationships, and
- By frequent monitoring of student progress.
- The overarching goal of these correlates was to establish increased opportunities for students to learn through increased focused time on task.
- Another overall goal was to establish a learning community structure for the professional development that was inclusive of all teaching staff (para professionals, tutors, and interventionists).
- To develop and establish Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that were grade level focused and monitor them weekly.

Clearly stated in the 2012-2013 School Improvement Plan for Southwest Middle School proficiency was that they would reach the Arizona Department of Education's Annual Measurable Objective Goals for the year 2012-2013 and every year thereafter as stated for each grade level as follows:

Math:

6th Grade: From 35.4% to 61% Mastery

7th Grade: From 48.4% to 63% Mastery

8th Grade: From 27.1% to 56% Mastery

Reading:

6th Grade: From 62.2% to 82% Mastery

7th Grade: From 74.5% to 83% Mastery

8th Grade: From 58.7 to 73% Mastery

Additional artifacts of this study included materials available and provided by Southwest Middle School and the Southwest Unified School District. Also, this researcher accumulated data from the Southwest Unified School District website as presented within the following sections, and other information was collected from Southwest Middle School current records and was used for comparative analysis to earlier years not available on Southwest Unified School District's website. In an effort to help interpret interview and data findings, Figure 1 (below) is a breakdown of student activities (attendance, mobility, stability, dropout) for school years 2007 – 2008 through 2009 – 2010:

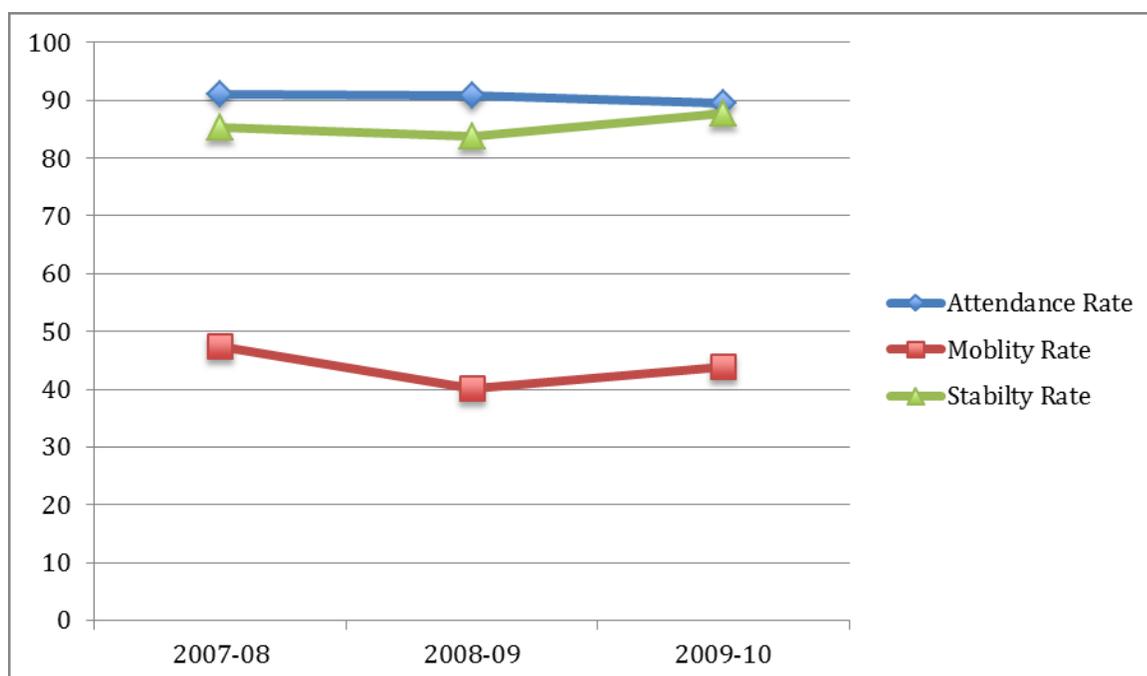


Figure 1: Statistics from AIMS Multi-Year Summary

In addition to the information charted in Figure 1, it must also be noted that Southwest Middle School's dropout rate increased nearly four-fold between school years 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 from 0.46% to 1.66%. Compared to the Southwest Middle School average dropout rate of 0.72%, Southwest Middle School more than doubled the average dropout rate.

Average AIMS scores 2010 through 2013

On analysis of available artifacts for Southwest Middle School, it was determined that results across reading, writing, and mathematics (math) were varied. Specifically, as indicated in Figure 3 (below), average testing scores among all Southwest Middle School students grades 6 through 8 for AIMS Writing testing displayed a drastic drop between 2010 and 2011 (<https://www.azreportcards.org/ReportCard/AIMS>). Further, while AIMS math scores for students grades six through eight showed a steady improvement, the final overall average for the 2012 – 2013 school year was still less than satisfactory, with 45% of Southwest Middle School students passing the AIMS exam for mathematics skills (<https://www.azreportcards.org/ReportCard/AIMS>).

Finally, the highest average AIMS score for school year 2012 – 2013 was indicated for reading, with 73% of Southwest Middle School students passing the test (<https://www.azreportcards.org/ReportCard/AIMS>).

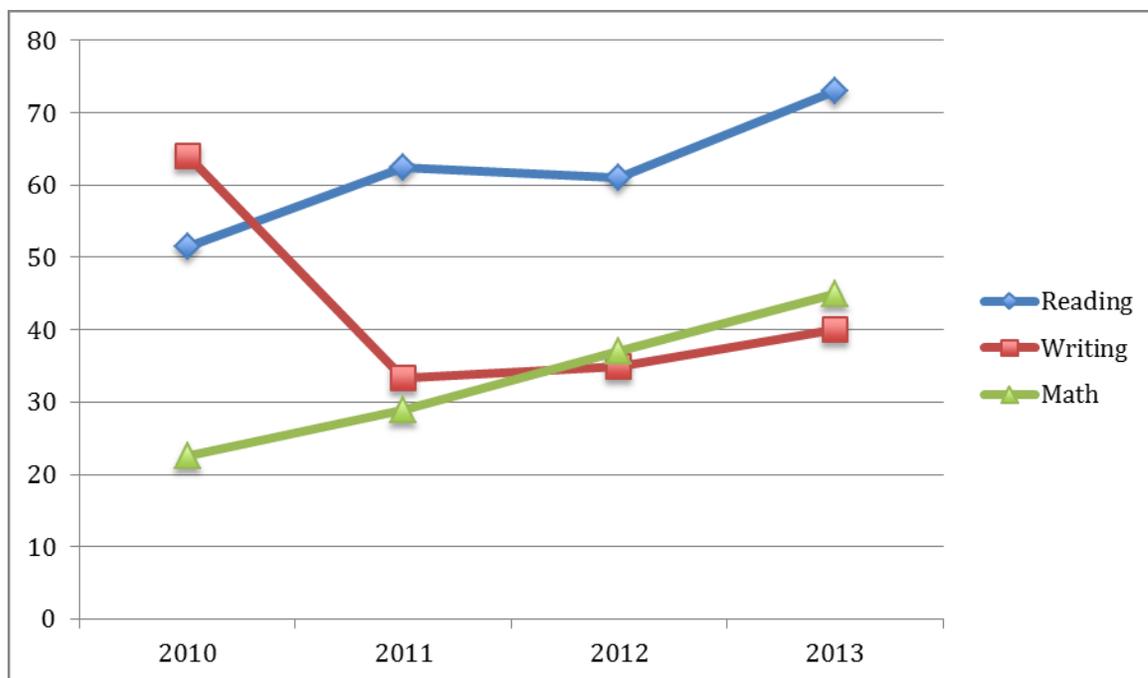


Figure 2: AIMS Scores Averages for 6th thru 8th Grade between 2010 and 2013 (Adapted from <https://www.azreportcards.org/ReportCard/AIMS>)

AIMS results for math – 2012

As indicated in Figure 4 (below), only 37% either meet or exceed standards set for math testing. As shown, 30% of Southwest Middle School's female students met and nine percent exceeded AIMS standards for school year 2012.

Unfortunately, nearly 90% of the Bottom Quartile was Falls Far Below standards for AIMS test in math. Similarly, disadvantaged students (consisting of Students with Disabilities (SWD), English Language Learners (ELL), Economically Disadvantaged (FRL), and Migrant Students (MS), consistently showed a maximum percentage testing either Falls Far Below or Approaching AIMS standards for math.

Although results were provided for only SWD (64% Far Below) and FRL students (41% Far Below), the trend is consistent throughout AIMS scores. Finally, Native American and Hispanic students ranked similarly with 39% and 41% respectively scored Falls Far Below in AIMS standards.

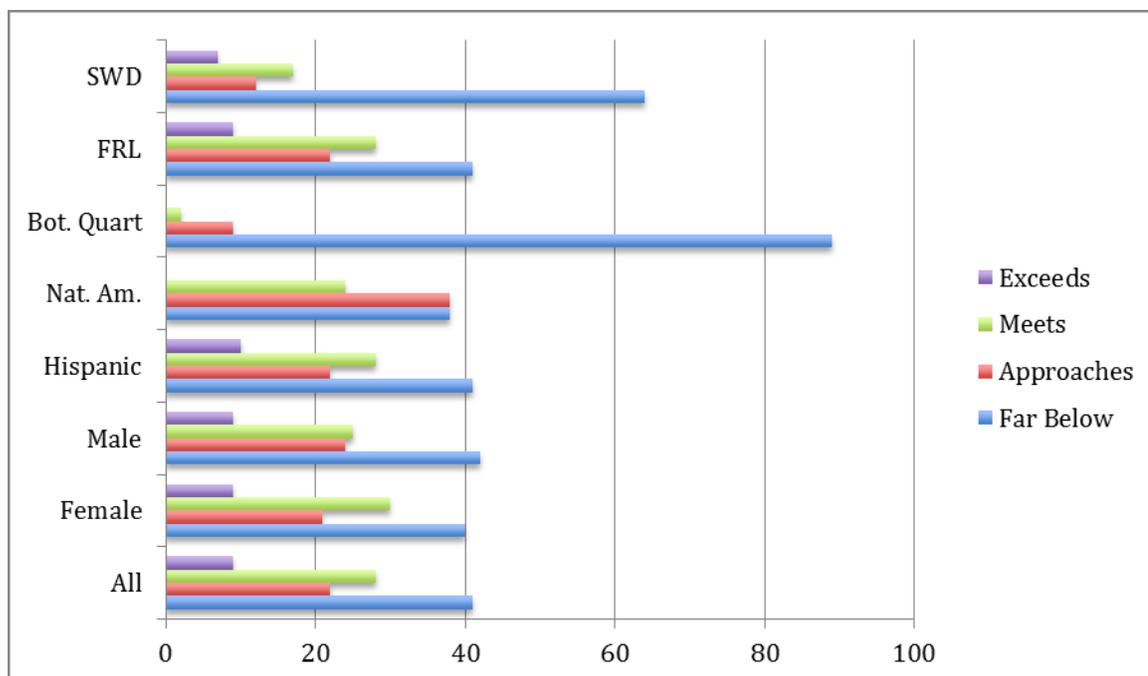


Figure 3: Southwest Middle School's 2012 AIMS Math Results (adapted from AZDash)

AIMS results for reading 2012

As shown in Figure 5 (below) the majority of Southwest Middle School students either meet or exceed (60% and 4%) reading proficiency as indicated by the AIMS test (AZDash, 2013). Female students out performed male students by seven percentage points (63% versus 56%), and not surprisingly, ELL students scored the lowest, with 39% testing Falls Far Below AIMS standards. Interestingly, FRL students scored the highest overall with 59% and 4% either meet or exceed proficiency levels, respectively. Finally, Native American and Hispanic students tested close to each other with 59% and 56%, respectively.

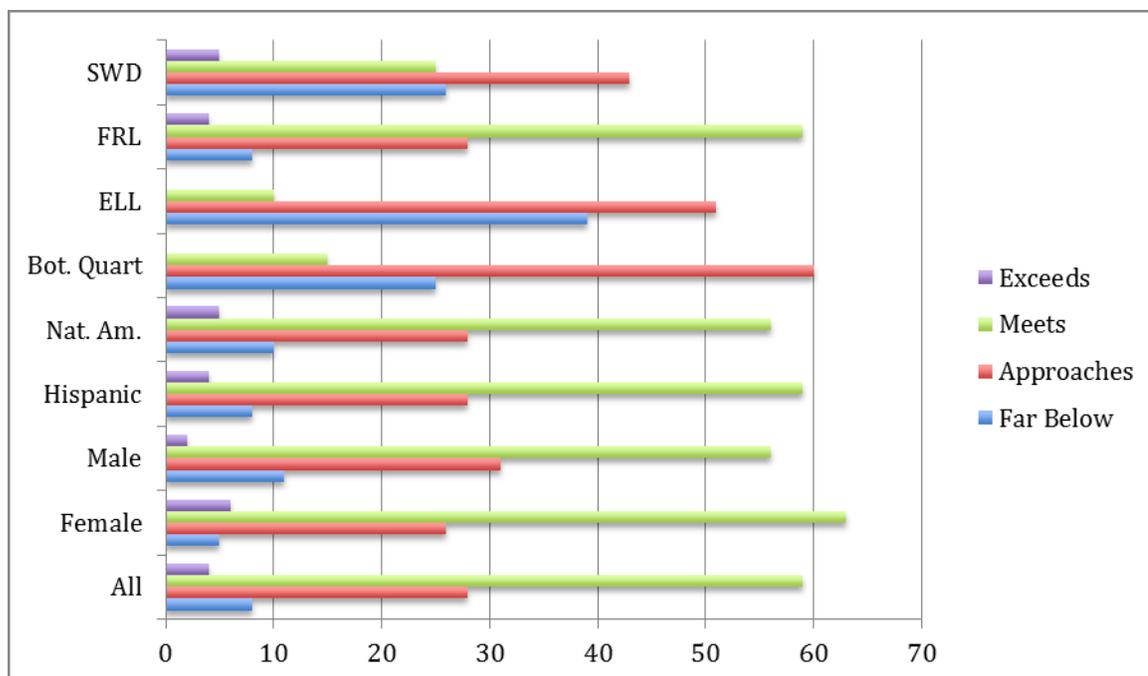


Figure 4: Southwest Middle School 2012 AIMS Reading Results (adapted from AZ Dash)

AIMS result for writing – 2012

The figure 6 (below) depicts the results for Southwest Middle School students' scores for AIMS writing test for 2012 (AZ Dash, 2013). Overall, the students ranked dismally, with only 37% meeting and one percent exceeding standards (AZ Dash, 2013). On the other hand, over 40% of all students tested scored approaching standards. The worst performers were the SWD students, with 62% far below, and only 5% meeting standards. Further, female students' scores (49%) showed nearly double the amount meeting standards when compared to male students (25%). Interestingly, FRL students scored similar to Native American and Hispanic students with 37% and 1% meeting or exceeding expectations, respectively.

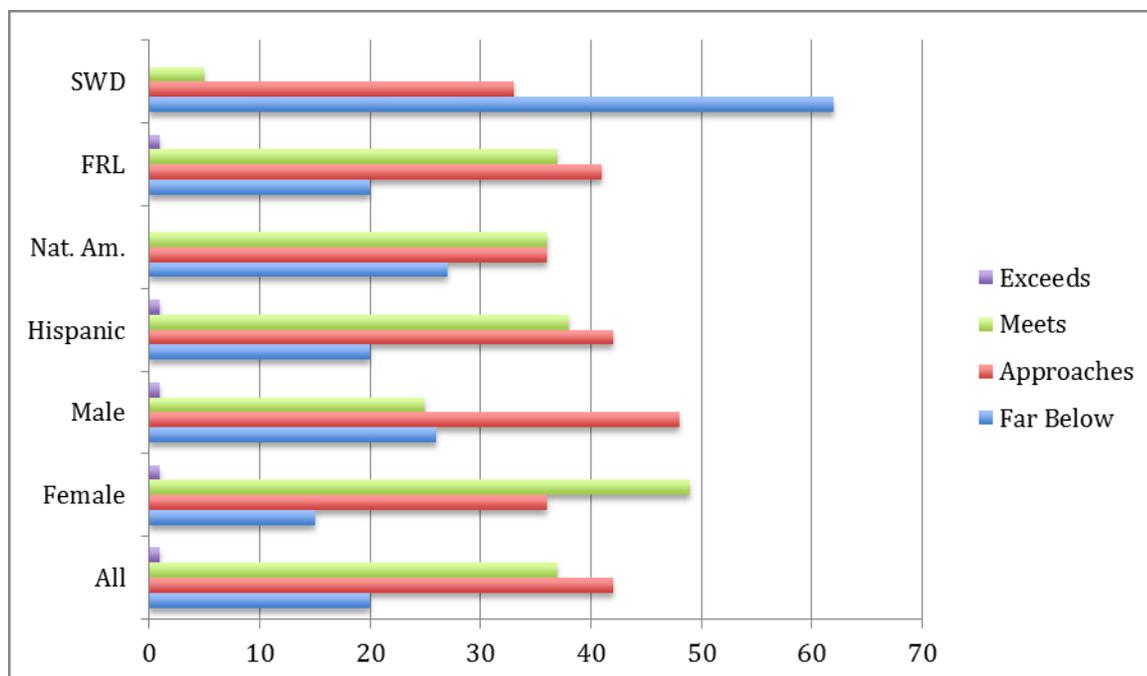


Figure 5: Southwest Middle School's 2012 AIMS Writing Results (adapted from AZ Dash)

Comparison between AIMS 2011 and AIMS 2012

To gain perspective, it is necessary to visualize the differences between subsequent years for schools in restructure. In an effort to determine whether Southwest Middle School's School Improvement Task Force was implementing effective and/or recommended improvements, this section will provide a direct comparison grade by grade and subject by subject for math, reading and writing for years 2011 and 2012. For simplicity of analysis, this researcher has decided to include only the combined scores for each grade level, rather than by ethnicity, disadvantage/SES, etc.

Comparison of AIMS 2012 and AIMS 2011 Scores

Figure 6 (below) was derived from artifacts provided by Southwest Middle School; specifically, the AIMS Multi-Year Summary Results for 08/09/09 – 10/10/11 were compared with results from the AZ Dash website. It was assumed that Mastery included any student that meets or exceeds standards according to AIMS test scores. Therefore, to provide a fair comparison between the 2011 and 2012 years, the "All" scores provided on the AZ Dash website that either meet or exceed standards for

reading, writing, and math were summed and compared to the artifact sheet provided by Southwest Middle School.

Although each subject showed slight improvement, the increased scores fell far short of the projected ten percent. Specifically, between 2011 and 2012, the most significant increased score, with an 8% increase (from 29% to 37%) was seen in math. Math was followed by an increase in writing scores of 4.7% (33.3% to 38%). Finally, reading remained virtually unchanged with a 0.5% increase (from 62.5% to 63%).

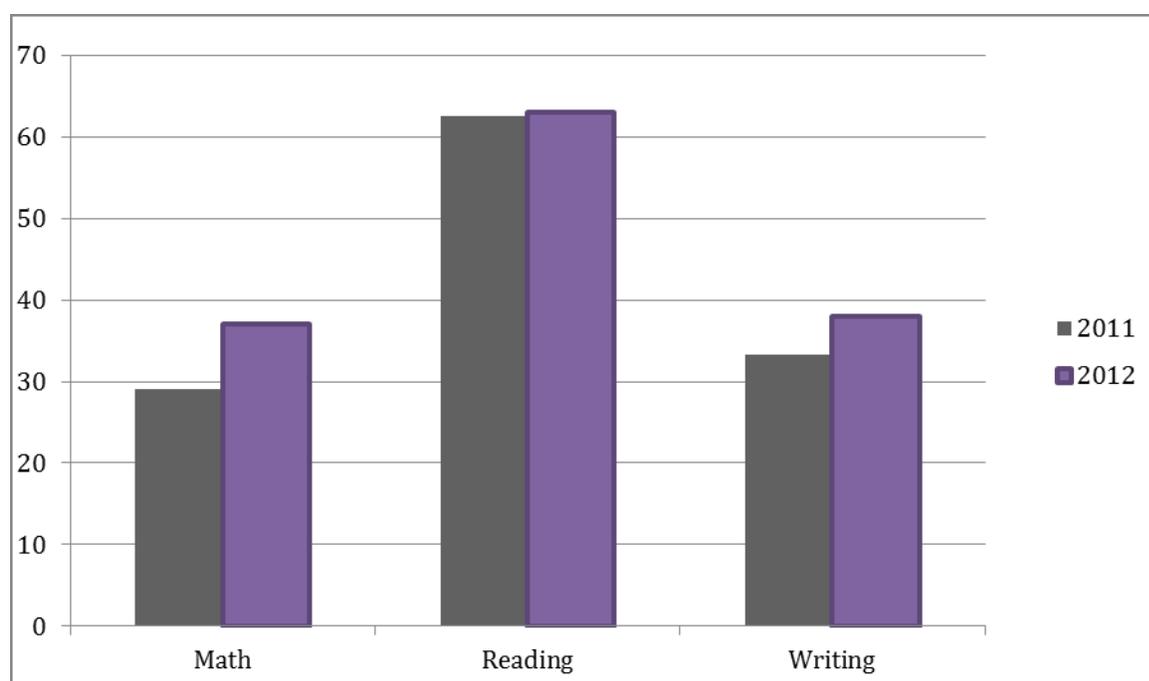


Figure 6: Comparison of Overall AIMS Scores 2011 – 2012 (adapted from AIMS Multi Year Summary Results provided by Southwest Middle School & AZ Dash)

Southwest Middle School AIMS Multi-Year Summary Report

As further comparison to AZ Dash's summaries, the final summaries are being provided by Southwest Middle School within the artifacts for this study. Figure 8 (below) paints a confusing image. Specifically, both reading and math scores declined significantly between 2009 and 2010. Math declined nearly 20% between 2009 and 2010 and gains approximately half of its current loss with 40.4%, 22.5%,

and 29% for the years 2009, 2010, and 2011 respectively. Further, overall writing scores declined throughout all 3 years for a total decline of 45.1%. Specifically, declines for years 2010 and 2011 were 14.3% and 31% respectively. On the other hand, writing skills showed continuous improvement between 2009 and 2011. Specifically, between 2009 and 2010 a 7% increase was noted (from 44.5% to 51.5%) meeting standards, and an 11% increase (from 51.5% to 62.5%) between 2010 and 2011. It must be noted that 8th grade assessments were not included in the artifact provided from Southwest Middle School.

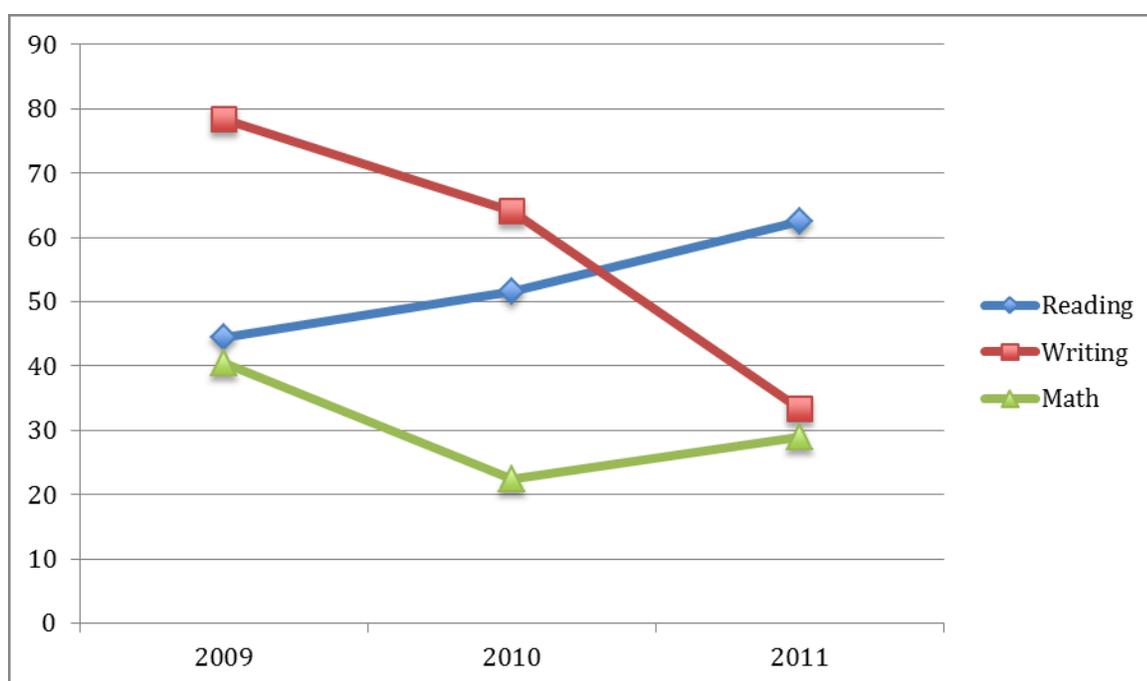


Figure 7: AIMS Multi-Year Summary Results (adapted from artifacts supplied by Southwest Middle School)

Southwest Middle School Improvement Plans 2008 – 2013

This researcher aggressively sought school improvement meeting notes, all School Improvement Plans, strategic school improvement plans and recommendations derived from Solution Team visits. Unfortunately, the only verifiable information available was the 2007 - 2013 School Improvement Plans and a copy of the Statement of Findings 2007-2008. Please note, School Improvement Plans are

supposed to be revisited by following the Solution Team visit recommendations (this did not happen here).

Most of the Solution Team visit notes, observations and recommendations were not made available for this study, as the Arizona Department of Education mandates that upon completion of the school visit the notes be immediately mailed to them and they are shredded upon arrival to the Department. Therefore, it is impossible to compare the Solutions Team School Improvement Plan notes with the Solution Team recommendations.

As stated, the only Statement of Findings provided that Southwest Unified School District could relocate since the schools closure was for years 2007-2008. The researcher found that document quite puzzling as it stated that many of the Standards and Rubrics mandated by the Arizona Department of Education appeared to be satisfactory. The final Arizona School Improvement Plan refinements and results from Solutions Teams findings were: Southwest Middle School must prioritize the instructional strategies listed in the Arizona School Improvement Plans, also, it must provide targeted professional development aligned to the prioritized strategies that would allow for mastery and differentiate professional development based on student needs.

School Improvement Plans School Years 2007-08 and 2008-2013

Item 1 on Southwest Middle School's NCLB Requirements questions the following; how does your mentoring program support new or less experienced teachers? The Instructional Coach and Arizona Master Teacher Mentor identify new and less experienced teachers for additional training and support. New teachers are trained in classroom management strategies, school procedures and expectations. New teachers are supported by lead teachers in their professional development sessions.

Unfortunately, it appears that the full content of Southwest Middle School's Improvement Plan was not available at the time of this analysis. Other items included within the provided document,

included information related to how Southwest Middle School intended to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals including available before, during and after school tutoring, learning models, and research based evidence supporting teaching methods and learning objectives. As stated earlier, with a large amount of information missing and no data to uphold the claims of completion and/or implementation of particular items, it is difficult to assess or analyze the document. Included in the 2008-2009 Arizona School Improvement Plan, Southwest Middle School once again outlines its teacher mentoring program as follows:

How does your mentoring program support new or less experienced teachers?

- Teachers in their first 3 years are assigned a New Teacher Mentor.
- Experienced teachers are mentoring teachers new to their content area or to the school.
- The School Improvement Coach works with new teachers on an ongoing basis.
- Teachers are assigned a teacher buddy.
- There were frequent Administrative Team walkthroughs.
- Teacher handbook is provided for all teachers.
- Professional development takes place once a week.

Within the 2008-2009 Improvement Plan Southwest Middle School directly addressed the weaknesses with parent involvement:

- Parents are not involved directly in the classroom.
- There is outdated contact information on district databank to address problems and create a system to solicit and input current information in school databank.
- Professional development for office in providing service to all stakeholders.
- Provide training to parents on how to be engaged with school.

The document further indicated that the school did offer Saturday sessions for AIMS tutoring, and that it was not funded for summer school sessions to help improve student outcomes, but planned on forthcoming resolutions to this matter. Further, the plan called for providing students a number of additional academic services including state tutoring, Title I SES Tutoring, 21st Century After-School Tutoring, 8th Grade Bridge Program and summer school.

The Statewide Reform Model chosen by the School Improvement Team for Southwest Middle School was the Pyramid of Interventions. Additionally, teachers used the Structured Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model for English Language Learners. Expanding the academic day to seven periods, Southwest Middle School hoped to “strengthen instruction in the core academic subjects.” The additional period provides teachers the opportunity to meet daily with grade level ITOs or departments. Although this document indicated that “agenda, minutes, and goals are kept in team binder for review,” this researcher was unable to locate such binders. Finally, Southwest Middle School added Honors and classes granting high school credit in math and Spanish that transfers to Pima Community College.

School Improvement Plan School Year 2009-2010

According to Southwest Middle School Improvement Plan for School Year 2009-2010:

Teachers have consistently reported their concerns about effective professional development. District mandated professional development activities only occasionally meet the specific needs of our campus. Moreover, the report stated,

“Culture and climate survey results also show concerns about school discipline and safety.” Although reading and math showed improvement for the last 2 years, these were the subjects noted as in greatest need of improvement for the school’s 6th graders.

The priorities addressed for the 2009-2010 school year included the following:

1. Best Practice Instructional strategies are not used consistently.
 - Strategies may be introduced but not fully implemented.
 - Some evidence of differentiated instruction must be identifiable.
 - Instruction does not adequately meet the individual learning needs of all students.
2. Southwest Unified School District adopted new math curriculum and the Arizona Department of Education has adopted new math standards. Math department is developing new Performance Objective checklist. They are also developing new formative and summative assessments.
3. Southwest Middle School has established Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS) as our comprehensive intervention program.
 - Students are not equipped with personal social skills and conflict management which interferes with learning.
4. Technology is not effectively used due to lack of technological support and updated equipment.
 - Current equipment is not maintained due to lack of budget.

As in prior years, the 2009-2010 School Improvement Plan calls for an in-place teacher mentoring program. Further, in an effort to reduce disorderly conduct among its students, Southwest Middle School chose to implement the following:

A Safe and Orderly Environment

- a) Southwest feeder pattern articulation
- b) Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS)
- c) Quarterly Assemblies
- d) Intervention classes on drugs and alcohol abuse and violence (6th grade)

- e) Consistently implemented School Wide Discipline Plan
- f) Capturing Kids Hearts
- g) In-house Alternative to instruction program.

Lastly, after years of promise, the summer school program was implemented during the 2009-2010 school year to address additional instruction needs for Southwest Middle School students.

School Improvement Plan 2010-2011 and 2011-2012

The School Improvement Plan provided by Southwest Middle School for the 2011-12 school years outlines specific Action Plans and Strategies designed to meet the primary goal to Improve Student Achievement. Although most of the strategies were deemed implemented in earlier years, the artifacts indicated that several strategies were to be newly implemented for the stated school years. Additionally, existing programs were extended and more fully described in the current year's School Improvement Plan as compared to prior years' plans. For example, the current School Improvement Plan indicated that;

...every teacher supporting five students through case studies in reading and math, support 10 students through Tucson Public Library Tutoring Services. Monitor Student Progress through Native American Studies once a week.

Further, the school week was altered to include 4-core days and 1-day collaboration as well as, hiring a math interventionist. Additionally, the process of differentiated instruction was also clarified with the current School Improvement Plan Specifically:

At Southwest Middle School Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) will be established to analyze data (4 day core 1 collaboration day), plan instruction, increase effective instructional practices, identify and monitor students in need of interventions (through the support of a School Improvement Coach and a Math

Intervention Specialist).

Still, another area that was indicated in prior years was classroom walkthroughs and teacher mentoring. Interestingly, the current School Improvement Plan indicated both programs were to be implemented in School Year 2010-2011:

- Institutionalized systematic walkthroughs and peer observations school wide and district wide, in which leadership identifies evidence of effective delivery of instruction as well as, areas for improvement.
- Immediate feedback is provided to teachers in the form of in and out coaching.
- Identified teachers are directed to work with School Improvement Coach and to
- analyze student work during PLCs to determine how effectively the objective was learned by students and appropriate steps to following re-teaching.

Similarly, although teacher mentoring was indicated as provided since 2007, the current School Improvement Plan stated, “All teachers with three or less years of experience are provided a District Mentor Program. Additionally, the leadership team conducts weekly observations with feedback to support teacher growth.”

Finally, Southwest Middle School implemented a data driven decision making model. The chosen data model provided job-embedded time to “analyze data and plan for instruction, Southwest Middle School must establish a week of 4 Core Days and 1 Collaboration Day. The School Improvement Coach is needed to ensure this process.” Using “weekly pre and post assessments, Quarterly Math Formative Assessments and teacher observations,” the newly implemented data driven instruction will help teachers determine students in need of re-teaching and extended learning time.

Southwest Middle School’s “Coordinated and Comprehensive Services” for the school

years 2011-2012 were designed to improve parent engagement, decrease student dropout rates, and ease students' transitions into and out of Southwest Middle School. Of particular interest was the Dropout Prevention program. In addition to continuing the services of a Dropout Prevention Specialist (current teacher assigned additional duties), Native American Studies Liaison (existing employee), and a Learning Support Coordinator (current teacher), and School Psychologist were to be hired by Southwest Middle School to "provide teachers and students with support in the areas of need e.g. behavioral health, case management, facilitating group interventions, overseeing behavioral contracts and/or other plans.

Also, there were discussions about a promise to increase family and community engagement, Southwest Middle School proposed the following: Schedule Monthly Curriculum Nights, Biweekly ESL Classes for Parents. Thursdays Family and Community Day with Admin, Literacy Night in partnership with Pima Community College, University of Arizona, Pueblo High School. They also planned to establish a Saterline Community Support Center and health services in partnership with La Frontera (a local mental and behavioral health clinic). Conduct weekly Coffee/Cafecito Talks with parents and provide parenting, coaching and study strategies to support their children.

After careful review of the school improvement plans available this researcher made many unsuccessful attempts to interview the Arizona Department of Education School Improvement Director to confirm that the above mentioned plans were in fact reviewed by the Arizona Department of Education School Improvement personnel. Also, the researcher made various attempts to interview former Solution Team Leaders and members, but to no avail, emails and phone calls were never returned.

Findings from Interviews

The primary themes identified from interviews with school personnel involved in the School Improvement effort are discussed separately, and include sub-themes where appropriate. After presentation of all themes and sub-themes, the implications of the findings are discussed. The discussion compares the themes through the lens of the theoretical framework that Arizona School Improvement and is based on the concept of School Effectiveness in schools where students are failing and the schools need improvement.

In the 1960s American taxpayers began to question the public school system and discussed issues related to student backgrounds and social influences and how they determined student success, more than just schooling (Madaus, Airasian & Kellaghan, 1980). As stated prior, many Americans arrived at conclusions that indicated that where a student attends school, does have an effect on his/her success. That may have been the case for students at Southwest Middle School.

During the interviews most participants appeared to be comfortable and at ease, until the question on the impact of the school closure was asked. After that this researcher noticed all participants became restless as they struggled to respond. One participant commented at the end of the interview, that he felt like he had “brought this experience to closure now and that it was therapeutic.” Throughout the interviews the researcher listened attentively and remained open-minded and conscious to give no opinions, show no facial expressions, and revealed only calm body language and a positive attitude. In an effort to answer Research Question Number 1, each participant was asked understanding of the actual impact of the Solution Team Visits on Southwest Middle School’s Improvement Plan (See Appendix #1). When the participants were asked to explain how the Solutions Team visits to Southwest Middle School impacted and affected the school improvement process as mandated by Arizona Department of Education, six teachers agreed that if some of the recommendations in the Statement of

Findings would have been followed perhaps, they could have saved their school.

Contrary to that, another teacher felt that some of the recommendations from the Solutions Team were implemented, and in 2012 and 2013 some of the successes at Southwest Middle School were due to the implementation of some recommendations e.g. guiding data driven instruction and the use of data notebooks by students.

Throughout the course of the interviews, a prevalence of disengagement was observed in a majority of the participants (78%, n = 9). Teacher #1 taught reading and language arts. She spoke about it being her first year of teaching and her first year at Southwest Middle School. She was distraught about not even knowing how to actually manage her classroom, lesson plan, align curriculum to the common core and State standards, and having to learn about school improvement and all its mandates. She admitted that her lack of interest did not stem from not wanting to learn, she just did not have the time to undertake one more obligation. “Therefore, I just attended the school improvement meetings, but contributed nothing and got nothing from them. I was just completely overwhelmed, felt unprepared and scared. “When the State came to visit us, I avoided being in my classroom and took extended recesses. Hoping the Solutions Team would move on to the class next to me.” She was not sure that the School Improvement Team actually followed the recommendation for improvement but her assumption was that they did not because the State still caused their District to close down their school.

Teachers #2, #3, #4 and #5 all felt quite the same way. Some of them were novice, inexperienced teachers, having to learn the District policies and procedures, classroom management, common core and all the other Arizona Department of Education and school improvement mandates. They admitted that they never knew what the entire school improvement situation was about. No one ever explained it to them and made sure they understood. They were just mandated to attend the meetings and try to be good teachers so their students would pass AIMS.

The teachers all agreed that the School Improvement Administration made an effort to inform them and all the staff of the Solution Team visit in a timely manner. In fact, prior to the visit they were also informed of the date and told of the impact the visit would have. The teachers all spoke of the mandates (many teachers had never heard of them before) they had to have ready for the Solutions Team visit. “We had to have objectives written on the board in student friendly language, current lesson plans aligned to the State standards and common core, and make sure their students were prepared to answer questions about their learning” when asked by the Solutions Team Members “what are you learning as you do these assignments?” After the Solutions Team announced the Statement of Findings and left, the teachers realized that perhaps following it could have saved their school. Maybe they could view it as framework for improvement and have it make some difference now. If they had implemented or decide now to implement the Recommendations they wondered what funding would support the ongoing school improvement Recommendations from the Solutions Team?

A common theme among teacher descriptions was a problem with commitment to the School Improvement Team. Although teachers discussed this topic, there were different reasons as to why some were not engaged in participating in the school’s improvement effort. Sub-themes emerged to explain the overwhelming feelings of the participants’ lack of engagement. The teachers observed a sub-theme from interviews that included new teachers not understanding the basic idea of the Arizona School Improvement Plan and their lack of training about the purpose of the School Improvement Team. Another sub-theme among six teachers was apathy toward the effectiveness of the School Improvement Plan, and the overall perceived potential of the school’s students. A clear problem was evident with the youngest teachers not being familiar with the school improvement jargon, mandates, and guidelines, as they struggled to learn their jobs. One participant noted a lack of mentoring for new teachers, which continually brought the interview’s focus on the shortcomings of the staff and principal. During this time

the researcher redirected the participant back to the interview question. The newest teachers felt desperate to share common core and best practices at Southwest Middle School information with the researcher and also were redirected to the interview questions.

Consequently, there were serious problems with engagement as indicated in the following Figure 8 which shows the common themes that emerged from interviews with teachers. Southwest Middle School was as shown in:

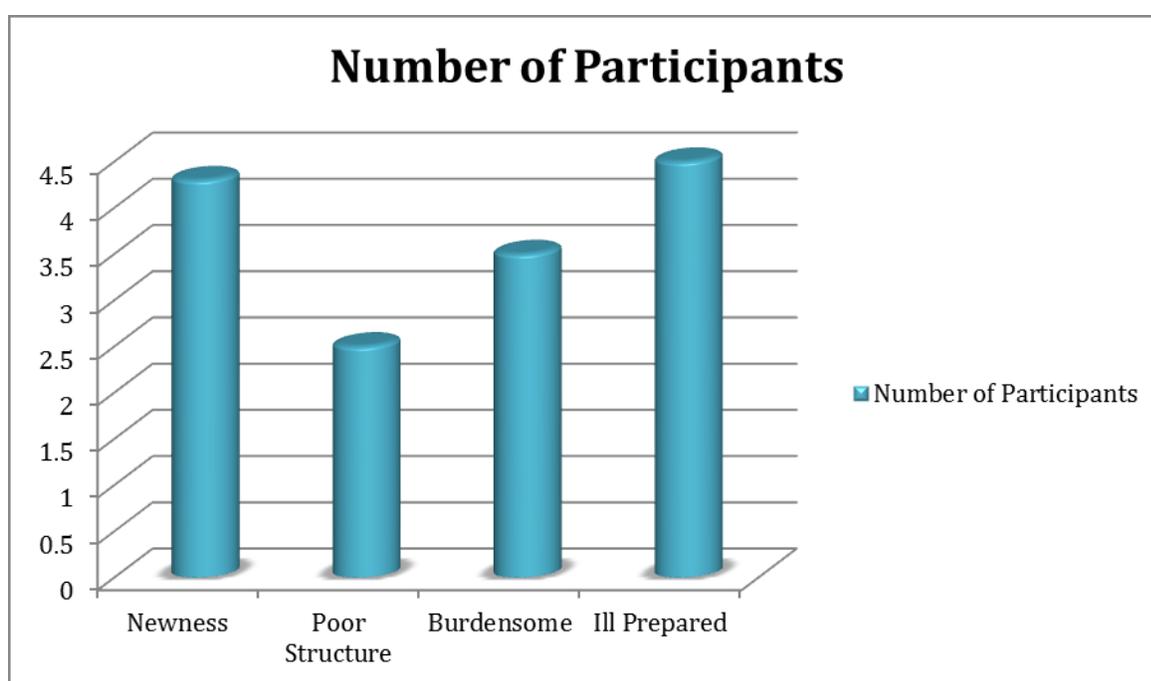


Figure 8: Common Themes From Interviews With Teachers

Additionally, among all teachers there seemed to be a connection between reason for being a School Improvement Team member and engagement. Rather than participating voluntarily 7 of the 9 Team members were mandated to join. The remaining 2 team members “had a vested interest” (male with >9 years at Southwest Middle School and the School Improvement Coach, who actively attempted and did improve the school somewhat). Although the School Improvement Coach claimed she succeeded in improving some core teacher competencies (data use, etc.), Southwest Middle School still

did not meet the required mandates to save the school from closure. Her perception differed markedly from those of the majority of teachers. Only the male teacher with >9 years at Southwest Middle School agreed with the School Improvement Coach. These two presented positive attitudes, and hence, a high level of engagement toward the School Improvement Team.

Specifically, the School Improvement Coach identified an underlying erroneous assumption that Southwest Middle School's students' learning potential was hampered by their socioeconomic backgrounds and coined the term "probrequito syndrome." According to the School Improvement Coach, it took approximately 3 years for her to modify a majority of teachers' belief system regarding the effect socioeconomic status has on a student's potential. Concurrent with changing teachers' belief systems, the School Improvement Coach also implemented various strategies such as data talks, student data charts, and using student data in helping teachers learn to interpret data, learn methods to transfer information to students and use data to drive instruction. She moved teachers from reciprocal teaching to common core in their subjects, as they learned to master their subjects. To that end, she felt "the administration had planned the School Improvement Team meetings carefully, engaged all staff to become viable stakeholder in the school improvement process, and executed mandates well."

Also, she reassured the interviewer that "the administration was aware of the impact the school improvement grade had on their school and its possible fate. "Therefore, their ongoing goal was to follow the Solutions Team findings (Recommendations) as a roadmap for improvement. The only problem with that was that the money wasn't there to do what they wanted us to do. I guess we will have to petition the District for more money."

Contrary to the School Improvement Coach's opinion is Teacher #7 (9+ years), who had a vested interest in Southwest Middle School. He said that to this date, he felt a strong connection to Southwest Middle School, its students, families and the neighborhood, at large. In 1990 he founded the Site

Council and for many years he was the president. He was very successful at engaging families of students that might not have otherwise ever become involved. Through his efforts of empowering students and their families through positive interactions e.g. making sure parents have a clear understanding of the changes the Arizona Department of Education had mandated as to the way their children were being taught, AIMS orientation and an understanding of mandates for graduation. Throughout this time Southwest Middle School had an established Site Council and experienced positive activities, school, and student success. They were funded by Century 21st Grants, A Gear-Up Grants and a large private foundation grant that supported their efforts in engaging and empowering the community. It was not until the last leadership came into effect that the site council began to disengage and loose participation from members that had been there for a while. The new leadership basically gutted it out. The new leader wanted his vision to be backed by his people. “He took the site council over and told the site council that he would not tolerate decent, details and devils. “ That made many site council members reluctant and their leader figured conflict would be counterproductive therefore, he dropped out. He felt his role on the site council was no longer significant.

Teacher #8 and teacher #9 were both hard working and wanting to help Southwest Middle School students be successful with their test scores. They felt that they were at a point in their careers where they had to do as the administration directed. When the research asked one about his participation in the School Improvement Team he responded “I did what it took to get the students to be successful, and seeing as that is the way that student success is measured in this day in age, I must teach them how to pass the test.” Teacher #8 did recall the discussion concerning the visits from the Solution Team that occurred at the School Improvement Team meetings. He felt he was made aware of what the Solutions Team members would be looking for, the impact that the visits could have on the school, and was coached as how to “appease” them. Both of these teachers were present at the presentation of the

Statement of Findings and felt that if the former administration had made an effort to implement the Findings (Recommendations) but, “maybe it was too late. Both of these teachers concurred that if the Statement of Findings (Recommendations) would have been followed in the years past, maybe they would not have ended up having their school close.

The overarching theme from questions that were geared for determining the staffs’ understanding of their purpose as members of the School Improvement Team was that their understanding was generally minimal. Four participants admitted they understood “the basic purpose of the School Improvement Committee/Team because the name implied it.” Furthermore, one participant stated she “only attended the meetings because she was mandated by the Administration to do so.” Unfortunately, this teacher admitted she did not quite understand any guidelines, mandates and could not honestly answer if there were identified goals and objectives at the meetings. Two teachers admitted the reason for their weak participation and/or support of the School Improvement Team was directly related to diminishing grant dollars that should have been allocated for Southwest Middle School’s Improvement Team.

Also, the absence of the grant dollars in turn resulted in “stipends and incentives being dried up.” This also was a contributing factor to keeping the school underperforming. Further, one teacher stated that the Administration’s only concern was continued receipt of grant dollars without a stipulation to pay the Team members’ stipends. Surprisingly it seemed the teachers agreed that “Many times thoughts crossed our minds, assuming that perhaps the administration that was the core of the School Improvement Team had some mode of communication they were utilizing that was not shared with the others on the School Improvement Committee.”

Interestingly, there were a few School Improvement Team members who focused on the successes of the School Improvement Team. For example, the long term male teacher, who served on

both the School Improvement Team and the School Site Council stated that under the purview of four-principals, the seriousness varied from lackadaisical to inspired. He cited many improvements during his time on the School Improvement Team and the Site Council. Specifically, “More parent and community participated in their children’s education. Some students took ownership of their learning and teacher collaboration. However, even with those changes Southwest Middle School lingered in school improvement for at least five-years.”

The School Improvement Coach agreed with this particular long-term male teacher, indicating that the new principal assigned Southwest Middle School in 2011 took actions to inspire the School Improvement Team to take their responsibilities seriously. For example, the name of the team was changed to School Improvement Task Force and meetings were scheduled every two-weeks. She also had the newest principal’s fullest support, as he backed her suggestion to implement changes designed to relieve the workload of the School Improvement Task Force members. Specifically, she received permission to eliminate ambiguity in lesson planning, delivery, and assessments by shifting teachers to teach only those disciplines for which they were certified. Further, as stated prior, she implemented the creation and utilization of data binders to guide students’ studies, and transitioned Site Council meetings to be data driven. Finally, the School Improvement Coach suggested a “Saturday school component that should have focused on strong AIMS teaching strategies that would help students pass AIMS tests.”

Additionally, the School Improvement Team meetings lacked follow-through, organization, or accountability. One teacher stated “the meetings were hastily prepared, if any planning even went into them. It just seemed that at those meetings many other things would be discussed and school improvement was secondary.” The two teachers who noted lacking grant funds stated that the absent incentive (stipends, etc.) resulted in meeting attendance being mandated. Unfortunately, one teacher stated, “I don’t even remember agendas at those meetings.” In fact, neither teacher recalled any goals or

objectives at the School Improvement Team meetings. The remaining male teachers indicated, “we were mandated to attend meetings with no purpose.” Stating at times, at the Team meetings “sometimes it seemed like a gripe session. Students were blamed for not learning.” In fact, one teacher considered the meetings “heated discussions” about “those parents in that area of town being unconcerned about their children’s success.”

It seemed that some teachers felt overwhelmed by the responsibilities associated with the School Improvement Team. Specifically, one teacher said she “had much to do just to keep up with her classroom and she was not interested in other issues at that time.” In fact, this teacher had not made the connection between her teaching and the impact she could have on the school improvement process. Interestingly, she stated that “after the closure I reflected and concluded that maybe I could have made a difference.”

The final interview questions dealt with participants’ perceived personal level of responsibility for and emotional response to the closing of Southwest Middle School. Without fail, every participant displayed overt emotion with regard to the closing of Southwest Middle School. The newest teachers were still acclimating to Southwest Middle School culture, learning the curriculum, understanding the data, participating in grade level meetings, and mastering assessment implementation and collaboration with the Arizona Department of Education. On the other hand, the most senior teachers explained a vested interest in the success of the school. Finally, the School Improvement Coach was most emotional because in the past she had successfully implemented similar systems successfully at another inner city school within the same school district.

Teacher #1 (a first year female teacher) felt lost as she was concerned about her participation in the School Improvement Team which immediately transitioned into a discussion about the lack of mentoring available at Southwest Middle School. She said she was having a hard time learning policy

and procedures, time management, classroom management, lesson planning, curriculum alignment, state standards and common core. She said she was overwhelmed. The researcher politely redirected her back to the interview questions. Needless to say, she continued with complaining about having to learn all about School Improvement over and above all else, she felt she could not do that. She stated that “even when her questions were addressed at the meetings, she still felt lost.”

Teacher #2 explained that although she had taught at another school for 1-year prior to coming to Southwest Middle School, she still was not comfortable participating in the School Improvement Team, but had no other choice. Specifically, the job description within the contract she signed stated “and other duties as assigned.” Therefore, her involvement on the School Improvement Team was considered other duties as assigned. She also discussed the arrival of the current principal in 2011 and his impact on the School Improvement Plan. Specifically, he changed the name of the School Improvement Team to a School Improvement Task Force and mandated meetings every two-weeks on developmental Wednesdays. Although the principal injected new energy into the School Improvement Task Force, beyond introducing the five State Standards on which the School Improvement Task Force would work and address, plus one additional State Standard each subsequent week, not much else changed. For example, the teacher felt that the principal and the School Improvement Coach co-chaired the meetings in a disorganized manner. She said “the principal came unprepared many times he did not pass around an attendance sign-in sheet, agenda, and circulation notices with information.” Of particular note was “seldom were we told of the progress we were making and/or shown data to prove it.” Despite the chaotic attempts to bring about positive change, when Southwest Middle School closed this teacher said she felt depressed and began to blame herself though I knew I just could not do any more. My first obligation was to my classroom and students.” Further, she discussed her personal commitments, “I also have family when I get home that demand a lot of my time. So I just did what I could at the time and it

was not enough.

Teacher #3 admitted to attending only 5 meetings. In spite of the new principal's mandate, she found the system easy to manipulate. She managed to make excuses, telling the principal "I had medical appointments, sick children, transportation issues, etc., that managed to get me excused from several meetings." It was apparent that she never realized that Southwest Middle School was at the point of closure if sufficient improvement was not shown soon. Therefore, despite her apparent apathy, she indicated that she "cared a lot about their school's improvement status." One overwhelming issue, according to her was: "Teachers and staff at this school were very cliquish. You either assimilated into that environment or else you were not included in many discussions and events. The camaraderie was lacking, therefore, there was no community at Southwest Middle School. The culture was questionable. How can the administration make an unreasonable expectation that all the staff get along and serve as an example to students, when not even the leadership was exemplary in this area?"

Teacher #4 (female) had experience with School Improvement at another school, and was extremely excited to be on Southwest Middle School's Improvement Task Force. As one of the few School Improvement Task Force members who attended every meeting and took notes she revealed leadership inconsistencies and stated "I saw the writing on the wall." One of her primary concerns was "not all students received the academic services that they were entitled to such as the mandated supplemental services (SES) tutoring that must occur when a Title I school fails to meet AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress)." Clearly she understood the basic tenets of the School Improvement Program, as she continued by saying "The parents should have been provided with a list of state approved, qualified vendors that provide the needed interventions for their student." She lamented that the parents needed to be constantly "reminded that they had the option of choice." Referring to a parents' choice to move their children from an under-performing school to one that is meeting AYP and performing at no cost to the

parent. Also, she stated repeatedly that “shared/reminded the leadership that they were in the last year of corrective action...but no one seemed to hear me or know what I meant.” Although she felt no responsibility for the closing of Southwest Middle School she was saddened because of the “long term effects on all those involved.”

Teachers #5, 6, 7, 8, are males and each with varying degrees of experience. Specifically, Teacher #5 and Teacher #6 had 3 years of experience working at Southwest Middle School. Teacher #7 and Teacher #8 had 5 and 9 years respectively. Teacher #6 stated “there was a huge problem with attendance and late issues at Southwest Middle School.” Further, “classroom management issues and students just seemed not committed to learning” combined with a low overall morale created an environment that had “the energy that had almost totally diminished.” There seemed to be confusion with “one administrator saying and enforcing one thing and another doing the contrary,” Teacher #6 said “I didn’t know what/who’s order’s to follow?” This teacher felt Southwest Middle School had to achieve its vision to create a “Dual Language Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math focus school for its students. Southwest Middle School Leadership stated that this goal entailed funding and infrastructure support from the District. The school will need to tap into Desegregation Funds to staff a teacher to integrate the Engineering component. Additionally, Desegregation Funds will provide professional development in how to integrate multi-disciplinary project based assignments, develop Dual Language Units, provide transportation to students living outside the area, and acquire the equipment and materials needed.

Findings from Field Notes and Reflective Journal

The researcher’s field notes consisted of details such as the general attitude/mood the participants had toward the school improvement process, the degree and impact their role in the school improvement team had on them, and their attitude toward one another as they had to work on the school improvement

team together. Other details included the attitude, mood and interactions the participants shown toward the researcher during the interview and upon their exit from the interview. The researcher found herself jotting note-worthy activities e.g. the participant's body language, voice tones and facial expressions. Most days on the way home she would reflect on the school closing and would wonder what will happen to the neighborhood and the kids now that the school was closed? From these observations she developed key words that served as reminders of what she witnessed and heard during the interviews that day and reflected on them at the end of that day.

One of the researcher's fieldwork goals was to be open-minded about her case study, the participants and the components that impacted it. Another fieldwork goal was to include the environment and to document as many observations as she could in the short period of time, because they could influence the participant responses and ultimately, impact the study. The field notes allowed her to describe her personal feelings about conducting research on school closings. This aspect of the case study also provided her the opportunity to reflect on how the past 11 years of working in school improvement affected her attitude toward the complete failure of schools, hopefully helping to eliminate bias in the case study's results. The researcher used participant pseudo names while conducting both her field experiences and reflections, as she developed key words used in her reflection and journal such as:

- Impression-which reflected the researcher's position as a school improvement expert in the Arizona system; was used to separate the researcher's biases,
- Impact-explained how important that activity was,
- Purposeful-to realize that what had a purpose to one participant may have not been the case with all of them,
- Interactions-the actual sharing of conversations with from one participant to another,
- Inner Conversation- the researcher's voice as she reflected on what she was observing and the

impact it had on her research.

Also, clues helped the researcher fully explain the varied situations during the analysis of the field notes by listing them and defining their meaning as it was related to the situation. The addition of the reflective journal and field notes added rigor to the qualitative inquiry as the researcher was able to record experiences, assumptions, reactions, expectations and biases.

Lastly, another finding from field notes on the context prior to closing concerned the last principal that was at Southwest Middle School for the last two years prior to the school closing. From the researcher's personal experience, the principal had approached the school improvement mandate with vigor, a positive attitude, experience and energy. Unfortunately, it was too late to help a school that was failing profoundly three years prior to his assignment there.

Findings Across Data Sources

Data collected for this particular case study can prove helpful in determining methods for avoiding similar school failures in the future. The next section will address the analysis of the previously discussed findings from documents, artifacts, interviews, and field notes as they enhanced the understanding of this case study's overarching questions presented in Chapter 1.

Question 1: Explain how the Solutions Team visits to Southwest Middle School made an impact and affected the school improvement process as mandated by Arizona Department of Education?

As previously discussed, this researcher found that all the participants that were interviewed were concerned, impacted and anxious about the Solutions Team visits. The general consensus of nine was that they were not prepared to participate in the school improvement team activities in their entirety, nor did many of them have an interest or time to participate. Many were new to teaching. Others had family obligations that did not permit them to stay long after their contract time was up. Some were just plain

tired after a full day of teaching. The School Improvement Coach (is also a teacher) was the exception. She was always glad to participate in all school improvement activities. She had prior experience in this field and had experienced good success and that ultimately, that was her job.

Throughout the five years that Southwest Middle School was in school improvement there were not any Statement of Findings and only one School Improvement Plan in the archives (that was hastily prepared) in 2007-2008.

Question 2: Was there evidence that Southwest Middle School Improvement Team followed their School Improvement Plans through the mandated years as a framework for improvement?

The Statement of Findings developed by the Arizona Department of Education as described in A. R. S. 15-241 (P) was a result from the Solutions Team visit and required Southwest Middle School to do certain things such as:

- review achievement data,
- conduct interviews with the teachers, school support staff, administration, students and parents,
- conduct focus groups involving the entire school community and the community at large, and
- conduct classroom observations.

There were three guiding questions that the interviews attempted to answer:

1. Does the School Improvement Plan prove to be a sound plan for improving student performance?
2. Did the structures and conditions of Southwest Middle School appear to be in place for the successful implementation of the School Improvement Plan?
3. Were there recommendations that the Solutions Team provided that helped Southwest Middle School with implementing its School Improvement Plan?

The answers to the above questions appear to be no. Since there was no documented plan it is difficult to tell if it was sound. Other than the School Improvement Coach's description of activities she did with teachers there was no evidence that there were structures and conditions conducive to implementing the required School Improvement Plan. In fact, even teachers on the School Improvement Team didn't seem to know what was required. Apparently, the recommendations provided by the Solutions Team did not help the Southwest teachers or Coach in implementing the School Improvement Plan.

An ultimate question, was there evidence that Southwest Middle School Improvement Teams followed the Statement of Findings and School Improvement Plans through the mandated years as a framework for improvement? Eight of the participants reached a general consensus that the Solutions Team Statement of Findings was probably not followed because if they would have been followed, perhaps Southwest Middle School would not be closed today. The School Improvement Coach answered in the affirmative. She was directly involved in the School Improvement Team, planning, execution of strategies and most of the compliance issues therefore, she felt it was followed and that they were not given ample time to continue to see the improvements that she was very much a part of (even though they were given the federally mandated five years to improve).

From the one School Improvement Plan in the archived documents dated 2007-2008 there were discussions documented that focused on an increase in all student academic performance through extended learning time and carefully planned interventions that were frequently monitored. This data were to serve as a vehicle for student success and teacher accountability. Additionally, from the interviews and ongoing review of the documents given to this researcher by the District, field notes and journal, there was not sufficient evidence uncovered that indicted that the School Improvement Plans were followed through the mandated years as a framework for improvement.

Question 3: How did Southwest Middle School acquire the resources to implement the School Improvement Plan?

Resources were acquired from 2008-2013 from funding provided by the US Department of Education School Improvement Fund. Southwest Middle School was the recipient of a School Improvement Grant (SIG) from 2008-2013 that was specifically designated for school improvement activities. These grants were to be awarded to the persistently lowest-achieving schools of which Southwest Middle School was considered one. The School Improvement Grants awarded yearly to Southwest Middle School were designed to help some of the lowest-achieving schools in the country provide a better education for students who need it the most. School Improvement Grants were awarded to State Educational Agencies (SEAs) that then made competitive sub-grants awards to school districts that demonstrate the greatest need for the funds, and the strongest commitment to provide adequate resources to substantially raise student achievement in their lowest-performing schools. Under the Obama Administration, the SIG program has invested up to \$2 million per school at more than 1,500 of the country's lowest-performing schools.

Unfortunately, it was not until 2012 that Arizona Department of Education enforced an accountability mandate for all schools receiving SIG Grants. Findings show that many schools receiving SIG grants are improving, and some of the greatest gains have been made in small town and rural schools. Presently, (April, 2014) Arizona was the recipient of \$10,816,584 for the lowest performing schools.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion and Conclusions

In this case study, the researcher sought to understand what happened in the case of one middle school's improvement effort that resulted in school closure rather than improvement. The middle school had been failing for years as measured by student test scores and so was required to go through Arizona's school improvement process which was the Arizona State Department's plan as required by NCLB. This case study showed that the process put into place by the Arizona State Department of Education as mandated by NCLB was technically followed. That is, when the school did not make satisfactory progress, the State sent a Solutions Team to visit the middle school to assess needs and make recommendations for improvement. The Solutions Team did, in fact, issue a Statement of Findings with specific and detailed recommendations and presented it to the School Improvement Team. However, data collected in this case study showed that there was disconnect between the written plans issued by the State's Solution Team and the school site personnel's implementation of the plans. Further, the researcher found no evidence that there was follow-up by the State to see that the recommendations were implemented or to monitor progress in improved teaching and academic achievement at the school. The continued lack of improvement finally resulted in closing the school after five years of being in the Arizona School Improvement process.

It appeared that the State process of school visitations and issuing documents was followed as per the State's plan but in the aftermath of visitations and writing detailed recommendations, the follow-up in the school itself failed. The findings/suggestions for revision were not communicated to those who had to implement the changes in the school – the teachers. Almost all of the participants interviewed in the study were unaware of what the Solutions Team's recommendations were. Only one, the School Improvement Coach, could articulate the required changes/suggestions and thought that the

school was engaged in school improvement activities. The others who were interviewed could not say what the State's Solutions Team recommended or required. The School Improvement Coach indicated that she made great efforts and investments in the teachers at Southwest Middle School during the many years she worked there. She had experienced "great success" as a School Improvement Coach at another inner city middle school that she helped turn around and she blamed the teachers at Southwest Middle School for what she perceived as indifference and lack of effort. She believed that teachers were convinced that students could not perform academically at grade level because of the student's low socio-economic status. Even so, she felt she was successful with the teacher trainings at Southwest Middle School in that she taught teachers how to interpret data and deliver data driven instruction at well planned Professional Learning Community meetings (PLCs).

She also believed she had taught teachers instructional mapping, pacing guides and how to use and train students to utilize personal data notebooks. Also, she thought she had taught the teachers the use of solid formative and summative assessments. In fact, just prior to the closure of Southwest Middle School she was feeling that the teachers had definitely bought in to the concept of data driven instruction and were experiencing success. Needless to say however, Southwest Middle School was still not making improvements at the rate the Arizona Department of Education mandated. If the teachers were learning what the School Improvement Coach was trying to teach, it was too late in coming and as the school moved into its fifth year of underperforming, the District voted to close the school in 2013, thus avoiding a takeover by the Arizona Department of Education. The results of this study indicated that a majority of the teachers who served on the school improvement teams during Southwest Middle School improvement years were not as involved as was necessary in order to make a significant difference in the school improvement process outcome for Southwest Middle School. Seven of the teachers on the school improvement committee were new to the school that year and felt they were over extended when

mandated to serve on the committee. Therefore, they were disengaged in the school improvement process. Others had family obligations that limited their quality of time invested and still others had no interest due to their initial teaching commitments. However, there were a few that were very committed e.g. the School Improvement Coach, and the veteran teacher with nine plus years vested at the school. In spite of the fact that much of the written recommendations from the Solutions Team throughout the years called for “teacher mentoring”, teachers did not describe extensive staff development and training. They did not understand how they were expected to improve student achievement and were not committed to implementing changes the Solutions Team had written. Since there was little documentation on the follow-up to the Solutions Team recommendations, it’s difficult to know whether the extensive “recommendations for staff development and teacher mentoring actually took place or if it was all on paper. The teachers themselves did not describe effective training relative to the State’s mandates. They only described many meetings called by administrators and their worries about accountability and implementing common core standards.

Through the interviews teachers made it clear they were not prepared to effectively participate in the School Improvement Team or in the school improvement process. They knew the school was listed as “failing” but because of their lack of knowledge re: details of Findings from the Solutions Team, they did not perceive themselves as the implementers of the Team’s recommendations. The Federal mandate does not dictate to teachers how they are to teach/prepare students to compete at a global level. But, they do mandate that each teacher teach their students grade and that they identify the goals included in the state tests (Kymes, 2004). Needless to say, there is consistent controversy with that mandate and in 2006 the U. S. Department of Education mandated that each state hold teachers accountable for their teaching through imposing a Highly Qualified Teacher mandate.

Beyond not knowing exactly how they fit into the school’s mandated improvement process,

teachers did not know if the Statement of Findings was followed by others in the school as a framework for improvement. Also, they were not aware of the resources provided for their school to be used in school improvement. They talked of many meetings called by administrators but did not connect these with their own classroom practice. This lack of congruence on the part of teachers and those who mandate school change is consistent with all the literature on school change, improvement, and reform. The lack of communication and understanding between those mandating and those who have to implement mandates has been identified as a major cause of failure in all research related to school change, reform, school improvement, or whatever the current term in the long history of school improvement efforts (Byrk et al, 2010; Fullan, 1992; Griego-Jones, 1991; Meyers et al, 1994; Natriello et al, 1990).

In terms of resources, financial and otherwise, this school seemingly received resources that should have resulted in improvement. Clearly, Arizona spent money on Solution Teams' visits and time spent writing documents/plan and the State allocated money for staff development but still there was no significant improvement or change in what the teachers did or what the students achieved.

Another important component of NCLB and Arizona's mandated process for school improvement was parental involvement in the entire process. In the Solutions Team recommendations, especially in the latter years of this school's process, integration of parents and community was mentioned and School Improvement Team's also included plans for involving parents. Even so, data from interviews conducted in this study did not include descriptions of activities with parents or staff development activities related to how to work with parents and this school's community. The School Improvement Coach stated she thought teachers made excuses for lack of achievement because of what she called the "pobrecito" syndrome which alluded to the community's low socio-economic status. However, there was no evidence in any archived documents that any activities addressed aspects of the students'

community or home life. There were no records of what was done to help teachers better understand the lives and conditions of the students they were charged with teaching. Neither did teachers describe any staff development activities aimed at understanding the needs of the local neighborhood communities nor any staff development related to working with parents. Only one long term teacher who had been involved with parent governance committees in the past mentioned them in any detail and what he described were activities in past efforts, not the efforts in the last years of the school's existence. The literature review on the requirements of NCLB definitely shows that parent involvement in the school improvement is mandated by NCLB and is supposed to be an integral part of school improvement, especially in lower socio-economic communities like the one in this case study. The Arizona School Improvement Process and legislation also state that parents are to be integrally involved in school improvement and that schools are to formulate recommendations to improve schools. However, in spite of all the rhetoric, there was no evidence that parents or community members were an integral part of this school's improvement process. This aspect appears to be a major omission in the implementation of school improvement at this middle school.

Consequences of School Closure

The school improvement strategy of closing neighborhood schools through test score outcomes, with the possibility of adding to charter school density (Brownstein, 2012), can feed into the creation of possible "portfolio school districts." The concern related to what has been called "the portfolio district strategy" of school improvement is that it does not articulate instructional interventions for low scoring students or strategies to improve or enhance instructional staffing. The test driven accountability that the low performing schools are held to can dictate the students that are admitted to the school, avoiding admitting troubled students and admitting the highly performing students that will help the school reach the performance designation. Students that have high academic and social needs might be labeled as

failures and mandated to participate in intervention classes that focus only on passing the State tests and failing to prepare students to compete at a global level. This study did not follow where the middle school students were sent following the closure of the school, but the issue of a portfolio school district is relevant to the Southwest School District.

For example, in a study conducted of 44 Chicago schools that closed in years 2001-2006 as part of the Chicago Renaissance 2010 initiative by the Consortium of Chicago Schools (de la Torre and Gwynne, 2009) discovered that many of the students that were transferred to other schools in their respective District (after their neighborhood school had closed) had transferred to schools that were also academically weak. The exception was only 6% of the students transferred to schools that were in the top quartile of the District, while 40% of the students transferred to schools that were on academic probation and 42% enrolled in schools with scores in the lowest quartile in the system. That is counterproductive when the premise of school closures is to improve test scores. Therefore, students must be bussed from their neighborhood school that closed because lack of performance, to performing schools within the District.

Yet, another study by SRI International also examined the Renaissance 2010 initiative which indicated it would close 60 -70 Chicago schools, and would create 100 smaller schools by 2010. In this study they used a matching strategy to look at two cohorts of students that came from underperforming schools that already closed and were now attending 23 newly created schools, and discovered that students performed at the same level as matched comparison students (Young, et al., 2009). Other studies in New York City have also shown that students that have been dislocated from underperforming high schools, to smaller high schools, ended up in similar schools to the ones they left. Hemphill et al. (2009) discovered that when 34 large high schools were studied, 26 of them witnessed an increase in enrollment as underperforming schools were being closed. They were faced with a lot of the

same problems that plagued the closed schools e.g., poor attendance, lacking academic performance and low graduation rates. Many of these high schools were on the State rosters for low performance.

And still another study, from the 21st Century School Fund with the Urban Institute and Brookings Institution (2009) studied school enrollment patterns that resulted in 2008-2009 school closures, from the District of Columbia. The findings after school closures resulted in;

- several non-academic factors influenced enrollment factors e.g. lack of basic needs being met, homelessness, economic issues, social instability and health issues.
- Serious issues with transportation and safety barriers, such as new school proximity played an important role in this.
- Also, school consolidation into a single school including all grades,
- and students preferring to transfer to charter schools (performing or not) at a rate of 16.7%.

Could all of this happen to the students of Southwest Middle School? Researchers say that at times, the wrong schools are closed. They reiterate that the important piece of school closures is what happens to students after the closure and how they are affected by it, not what happens to the vacant buildings. Further, the decision to close underperforming schools is many times a result of a singular measure of school performance. Glazerman (2011) suggest that at times, policy makers rely on flawed measures of school performance and disregard the fact that the teachers that work with these challenging students have the interest, skills and sensibility to work successfully with them.

Moreover, Glazerman (2011) says that sometimes these teachers make a sincere investment in these students. In Southwest Middle School, the teachers described their experience with emotion and were deeply affected by the process they had been through. Glazerman also discusses the closing of low performing schools and replacing them with specialty schools. At the time of the case study there was no indication that this was going to happen with Southwest Middle School but that possibility is open. The

specialty schools would draw high performing students from throughout the city and possibly diminish interest from the neighborhood kids not wanting to attend that school, or perhaps the students would risk not being admitted because of space or lack of transportation.

One other question related to the reasons for closing Southwest Middle School is related to the concept of proficiency outlined in NCLB and Arizona's School Improvement process. Is proficiency the single factor in school performance? Should it be? Since proficiency rates dictate student achievement at a single point in time researchers have long discredited that concept as it speaks minimally about how much the teachers and school have contributed to its current students' performance (Glazerman, 2011). Every school closure relies on student academic proficiency at a single point in time. The distortion of focusing on the "bubble" students just below the proficiency cut score, or as in Arizona these students are the FFBs (students that Fall Far Below). As teachers plan teaching interventions for the FFBs, there is a tendency to overlook the APPs (Approaching) students and the MTSs (Meets Standard) students ignoring the fact that if they improve their scores overall and reach the EXs (Exceeds Category), the school's performance grade will rise and the school can be saved from falling into school improvement. Glazerman also suggests that instead of schools using proficiency rates as indicators, they should adopt student achievement growth measures as their performance indicators.

Di Carlo, (2011a) states that using a trend in school proficiency rates does not help and gives one a false sense of gains (Di carlo,2011b). Proficiency trends are affected by demographic change and other differences between students that are successfully engaging in school more so than the performance of the school's teachers. Proficiency trends compare students in one year to different students instead of students in one year to the same students in the prior year e.g. a school can have declining proficiency rates if the feeder school promotes only the at-risk students (Glazerman, 2011).

Many researchers have attempted to introduce several ways to systematically identify successful

school turn-around models (Hansen, 2012; Meyers et al., 2012), even without the existence of an agreed upon amount of growth that is required, and the amount of time it should take place in, this concept remains difficult. Studies of successful turnaround models appear to be based on anecdotal evidence and ignore examples in which turnaround efforts are associated with a decrease in test scores (Trujillo and Renee, 2012). The research says that we cannot simply shut down schools in poor neighborhoods and blame the administration and teachers for the failure, and expect the students to then transfer to performing schools, and pass the test and perform at grade level. That is an unreasonable expectation. The research also points to the fact that a more likely result is that school closure imitates an inevitably continuous pattern of academically harmful displacement from school to school to school for already disadvantaged children.”

School closures (especially in a barrio like the location of Southwest Middle School) raise concerns about the negative impact on student achievement, administration, teachers, families and the neighborhood at large. To date, there is a lack of research in this rather new topic of school closures utilized as a school improvement strategy (Sunderman and Payne, 2009). Kirshner et al, (2009) in an article discusses that students who have had to transfer and be bussed to other schools within their District experienced a difference in the academic norms, routines, guidelines and expectations in the new school. That in itself can create adverse learning effects for them. In a comprehensive, long term study in Maryland researchers concluded that even when students remained in the same school building, with a new teaching staff (the turnaround model called reconstitution or reconstruction) they still had negative effects on their social mobility, school climate, and was not necessarily enhancing student performance (Malen, Croninger, Muncy, Redmond-Jones, (2002). The student experience remains the same with students moving to high performing schools experiencing a decline in achievement.

After closing Southwest Middle School and busing the neighborhood kids to schools throughout

the District in 2014, the Arizona Daily Star Newspaper announced that Southwest Unified School District had agreed to reopen Southwest Middle School in August 2014 as a charter school. This was a great concern to the researcher as she had just reviewed the minimal research that has been done in the area of transiting/restarting closed schools into charter schools. That research shows that charter schools are no more effective than the regular public schools when utilized in this way. Moreover, the school turnaround research-Education Writers Association (Brownstein, 2011) indicated that to date, none of the charter school research has addressed the charter effect on low performing schools that undergo turnaround efforts. This is true even in the case where a charter school moves in to occupy the closed neighborhood school's building in an indirect effort to turn it around as it reopens as a charter school. This strategy is generally not very successful. The U.S. Department of Education Institute for Education Science's Turning-Around Low Performing Schools Project analyzed three years' worth of test scores and studied sustained turnarounds (Sparks, 2012). They concluded that out of 715 low performing schools only 15% of their students were able to sustain an increase in the number of proficient students by at least 5 percentile points in math.

Teachers must be held accountable for the implementation of instruction, assessments, the results and their reporting. They must be trained in meeting frequently as teaching teams and discuss the data that must guide their instruction. This effort must occur with fidelity. As the teachers become more comfortable with the data, they can then share it with each student and have them develop their personal data notebooks that will give them a clear idea as to which concepts they need to focus on in order to pass AIMS. Though it is up to teachers as to how they creatively teach in order to meet the grade level common core and Arizona State Standards alignment, students still have to pass the Arizona proficiency tests.

The school administration must also be held accountable in building capacity for all teachers.

They must continue to revisit and implement systemic school reform that is overseen by the entire school as they believe in it profoundly and practice it with fidelity. They must constantly inform the parents and community at large about the ongoing school improvement process, its changes, mandates, modification, results as they seek their continued support. Lastly, the school administration must consistently lead their school improvement team and students in overall school improvement.

Even though Southwest Middle School was given five years to turn around, year after year the School Improvement Team wrote and rewrote their school improvement plans, and were visited by different Solutions Teams, and each time they were left with a Statement of Findings to be used as a framework for improvement, and still nothing saved the school. After intensely reviewing the only archives the District could retrieve for me on the Statement of Findings, the conclusion was that they were not used in the way they were intended to be used - "as a framework for improvement."

Moreover, every year the school was in improvement it was allotted sufficient funding through federal school improvement grants to make the improvements and get the school to a performing status and it still failed profoundly. Southwest Middle School's school improvement history and that of schools like Southwest Middle School continue to be one of concern to educators and the general public. Questions arose in this study about the accountability of hundreds of thousands of dollars generated by the Arizona Department of Education for Southwest Middle School Improvement funding. There was no evidence of accountability in this area in the archives provided by the District.

Implications for Further Research

Individuals working in the area of school improvement must realize that all its components are interrelated and interdependent. How State level administrators work with school level personnel is key to effective implementation and integration of any improvement efforts. Research could identify how communication across the levels can be more effective. It seems that policy makers mandate actions

and there is a great deal of activity in writing documents and plans. Yet, these documents need to be translated into classroom practice. Teachers in particular need to understand and embrace the plans. Besides teachers, one of the most essential parts of school improvement is the principal who acts on and is acted upon by the context of the school. He/she must learn to understand and work with all the components of the school context if he/she is going to be successful in the school improvement process. Interestingly, the principal was not mentioned much by participants in Southwest Middle School except in one context. A few teachers mentioned that the principal had changed during the years in school improvement and the researcher did know about this change of leadership at the school within the 5 year period from her own experience in the district. Principal leadership is key to effective implementation of anything in schools and this change could have affected the implementation of this school's recommendations from the Solutions Team.

The surrounding community is also critical to involve in school improvement efforts. Historically, the school context has been a challenge to identify and fit into the context of the school within which implementation is attempted. School context is composed of the following:

- Student background,
- Student social background,
- Student body diversity,
- Student's family background and
- Resource equity that affect students.

Also, developing a sense of community support is essential in school improvement. As the principal solicits school improvement team members he/she must select individuals that are willing to take a step further and become stakeholders in the school improvement process. These individuals have to believe in the school mission, the school improvement mandates and compliances, as they take

ownership of the school improvement process. This alone makes the school culture envelope the school improvement process, and exerts a powerful and pervasive influence in the school. Old beliefs that tend to exist must diminish for example, having teachers and administrators view each other as adversaries, beliefs that parents are not interested in their children's education and internal beliefs we have of children's innate abilities. A shared vision that involves the administration, teachers, all staff, students and parents is imperative to a school in improvement. If a school has isolated groups trying to make school improvement successful as they work autonomously, it will not work. Improvement is a group effort that is guided by the school's mission, needs assessment and in Arizona's context, the School Improvement Team's recommendations. Ownership must be a foundation for successful school improvement. The school administration must acknowledge that the change will produce anxiety among all school improvement participants. Finally, State and school level administration must acknowledge that teachers in the classroom are the essential component in the school improvement process and must provide meaningful staff development that supports them in improving instruction in classrooms. Teachers on the other hand must recognize and accept their key role in school improvement and confirm the trust and belief others have in them.

Students did not seem to be mentioned much in this study except as they were labeled in the documents that were reviewed. A recommendation from this study is that students must take an active role in the change process. Students must be involved in the school improvement process as their input is essential in the success of their school, as they take ownership of it. They have to be an intricate part of the decision making process that has major implications on their academic success and future as they try to contribute to improve the performance of their academic at-risk peers. Student leaders need an awareness of the student attitudes that Fullan (1991) shares:

- Indifference: The change that is to occur must be meaningful to the student's reality.

- Proof: It must be established and proven that this change is not a temporary novelty for boredom.
- Strong Interest: Students must be committed agents for change in shared and supportive learning for all their peers.
- Community: Students are an essential piece of developing a sense of community in which they feel their input is valued and their ongoing effort is validated. They must nurture academic relationships with teachers and their peers with clarity and commitment.
- School Culture: Students must become change agents in the new culture that fosters respect for all individuals, provides safety, and places priority on academics.

The improvement of schools is definitely governed by a set of factors that are both interrelated and interdependent, and because of these interrelationships the context is important to school principals and leaders in order to effectively turnaround a low performing school that is in school improvement. This concept is supported by the literature and establishes that in school improvement no two schools are the same, though many have commonalities e.g. they serve the similar demographic, not having strong teachers, weak leadership and funding issues.

There is a need for additional research that can identify ways to contribute to address how these components are interrelated among the elements of school improvement context. Since 2008 school districts around the U. S. began experimenting with programs in technology (Shiengold, 1991, p. 19) technology might contribute to the success of school improvements in their schools. Again, this is another area that needs additional research to see if in fact, the “blended learning theory” is successful in its contribution to effective school improvement.

School improvement also needs further studies in addressing what leaders should do to reduce the counterproductive efforts of barriers to change, and proactively work with those supporting change

and student success. These change agents can come from the school neighborhood or the community at large. However, they must take ownership of the school improvement process and see it through as they support change. Leaders within and outside of the school need to be convinced that;

- School improvement is a federal mandate that is in the best interest of our students,
- Teacher accountability is a necessary component of school improvement,
- Parent participation is an essential piece of student success and
- School culture must continually be revisited and offer the school improvement process ongoing support.

There must be further research in the school's mission and culture, in the enhancing expanded learning time for all students, building and maintaining parent and community based networks, development of ongoing teacher teams (with fidelity), and work with organizational and behavior experts. When this research occurs, it will provide an insight regarding the interrelationships between the various components of school context and will contribute more to a successful school improvement experience.

Research Limitations and Reflections

The first challenge facing the researcher was in attempting to interview the Arizona Department of Education School Improvement Director who began his position in late 2012, and was in his last month in this position. Unfortunately, he was never available (four attempts) to participate in a phone interview. Next, all the Solution Team members that had been to Southwest Middle School in the years of school improvement visits had since taken full time positions in schools throughout the U. S. or had accepted positions that did not allow them the time to give interviews. They had other obligations that demanded their time and three other former Solutions Team members had passed on.

Findings from this case study may only be applicable to similar cases and that they might gain

internal validity and lose external validity. Even though the study was done as objective as possible, the researcher felt that she did become part of the research itself and anticipated some of the results based on her own experience.

Other limitations were that students and parents were not interviewed so their perspectives are not included in the case study. Given the importance of students and parents in improvement this is an important limitation. The context of the neighborhood too, was not fully a part of the case study. This neighborhood context, especially in low socio-economic areas, is not usually a part of research on school improvement but should be, given that the school improvement effort is targeting the children from the area surrounding the school.

Significance of this Case Study

Upon reflection on data from documents and interviews, two points stood out for the researcher, 1) lack of attention to and involvement of the specific community/neighborhood surrounding this case study school and 2) the deep emotional involvement of the teachers and others effected by this school's improvement process. The emotional impact of unsuccessful mandated school improvement efforts has not been researched. In this case study, all participants interviewed exhibited emotion and a personal feeling of failure or limited success. In their descriptions, teachers expressed frustration, feelings of failure and stress and in news accounts of the school's closure there was evident distress. There seemed to be a need to revisit the community's awareness of what was happening at the school and to reestablish the importance of improving education in Southwest Middle School by raising the academic standards that had it failing for five years prior. It remains to develop a good school reform model that includes state standard aligned instruction with inclusion of grade level Common Core, and new assessments (progress monitoring) that can be administered and monitored frequently. Equally important, or maybe even more important, the local community's needs and aspirations for their children need to be part of

the improvement plans.

Studies like this case study are needed because they contribute to establishing the effectiveness of the NCLB and the Arizona Department of Education's school improvement process collectively. Further, this study reinforces the idea that the outside evaluation strategies that are mandated must be an essential piece of the school improvement process as is planning for the teachers as planning can provide them with information about how well programs are implemented, what changes need to occur, effective professional development, and the difference school improvement planning can make in student success. Further, the consistent monitoring and evaluating eliminates guesswork and provides an objective framework for judging the value of initiatives undertaken by the school in improvement. With the information gained from evaluating their programs, schools have data they can use to make informed decisions.

Moreover, the importance of teacher preparedness, parent awareness and educational outcomes of students must play a leading role in mandates for school reform. Correlates such as a clear mission statement, rigorous high expectations for all students, strong instructional leadership, frequent monitoring of student progress, extended learning time for students in need, a safe and orderly environment, and strong home and school relations are absolutely necessary in reform efforts that can become the catalyst for underperforming schools.

APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Explain your role at Southwest Middle School and the amount of time you filled that role throughout 2008 – 2013?
2. How and when did you become involved in the School Improvement Team (SIT)?
3. What length of time were you involved in the SIT?
4. Please share with me the basic purpose of the SIT meetings? Were there agendas, goals, objectives that the SIT used as guide to conduct meetings?
5. Please share with me how many SIT meetings did you attended? Was there a stipend attached to your commitment to attend the SIP meetings?
6. Discuss with me the issues that you can remember that were discussed at the SIT meetings e.g. the school improvement process, Solutions Team visits and School Improvement funding.
7. During the time you served as a member of the SIT were you related to any of the students? If so, what was your relationship to the student/s and how did it affect your participation on the SIT?
8. Please explain to me how the SIT meetings were conducted and by whom? Share any other information you want to share about the meetings?
9. Did the meetings run effectively and did the SIT accomplish their goals set for the meetings? Afterwards (post meeting) was there follow-up provided for you e.g. minutes, informational bullets, etc.?

10. After the visits from the Solutions Teams, there was a Statement of Findings given to each Team member, was it followed as a framework for school improvement? Was it discussed at all at the meetings that followed? If so, to what extent?
11. Were there changes that occurred after the Solutions Team visits to the school? If so, what were they and how were they implemented? Did they improve the overall student performance?
12. Did you find your role in the SIT a significant one? Was it particularly stressful? If you were asked to serve again would you be willing to serve?
13. How did the closure of Southwest Middle School affect you? Did you feel in any way responsible for it?
14. Is there anything else you want to share before we end this interview?

Again, thank you for your time. I want to remind you that this interview was totally confidential. Your name will not be used in any way. All information you have shared will be destroyed in the appropriate manner as direct by the University of AZ IRB guidelines. The information you have shared will be encrypted into my laptop therefore, if I lose it no one will understand this interview. Any transcripts will be shredded after their use. Thank you.

APPENDIX B. CRITIQUE CHECKLIST

The researcher used this checklist to check the writing of the case study.

1. Was the report easy to read?
2. Did it flow or fit together? With each sentence contributing to the whole?
3. Did the report have a conceptual structure e.g. themes or issues?
4. Were its issues developed in a serious and scholarly way?
5. Was the case adequately defined?
6. Was there a sense of story in this study?
7. Was the reader provided some vicarious experiences?
8. Were quotations been used effectively?
9. Were headings, figures, artifacts, appendixes and indexes used effectively?
10. Was it edited well?
11. Was the writer made sound assertions, neither over nor under interpreting?
12. Was adequate attention been paid to various contexts?
13. Were sufficient raw data presented?
14. Were the data resources chosen well and in sufficient number/s?
15. Was the role and point of view of the researcher apparent?
16. Was the nature of the intended audience apparent?
17. Was empathy shown for both sides (Southwest Middle School and AZ Dept. of ED)
18. Were personal intentions examined?
19. Did it appear that research participants were put at risk?

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