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Editor

Tonya Conner, Troy University Dothan Campus

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# The Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership

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## Note from the Editor

Welcome to the first edition of the Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership (AJEL) peer reviewed by the Alabama Association of Professors of Educational Leadership (AAPEL). AAPEL is celebrating the birth of AJEL with vast excitement. To make the journey from mere discussion to a published journal has become today's fruit of labor. A variety of manuscripts including full research articles, proposals, and position papers fill AAPEL's inaugural journal. The article topics branch from a broad theme: Trends and Issues in Instructional Leadership and Administration.

The first article of AJEL begins with Robinson providing unique perspectives of African American females in leadership roles through a phenomenological study. As you continue to read, you will learn how Ash, Richardson, Hodge, Connell, and Green are working with the Alabama State Department of Education to design and implement a Middle Grades Leadership Academy (MGLA) as a framework to school improvement. Edwards, Grace, and King explain their exploration of the relationship between principals and school counselors to improve effective counseling services for students. Faust, Ennis, and Hodge shine a spotlight on the relationships between students and teachers in the middle school setting. Finally, Hester and Fenn, share how transformational leadership combats against cyberbullying and provides suggestions for corrective approaches.

As we move forward, the continuation of various manuscripts for publication consideration are requested. The new Call for Papers will be available in fall. The Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership is a refereed journal using a triple-blind review process.

I would like to acknowledge the many people playing a major role in the inception of AJEL. First, thank you to all of the authors for submitting manuscripts. I encourage you to continue presenting your work for consideration. In addition, an enormous thanks to the submission reviewers. Taking much time and effort, many reviewers took on the task to evaluate several manuscripts and provide insightful feedback to the authors. Furthermore, thank you to the AAPEL Executive Board. Your support was encouraging through the trial and errors of the first publication. Finally, to Ted Creighton and Brad Bizzell with NCPEA Publications, AJEL would literally not be possible without your direction and support. Thank you to Brad for the design of a beautiful journal cover. Much appreciation and thanks to Ted for your supervision and counsel throughout this process.

To the readers, I hope the content will provide you with a deeper awareness of the many facets of Instructional Leadership and Administration through AAPEL's continuous dedication to offer insightful and reflective research. Enjoy!

# Personal, Professional, and Sociocultural Experiences of African American Female School Leaders

Armentress D. Robinson, *Birmingham City Schools*

*The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of ten African American female school leaders serving as assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators in four suburban school districts in the southeast region of the United States. By exploring the lives of these school leaders, greater insights may be gained to open the door to this underrepresented population. This research may be valuable for professional development planning and educational leadership programs with the objective of recruiting and retaining more African American female suburban school leaders.*

Women comprise approximately 84% of the teaching workforce in public schools in the United States, yet female leaders only comprise approximately 29% of principalships in public schools and within the 29%, African American women only hold 10% of the principalships in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007-2008). Women are “overrepresented in teaching” but “underrepresented in administration” (Shakeshaft, 1999, p. 100). The irony is women are the majority of students enrolled in educational administration programs (Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, & Ballenger, 2007; Sherman, 2005). With expansive research, educational leadership, equity, diversity, and social justice have become significant topics of interest (Horsford, 2012; Loder, 2002). Moreover, the stigma of gender and racial biases are quite common in today's society, including school districts where women and people of color are often ignored for leadership positions (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Society plays a critical role in forming gendered norms and expectations for men and women (Lorber, 1994). African American men and women encounter race and gender issues as part of society's “fundamental organizing principle of social structure” (Collins, 1998, p. 209).

Educational leadership in the 21st century requires individuals who have the ability to build positive working relationships with individuals from diverse backgrounds with diverse experiences (Tatum, 2007). A key factor of this realization is the need to recruit and retain more African American women in school leadership positions (Brown, 2005). The history of women in leadership does not provide a fair and proportionate representation compared to their male counterparts (Shakeshaft, 1999). The significant contributions of African Americans, especially women, in the areas of education and educational leadership have been greatly undervalued (Jackson, 1999; Reed & Evans, 2008).

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Therefore, it is imperative to know the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of African American female school leaders in order to garner a different perspective of educational leadership.

By sharing their personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences, African American female school leaders may provide the insight needed for current and aspiring minority female school leaders. An increased effort to “recruit and retain women of color at all levels” of educational leadership is drastically important (Tillman and Cochran, 2000, p. 50). Although women have made modest progress over the years, not much is known about the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of minority women as leaders in the educational field (Celikten, 2005).

### **Research Questions**

This phenomenological study was guided by the following central research question: What perspectives do these study participants have regarding their personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of being an African American female school leader in a suburban school district? The sub-questions for the study were: (a) What challenges have participants encountered as an African American female school leader in a suburban school district? (b) How do participants deal with these challenges? (c) What positive experiences have occurred because of being an African American female school leader in a suburban school district? (d) How do participants acknowledge these positive experiences? (e) How do participants balance work, family, civic, and other obligations in their current position?

### **Methodology**

Because of the primary focus on the lived experiences of study participants, a phenomenological study was conducted. From the researcher's perspective, the chosen approach, was the most logical choice in answering the research question. A phenomenological study delineated the meaning of lived experiences for several individuals (Creswell, 2007). The objective was to focus on what participants had in common—shared, lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). Two types of phenomenological approaches were identified in qualitative research. The first approach was known as hermeneutical phenomenology in which the research was adjusted toward participants' lived experiences (Van Manen as cited in Creswell, 2007). The second approach was known as transcendental phenomenology in which the researcher identifies a phenomenon to be studied, bracketed the researcher's own experiences, and collected data from several individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas as cited in Creswell, 2007).

For the purpose of this study, hermeneutical phenomenology was utilized because of an interest in the real-life experiences of these 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. According to Hatch (2002), hermeneutical phenomenology “combines both interpretive/hermeneutic methods and descriptive/phenomenological methods for the purpose of examining the lived experiences or life worlds of people being studied” (p. 29).

## Sample

For this study, criterion sampling was utilized (Creswell, 2007) because participants represented individuals who were African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. Ten individuals identified as African American females who served as principals, assistant principals, and central office administrators with at least three years of service in suburban school districts were selected for this study. Each of the participants was briefly described below with regard to their pseudonym, year their educational career began, highest degree attained, job title, and years in current position as shown in Table 1. The participants were employed in four different suburban school districts in southeastern United States. Suburban schools “are located in residential areas on the outside of metropolitan areas and compared to many urban schools, often have higher standardized test scores, college going rates, and attendance rates” (Tefera, Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 1).

Table 1  
*Participant Summary Data*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Year Began in Education</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Current Position</b>	<b>Years in Current Position</b>
Angela	1993	Doctorate	High School Assistant Principal	5
Beverly	1986	Doctorate	Director of Student Support Services	7
Celeste	1998	Master’s	Elementary School Assistant Principal	2
Diane	1998	Educational Specialist	Elementary School Principal	2
Elise	1991	Doctorate	Middle School Principal	2
Faith	1999	Doctorate	Elementary School Principal	1
Gabrielle	1995	Doctorate	Elementary School Principal	1
Henrietta	1980	Educational Specialist (currently pursuing Doctorate)	Elementary School Principal	6
Ingrid	1997	Doctorate	Administrative Manager	2
Jaqueline	1992	Doctorate	Curriculum and Technology Coordinator	1

## Data Collection

Data collection for this phenomenological study consisted of open-ended, face-to-face, one-hour interviews with study participants at sites designated by them. Prior to the interview, participants received a printout of the original questions. As the interview progressed, follow-up questions were asked to garner more details with regard to their experiences. Interview(s) were audiotaped with a digital recorder and transcribed in which study participants had the opportunity to review and check for accuracy. With open-ended questions, study participants had the opportunity to share their lived experiences without restraint from the researcher or other past findings (Creswell, 2008).

## Data Analysis

Data were organized according to interviews of study participants. Multiple copies of the data were maintained (Creswell, 2008). Transcriptions were completed by typing the text files collected during interviews (Lichtman, 2012). From each transcript, key phrases or sentences were identified which related to study participants' experiences. Meanings were formulated from these significant phrases and sentences, which allowed common themes to surface (Creswell, 2007). This approach was defined as interpretive phenomenological analysis, which involved "the detailed examination of the lived experience of individuals" (Lichtman, 2012, p. 260).

After reading each participant's transcribed interview, the researcher created a table in Microsoft Word. The table consisted of three columns for data organization. In the first column, actual statements or raw data were provided (Saldana, 2009) from each participant's interview. In the second column, codes were specified based on notes from preliminary jotting of the responses given by participants (Creswell, 2007). A code was defined as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldana, 2009, p. 3). These codes originated from the actual statements of study participants. In the third and final column, themes were recorded which emerged from the combination of preliminary jotting, actual statements or raw data, and codes. Themes surfaced because of the repeating ideas, which study participants, had in common (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

With regard to this research study, seven themes emerged which gave credence to the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of these 10 African American female suburban school leaders. **Personal experiences** were (a) race and gender in school leadership, (b) caring for family and self, (c) resilience and spirituality; **professional experiences** were (d) education and upward mobility, (e) mentoring and networking; **sociocultural experiences** were (f) effective communication and positive working relationships, and (g) child advocacy and community partnerships. The themes served as a reminder of what study participants encountered on a daily basis as they worked to serve their families, their schools, and their communities. Although responses varied among participants, themes provided a more vivid picture of their lived experiences as school leaders. Themes were connected with actual statements from study participants' transcribed interviews. All data were secured and locked in a combination safe.

## Credibility and Trustworthiness

When checking for credibility and trustworthiness, researchers test whether the information gathered is accurate (Creswell, 2008). For this phenomenological study, credibility and trustworthiness were established by employing the following strategies: member checking, reflexive journaling, and thick, rich descriptions of respondent reports.

**Member checking.** Member checking was utilized by asking study participants to check the accuracy of themes, interpretations, and conclusions based on interviews (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The researcher communicated with each participant individually and asked for open and honest feedback regarding the findings through their interviews (Creswell, 2008). Participants were asked about the various components of the study in terms of an accurate and complete description of their experiences (Creswell, 2008). They were encouraged to communicate truthfully the accuracy of themes and interpretations based on their initial and possibly subsequent interviews (Creswell, 2008).

**Reflexive journaling.** Reflexive journaling was used to maintain a diary of information regarding the investigation, such as possible biases and methodological discussion (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The researcher reflected on experiences as an urban educator in order to discover the similarities and differences of decision-making, policies, and procedures in suburban and urban school districts. The cultures of each type of school district were examined. As an aspiring administrator, the researcher gained knowledge, which may be beneficial as a school leader in an urban or suburban school district. The researcher wanted to know firsthand what African American female school leaders do in order to be successful in their current leadership roles.

**Descriptions.** Thick, rich descriptions were employed because qualitative research allows the various stories or experiences of participants to be heard (Gamson, 2000). The purpose was for the reader to get the feel of what participants have experienced in their personal, professional, and sociocultural lives. In addition, readers could actually think about placing themselves in these experiences. A picture was painted with words, in terms of the reader visualizing in their minds, what participants faced as African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. Because participants were minorities in the area of educational leadership, the researcher believed their experiences needed to be included in current and future research.

An audit trail was established by meeting with the committee chair, methodologist, and other committee members, maintaining entries of research activities, conducting interviews, having discussions with fellow colleagues, completing transcriptions, initializing coding, and analyzing data (Creswell, 2007).

## Results

For study participants, race and gender in school leadership was a challenge with regard to experiencing racism and sexism as they pursued leadership positions. Although Diane made history by becoming the first African American principal—male or female—in her school's history, she was unable to celebrate this historical accomplishment because of the uncertainty of others' reactions to her being selected as the school's leader. Fortunately, Diane was well received by parents, and students of color looked to her as a role model. With regard to gender, Ingrid faced repeated disappointments as she was

overlooked for a promotion to school principal, which subsequently went to male colleagues with less experience and less education. Ingrid also expressed humiliation and disrespect at the hands of a former principal. At one point in her career, she began to question her purpose and her value as a school leader. The words of Ingrid's youngest daughter instructing her to remember her purpose was just what Ingrid needed in order to regain focus and succeed.

In addition, caring for family and self was a major responsibility for study participants because they were wives, mothers, volunteers, and caregivers. Having a healthy balance between work and home was vital to participants' success as school leaders. Gabrielle noted it was a challenge to balance work and family, but she relied heavily upon "her village" and the art of compartmentalizing. She was able to employ the help of family and friends as well as organize her life as a wife, mother, and school leader. For Beverly, she had to learn the power of saying, "No", and she had to deal with the challenge of living with MS. Beverly admitted her physical health took precedence over everything else, and as a result of saying "no" and taking care of her health, she was able to fulfill her role as a school leader.

On the other hand, resilience and spirituality provided the strength and direction needed for being a school leader. Study participants had an unyielding faith and sense of spirituality, which enabled them to strive toward excellence (Alston, 2005). For Faith, being resilient and spiritually grounded was essential for her as she began her first-year as principal only one month before the death of her mother. After her mother's passing, Faith admitted there was no time for her to grieve or have a pity party because others were looking to her for guidance and strength as they faced challenges in their own lives. Despite being turned down for an assistant principal position seven times, Celeste exemplified resilience and maintained a positive attitude in the midst of rejection. She held the strong belief of persistence working in her favor as she pursued a school leadership position.

Education was considered the catalyst for upward mobility and the answer to a better quality of life. Even though earlier generations did not possess the same opportunities, parents instilled in study participants the value of attaining an education. Parents possessed wisdom or mother wit with regard to seeing the future benefits of being educated in today's society. Angela's parents were not college graduates, but they worked diligently to provide for their children. Despite their limited educational background, they conveyed the important message of education to Angela and her 12 siblings. Similarly, Henrietta's parents were not highly educated, but they stressed the importance of education and respecting others. As a Doctoral student, Henrietta knew knowledge was powerful and vital to the success of African American females who aspire to become school leaders. In her opinion, education coupled with a spirit of excellence was the key ingredient to being a successful school leader. Both Angela and Henrietta were living testaments to the impact of education in their lives as school leaders. Ironically, Ingrid was highly educated and experienced but was overlooked for a leadership position in her school district. Although Ingrid was taught education was the answer to a better quality of life, she experienced rejection despite her academic credentials.

The role of mentoring and networking was beneficial to study participants as well. Mentoring and networking provided the support needed for successful leadership.

Although not every school district had a formal mentoring program, study participants were not deterred in their efforts of being mentored and networking with others, which resulted in study participants mentoring aspiring school leaders themselves. As a first-year principal, Gabrielle found the school district did not have a formal mentoring program. However, she connected with a fellow colleague who assisted her in making a successful transition from assistant principal to principal. In Elise's case, she felt the need to stay one-step ahead; therefore, she remained in constant communication with the other two middle school principals in the district. Her philosophy was not to be caught "out on a limb" while everyone else was "still in the tree". She also employed the help of other school leaders outside of the district who kept her informed of pertinent information.

With regard to "paying it forward", Jacqueline delineated herself as a colleague of teachers and enjoyed mentoring them. She made a special effort to connect with individuals who were different and not easily embraced by the majority. She had grown accustomed to being the only minority based on race or gender. Therefore, she related well with others who were in the same situation. Jacqueline provided teachers and school leaders with opportunities to be themselves and not to allow anyone to fit them into a certain mold. Jacqueline explained how mentoring teachers and school leaders allowed her the opportunity to become better acquainted with who she was as a person.

Another key factor in study participants' success as school leaders was effective communication leading to positive working relationships. Participants utilized relational collaboration to build morale (Alston, 2005). For Celeste, she used the strategies from a class to build school community. She explained how the class changed her personal and professional life and resulted in her decision to empower others by teaching and demonstrating the need for positive working relationships. Upon learning school morale was low; Diane took the initiative of improving school morale by administering a survey to her faculty and staff. She was able to get a true picture of the school's culture. Because of the survey's results, Diane went into action by building up morale. She encouraged those under her leadership to recognize others within the school for doing great work. Further, she and her assistant principal presented gift cards to those who were selected during the month. Morale was improved and positive working relationships were formed.

Finally, being a child advocate and forming community partnerships were two responsibilities identified by study participants. According to Alston (2005), African American female school leaders choose service while leading and leave a legacy of service to others. The servant leader is a servant first and one who genuinely desires to serve others (Greenleaf, 1973). Hence, participants referred to themselves as servant leaders. Gabrielle acknowledged she was committed to the well-being of her students and held teachers to a high standard of academic instruction. She provided teachers with professional development opportunities to aid them in growing as classroom teachers providing better instruction to their students. As a principal, she stated it was her job to hire good teachers. As stated by Gabrielle, her number one priority was to ensure her students received quality classroom instruction.

In addition to classroom instruction, students needed to know the value of giving back to their communities. Therefore, Elise challenged her teachers and students to participate in service-learning projects within the community. Like Gabrielle, Elise firmly believed in providing teachers and students with the resources needed to be successful in their classroom. Her philosophy regarding leadership was embedded in becoming a

leader meant becoming a servant. As self-proclaimed servant leaders, Gabrielle and Elise worked diligently to meet the needs of those under their leadership by supporting and challenging them.

Although study participants expressed being a school leader was hard work and challenging at times, the consensus was participants loved and enjoyed being a school leader. Study participants' spirit of excellence was conveyed through their passion and commitment to their schools and surrounding communities through diligence and determination as they served as suburban school leaders.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Data collection and analysis was confined to the participating 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts in the southeastern United States. This research study did not account for the experiences of other minority females in those particular school districts. The only data collected were study participant interviews. Participants were not observed in their daily routines as assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators. Teacher perspectives of participants' leadership style and ability were unaccounted for in this study. Researcher bias was a crucial component of the methodology and could not be completely omitted. However, member checking, reflexive journaling, and thick, rich descriptions were utilized for credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2008). Although these strategies were advantageous in decreasing researcher bias, qualitative research takes into account the researcher's experiences. As a result, the conclusions drawn in this study were subject to other interpretations and analysis.

### **Discussion**

As more women of color, whether African, Hispanic, Native American, or Asian, enter educational leadership, their lived experiences need to be an integral part of the conversations in empirical research. According to Clark (2011), "...an examination of how women lead can result in a deeper understanding of an educational leadership concept that reflects diverse perspectives and that involves a community as opposed to a single leader" (p. 91). There is a great need for more feminist research, which focuses on the lived experiences of women, especially women of color (Sherman, 2005). Notably, Clark (2011) asserted, "The increasing number of African American women in educational leadership positions has offered up a rich opportunity for the exploration of the ways in which women lead" (p. 91). The leadership styles and abilities of female school leaders, especially African Americans and other minority women, are worth exploring in-depth to gain a greater understanding of them as school leaders and gain more knowledge regarding their contributions to educational leadership. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal, professional, and sociocultural lived experiences of 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts.

Within the K-12 school setting, demographically changing suburban schools are more prevalent than they were in previous years. Hence, more diversity needs to be seen in the leaders and models of leadership with regard to race and gender (Brown, 2005).

Despite challenges, setbacks, and disappointments, African American women in this study and others have exhibited resilience and achieved goals of becoming school leaders (Gregory, 2001). By discussing the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of these 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts, their voices addressed the gap in literature with regard to minority female school leaders. Participants' lived experiences depicted the challenges, setbacks, and disappointments, which came with being a minority female school leader. However, triumphs over racism and sex discrimination were also evident based on participants' roles as school leaders in suburban school districts.

Inequities still exist and small gains by women to attain leadership positions are not truly sustainable (Young, 2005). Therefore, attention needs to be given to the lived experiences of women, especially minority women, as school leaders. The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the personal, professional, and sociocultural lived experiences of 10 African American female suburban school leaders in southeastern United States. African American female suburban school leaders must utilize their voices to share their lived experiences.

These findings may influence educational leadership programs and suburban school districts to recruit and retain more African American female suburban school leaders. Additionally, the findings of this research may provide recommendations for future studies of African American and minority women school leaders in suburban school districts. The results of this study are intended to aid educational researchers and educational practitioners in gaining a better understanding of the lived experiences of African American female suburban school leaders.

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# Five Critical Practices for Middle Grades Leadership: A Framework for School Improvement

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*Based on current research, many students in the middle grades (6 - 8) have not performed at their highest academic levels. In 2011, more than one-half of eighth graders in 16 Southern states scored Basic or Below Basic on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Alternatively, effective principal-leaders strategically demonstrated practices transforming schools into institutions of learning and improved student performance. To support the development and refinement of middle grades leadership expertise, educational leaders in the state collaborated to design a Middle Grades Leadership Academy (MGLA). The following Five Critical Practices synthesize the research findings and are critical to increased student learning: Focus on the direction, build a powerful organization, give life to data, ensure student-focused vision and action, and lead learning. In addition, educational leaders correlated and aligned the the Five Critical Practices with the standards of the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), Alabama Standards for Instructional Leaders, and State Department of Education: Alabama Plan 2020.*

Southern Regional Education Board (SREB, 2011) described middle grades as the “vital center — the make-or-break point — of our K-12 public school system” (p. i). Failure to develop confident, knowledgeable learners in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades destines hundreds of thousands of young people to failure in high school, college, and careers. In 2011, more than one-half of eighth graders in 16 Southern states scored Basic or Below Basic on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). A Basic level score indicated a student only partially mastered the knowledge and skills needed for success in high school (SREB, 2011).

“Literally millions of young people are out of school and grossly ill equipped to compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce and economy” (Association for College and Technical Education (ACTE), 2009, p. 1). The middle grades play a far-reaching role in determining if a student will graduate from high school as college and career ready. ACTE (2009) reported approximately one in every three students entering ninth grade failed to complete high school in four years, and high-risk students were eight to ten times more likely to drop out of school in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Balfanz and Herzog

(2006) agreed ninth grade retention is a major risk factor for dropping out of high school. According to Balfanz (2009), the middle grades are a place where a student launches forward to graduation and success or slips off course to a path of failure.

To accomplish true middle school reform, SREB (2012) recommended principals focus on improving instruction and involving all stakeholders. The principal is responsible for understanding and communicating the relevance and purpose of learning for all students and closing the achievement gap. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) stated, “Leadership has significant effect on student learning, second only to the effects of the quality of the curriculum and teachers instruction” (p. 5).

### **Middle Grades Leadership Academy**

The Middle Grades Leadership Academy (MGLA) Committee began work in May 2013 with 21 members from various backgrounds and areas of expertise including teachers, principals, state and district level administrators, and representatives from national non-profit organizations. The Committee developed a vision for a sustainable, research-based professional development model and formed a smaller group, MGLA Focus Committee, to develop the content and framework, delivery method, and evaluation model for the pilot (see Appendix A).

The intention of the Academy is to foster change and support schools that actively engage students in learning; motivate and support teachers to increase effectiveness; involve parents and families; and implement a continuous improvement process. To accomplish these goals, MGLA will provide a three-year ongoing leadership development academy for principals and school-based leadership teams, through face-to-face contact, on-line connections, networking opportunities, continuous feedback, principal leadership mentors, and resources responsive to the needs of schools.

The Committee selected eight schools to participate in the MGLA pilot. The basis of selection of schools included the following criteria: completed application (Appendix B), signed memorandum of understanding (Appendix C), and benchmark score on a site visit walk through (Appendix D). The Committee distributed invitations to participate in the pilot to 18 districts in central Alabama. The Committee received requests from 15 schools representing 10 school districts. The School Review Committee consisted of 12 veteran educators who attended a two-hour training on the MGLA School Review Rubric (Appendix E). Two School Review Committee members visited each school and submitted a benchmark score. The final selection of the eight schools and the initial training began in the summer 2014.

### **Five Critical Practices**

Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004) stated effective principals strategically demonstrated practices transforming schools into institutions of learning and improved student performance. The Five Critical Practices that successful principals consistently demonstrated are the following: focus on the direction, build a powerful organization, give life to data, ensure student-focused vision and action, and lead learning (Ash & Hodge, 2012; Ash, Hodge, & Connell, 2013). Each of the critical practices is subdivided into standards. These standards further define the practices of effective principals.

Additionally, the Five Critical Practices correlated with the standards of the following organizations: Wallace Foundation, Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) (Ash et al., 2013). Importantly, the Five Critical Practices correlate with the Alabama State Department of Education Plan 2020 (See Appendix F).

### **Focus on the Direction**

Leaders provide guidance in identifying and developing an understanding of the core beliefs and mission of an organization. The core beliefs guide the work and all decisions of the organization. Consensus among faculty and staff about students and the school's role in student learning is critical to maintaining the focus of the organization (Ash et al., 2013).

### **Build a Powerful Organization**

Leaders build a community of learners and supporters through knowledge sharing with faculty, staff, and community (Waters et al., 2004). Leaders facilitate ongoing informal and formal communication surrounding the status of the school. The communication includes a variety of forums addressing the successes and challenges of the work of the school, which build the sense of community among stakeholders. Establishing an organizational culture encourages productive discussions among all stakeholders reinforces the practice of self-reflection and continuous growth and improvement (Leithwood et al., 2004). The effective leader promotes organizational systems and structures to develop the collaborative school culture, which fosters staff participation in school decisions and enhances productive community relationships. High-quality leaders impact student learning “by setting directions--charting a clear course that everyone understands” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 3). Student learning increases as faculty and staff routinely engage in collegial conversations focused on developing practices to enhance the effectiveness of the instruction (Ash et al., 2013).

### **Give Life to Data**

Leaders ensure the deliberate analysis of key data and share with all stakeholders' critical data related to student learning and school effectiveness. Sharing a variety of sources of data documents student progress and helps identify potential concerns (Knapp, Swinnerton, Copland, & Monpas-Huber, 2006). “Quantitative and qualitative data about various aspects of professional practice can stimulate productive conversation and problem-solving by teachers and administrators. “In the hands of a skilled leader, data become a tool for focusing professional learning on the improvement of daily practice” (Knapp et al., 2006, p. 12). Gaining a solid understanding of data analysis through thoughtful conversations with parent groups, faculty, and staff encourages careful examination of student performance in response to instructional practices (Ash et al., 2013).

## **Ensure Student-Focused Vision and Action**

Effective leaders recognize creating an environment and culture where collaboration for the improvement of student learning is the norm, and includes “space, time, and access to new ideas and expertise” (Fullan, 2001, pp. 64–65). A powerful learning environment for all students focuses on creating a student-centered experience in all areas (Dix, 2012). Leaders protect time, allocate resources, and support personnel in creating and maintaining a focus on improving instructional practices resulting in high levels of learning for all students. Safeguarding routine faculty collaborative time for lesson design and analysis of student work promotes student-centered practices (Ash et al., 2013).

## **Lead Learning**

Leaders model life-long learning and provide routinized time and resources for faculty and staff to learn, collaborate, and reflect on student learning and the implications for instructional practices. Leaders challenge and support faculty and staff as they innovate and examine barriers to meaningful change. Leaders also create a sense of immediacy of the need for improvement in all areas of learning (Ash et al., 2013).

## **Evaluation Component**

In the age of accountability where students are expected to meet high standards and the principal and teachers are held accountable for student results, professional development must be linked to increased student achievement. “Evaluating professional development enables program managers and participants to make data-based decisions about the program” (Killion, 2008, p. 140). An effective professional development model demonstrates an understanding of adult learning; connects adult learning to the objectives of the training; utilizes a clear, practical approach; and measures student learning (Joyce & Calhoun, 2010).

Research studies recommended several professional development evaluation models including the Four Levels of Evaluation of Professional Development (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006), Levels of Evaluation (Guskey, 2000), and Eight-Step Evaluation Model (Killion, 2008). According to Zepeda (2012), evaluating professional development was effective if the program was open to continuous feedback and was adjusted accordingly on day-to-day implementation to improve training and impact learning. Haslam (2010) asserted professional development evaluation evolves as the planning and implementation of the model progresses and recommended five questions to be considered in designing a model. Listed below are the questions and answers guiding the initial development of MGLA’s evaluation model.

### **Should the activity be evaluated?**

MGLA is part of a middle grades school improvement initiative which includes large-scale professional development to be extended over three years in partnership with the Alabama State Department of Education and Samford University. Evaluations were developed for the initial MGLA walkthrough activities (Appendices G and H).

**What are the key elements of the professional development and what assumptions hold these elements together?**

Based upon research student achievement in the middle grades continue to be an area of concern in student achievement. The focus for MGLA is the design and implementation of an effective leadership model resulting in increased student achievement as measured by national, state, and local assessments. Seed funding was provided by the Alabama State Department of Education. Time and commitment from the selected schools are essential for participation. MGLA will provide on-going professional development for the selected schools and a leadership mentor to collaborate and provide focused feedback for the leadership team.

**Who is likely to be interested in the evaluation, and what do they want to know about the professional development?**

State Department of Education, teachers, administrators, parents, school boards, community leaders, and college and university faculties are some of the audiences interested in the impact MGLA has on student achievement.

**What resources are available to support the evaluation?**

Alabama State Department of Education will provide \$10,000 annually, each participating school will contribute \$3,000 annually, and funding from other institutions.

**Who will work on the evaluation?**

Students in the Samford Doctoral Program will design and implement a developmental evaluation model as described by Patton (2011), Haslam (2010), and Guskey (2000).

**Research Questions**

1. What are the practices of a quality leadership model that will sustain student achievement and how do they align with research?
2. What assets and obstacles exist in the implementation of the leadership model?
3. How is student achievement impacted by the implementation of the MGLA model?

**Methodology**

A developmental evaluation model will be used whereby professional development evaluation evolves as the planning and implementation of the project progresses. According to Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, and Caruthers (2011), while research focused “on the need to produce credible, generalizable knowledge,” ( p. xxv) a developmental program evaluation includes the investigation of the development, processes, theory, viability, outcomes, and impact of the specific program. Program evaluation research questions address the quality of the program not gaps and uncertainties in theories and areas of knowledge. A research project is designed to study these uncertainties and gaps; however, a developmental program evaluation helps answer questions to make decisions

about the program and its components (Yarbrough et al., 2011). “Development evaluation supports innovation development to guide adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments” (Patton, 2011, p. 1). Developmental evaluation includes supporting social innovation and adaptive management in the evaluation of projects, programs, products, organizational changes, policy reforms, and system interventions. “Evaluation processes include asking evaluative questions, applying evaluation logic, and gathering real-time data to inform ongoing decision making and adaptations” (Patton, 2011, p. 1). The evaluator may be part of a development team collaborating with the team members to “conceptualize, design and test new approaches in a long-term, ongoing process of continuous development, adaptation, and experimentation” (Patton, 2011, p. 1). The evaluation evolves as the evaluator facilitates team discussions infusing evaluative questions, thinking, and data using systematic, data –based reflection and decision making in response to change needs and conditions (Patton, 2011). Using developmental evaluation concepts, some MGLA school models may move from the exploratory and innovative phase of developmental evaluation into a more traditional formative and summative evaluation to determine scalability and generalizability while others may remain in the developmental mode, never creating a fixed model, but sustaining growth.

### Summary

The MGLA pilot was established to support the development and refinement of middle grades leadership expertise that results in improved student achievement. The researched-based content, Five Critical Practices, is correlated with standards from nationally recognized organizations and the Alabama State Department of Education Plan 2020. Eight middle schools will participate in a three-year Academy and a developmental evaluation model will be used to investigate the quality of the project.

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## Appendix A

### **Middle Grades Leadership Academy (MGLA)**

#### **Who we are**

Established with a mission to address the changing dynamics for middle grades' education, the MGLA Committee draws on a national team of leadership experts with multiple years of experience as teachers, academic coaches, principals, superintendents, central office administrators, deputy state superintendent, researchers, State Board of Education member, university professors, leaders of professional development, and leaders of professional associations. The MGLA Committee is a result of a vision created by a partnership among Dr. Yvette Richardson, Alabama State Board of Education Member, Dr. Tommy Bice, Alabama State Superintendent of Education, and Dr. Jeanie Box, Dean of the Samford University Orlean Bullard Beason School of Education.

#### **What we do**

MGLA equips leaders with the knowledge, skills, and strategies listed below.

#### **To foster change and support schools that:**

- Activate students' interests and desire to learn;
- Motivate teachers and provide the necessary support to increase effectiveness;
- Involve parents and families; and
- Enact continuous improvement processes (SREB, 2011).

#### **To build capacity of teachers to:**

- Demonstrate a passion for their work;
- Learn continually, reflect on learning and practice, and identify and solve problems of practice;
- Develop relationships with students grounded in students' interests and background knowledge;
- Demonstrate strong knowledge of content areas and a deep understanding of the development of middle grades students; and
- Collaborate with leadership teams to implement continuous improvement processes.

#### **To ensure students:**

- Demonstrate readiness to begin challenging high school courses by the end of the eighth grade (SREB, 2011);
- Utilize critical thinking, collaborate to solve problems, communicate, and reflect; and
- Demonstrate responsible social and civic behaviors.

#### **How we do it**

MGLA provides initial and ongoing leadership development for principals and school-based leadership teams, through face-to-face contact, on-line connections, networking opportunities, continuing feedback, and supporting resources responsive to the needs of schools.

### **School success starts with effective leadership**

MGLA incorporates research-based leadership practices and supports school leaders through a three-year commitment in a cycle of work that deepens each year. Professional development and ongoing feedback targeted to each school's specific needs support leaders in creating a sustainable framework for success. Mentors work closely with leadership teams to support the schools as they work to achieve their goals.

### **Year One: Building a culture of learning**

The first year builds the big picture as leaders create a learning culture that values the thoughts, opinions, and expertise of the school community. Leadership content focuses on continuous improvement to transform schools into true learning organizations resulting in higher levels of student performance.

### **Year Two: Embedding leadership practices**

Year 2 builds on the work of the first year to create an agile and flexible school by supporting leaders in using data and current research to improve student learning, providing instructional leadership, and analyzing and improving school processes. A primary focus of the work of year 2 is coaching reflective processes (listening, responding, debating, collaboratively making decisions).

### **Year Three: Sustaining innovative leadership practices**

Year 3 focuses on sustaining effective leadership practices in place from Year 1 and Year 2 as well as reviewing, analyzing, and revising current systems as necessary. Year 3 also includes opportunities to generate new ideas in addition to sharing results, leadership expertise, and effective programs and processes with other professionals. Participating schools will serve as model sites in which other professionals can study the implementation of the Five Critical Practices

### **Outcomes**

When fully implemented, the leadership processes, strategies, and practices will build leadership teams' capacity to create a culture of learning and continuous improvement grounded in collegiality and collective expertise, to embed and sustain innovative leadership practices, and to design profound learning experiences that impact student performance.

Appendix B

**Middle Grades Leadership Academy  
Application**

**School** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact Information:**

District Contact

\_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

Principal

\_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

**Principal** \_\_\_\_\_

Number of years as principal \_\_\_\_\_ Number of years at present  
school \_\_\_\_\_

**Academic**

**Coach** \_\_\_\_\_

Number of years in classroom \_\_\_\_\_ Number of years in present  
school \_\_\_\_\_

Number of years in a peer coaching role \_\_\_\_\_ Grade levels  
taught \_\_\_\_\_

Training, professional learning, or self-study in data analysis (list/describe on back, if  
necessary)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Area(s) of expertise/strength

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**School Demographics**

\_\_\_\_\_ % Free/reduced lunch      \_\_\_\_\_ # Student enrollment      \_\_\_\_\_ # Staff enrollment

**School Culture/Identity**

Briefly describe the culture and/or identity of your school.

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**By signing below, \_\_\_\_\_ School agrees to full participation and attendance in the three-year MGLA project.**

**Signatures**

Principal:

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Leadership Team:

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Appendix C

**Memorandum of Collaborative Understanding  
Middle Grades Leadership Academy (MGLA)**

Agreement: Between the Middle Grades Leadership Academy (in affiliation with Samford University OBB School of Education and the Alabama State Department of Education) and \_\_\_\_\_ District regarding a MGLA-  
\_\_\_\_\_ District collaborative in support of select middle school administrators and leadership teams

Goal: Improve student achievement through a research-based professional development model.

MGLA and the \_\_\_\_\_ District agree to the following commitments.

Samford University will:

1. In collaboration with the District, identify select school leaders that commit to full participation in a three-year training and implementation of professional development to ensure sustainability and to build capacity within middle schools,
2. In collaboration with the District, implement a rigorous and relevant leadership development program that will produce high-quality, transformative school leaders,
3. In collaboration with the District and in strictest adherence to confidentiality, commit to sharing annual student achievement data for purposes of measuring growth and meeting College and Career Ready Standards,
4. Provide appropriate training, and collaborate with the District in providing specific and targeted support for school level implementation through on-site brainstorming, coaching, benchmarking for progress, Skyping, direction/redirection, and supporting school and state initiatives,
5. Respond to District participants' continuous feedback on the effectiveness of training and responsiveness of support, and
6. Collaborate with partner schools through two day-long whole-group meetings during the school year, plus one day-long summer training to improve instructional practices.

\_\_\_\_\_ District will:

1. In collaboration with Samford University, identify select school leaders that commit to full participation in a three-year training and implementation of professional development to ensure sustainability and build capacity within middle schools,
2. Support select school Leadership Teams to include a minimum of six participants,
  - Principal (1)
  - Classroom Teacher (2 or more)
  - Additional School Personnel (3 or more)
3. In collaboration with Samford University, support implementation of a rigorous and relevant leadership development program that will produce high-quality, transformative school leaders,

4. Support MSLA leadership training and collaborate with Samford University in the implementation of specific and targeted support for select schools through on-site brainstorming, coaching, benchmarking for progress, Skyping, direction/redirection, and supporting school and state initiatives,
5. In collaboration with Samford University and in strictest adherence to confidentiality and the rights of students, commit to sharing annual student achievement data for purposes of measuring growth and meeting College and Career Ready Standards,
6. Provide continuous feedback to Samford University on the effectiveness of training and responsiveness of support,
7. Provide district support and endorsement through substitute coverage and costs for participants' involvement in the following:
  - two mandatory day-long whole-group meetings to convene at Samford University during the school year,
  - monthly school Leadership Team Meetings (a minimum of at least 85% of team members present at each monthly meeting) within and across schools,
  - one mandatory day-long summer Leadership Team Training at Samford University to improve instructional practices, and
  - monthly Principal Support meetings at Samford University or via social networking sites (Skype, Oovoo, etc.).

Agreed on this date, \_\_\_\_\_  
Samford University, OBB School of Education, Dean (signature)

---

District, Superintendent (signature)

Appendix D

**MGLA Data Collection Sheet**

School: \_\_\_\_\_

**School Demographics**

\_\_\_\_\_ % Free/reduced lunch      \_\_\_\_\_ # Student enrollment      \_\_\_\_\_ # Staff enrollment

**Five Critical Practices**

Critical Practice	Leadership Team Look Fors	Faculty/Staff Look Fors	Student Look Fors
<b>CP 1 Focus on Direction</b>			
1.1			
1.2			
1.3			
<b>CP 2 Build a powerful organizational structure</b>			
2.1			
2.2			
2.3			
<b>CP 3 Give life to data</b>			
3.1			
3.2			
3.3			
<b>CP 4 Ensure student-focused vision and action</b>			
4.1			
4.2			
4.3			
<b>CP 5 Lead Learning</b>			
5.1			
5.2			
5.3			

**Other notes:**

Interview notes

School Selection Committee Member: \_\_\_\_\_

School Selection Committee Member: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix E  
Middle Grades Leadership Academy (MGLA)  
MGLA Review Team Training Session  
Agenda  
January 27, 2014  
9:00 – 11:00 am

9:00 Richardson	Welcome  Introductions	Dr. Yvette
9:05	History of MGLA	Dr. Peggy Connell
9:15 Hodge	Five Critical Practices	Dr. Ruth Ash/Dr. Pat
10:45	MGLA Review Process	Dr. Janet Cumbee
11:20	Evaluation of Training	Ms. Zebra Green
11:30	Lunch	MGLA Review Team MGLA Work Group
12:30	Adjourn	

## Appendix F

### Five Critical Practices Correlated with Alabama Plan 2020

#### **AL 2020 Objectives**

#### **Five Critical Practices (CP)**

##### **Alabama's 2020 Learners**

1. All students perform at or above proficiency and show continuous improvement (achievement/growth).

2. All students succeed (gap closure).

3. Every student graduates from high school (graduation rate).

4. Every student graduates high school prepared (college and career readiness)

##### ***CP1 Focus on Direction***

1.1 Creating an organizational culture

1.2 Working with others to support, encourage, or require high-quality performance

1.3 Using a vision, mission, and strategic plan to make decisions and inform actions

##### ***CP2 Build a powerful organizational structure***

2.1 Working with others to create a powerful organizational structure

2.2 Leading an organization in becoming agile and flexible

2.3 Leading others in developing, maintaining, and improving processes that increase the effectiveness of the organization.

##### ***CP3 Give life to data***

3.1 Ensuring that key data are analyzed in a deliberate manner

3.2 Using data and current research to improve student learning

3.3 Communicating key data to all stakeholders

##### ***CP4 Ensure student-focused vision and action***

4.1 Creating a vision and a culture that focus on student learning and student needs

4.2 Providing instructional leadership

4.3 Leading the development of guidelines and procedures for classrooms

##### ***CP5 Lead Learning***

5.1 Establishing an environment of daily learning and providing time for others to collaborate, reflect, and share knowledge

5.2 Challenging the status quo and working with others to achieve change goals

5.3 Implementing methods to motivate, support, and/or encourage innovation

## AL 2020 Objectives

## Five Critical Practices (CP)

### Alabama's 2020 Support Systems

1. All students will attend school daily and be engaged in rigorous and relevant learning environments.
2. All students will develop a sense of personal and civic responsibility to ensure a learning environment that is safe and civil.
3. All students will be provided with individual and group counseling services.
4. All students will enter 9<sup>th</sup> grade prepared and with a 4-year plan that addresses their individual academic and career interest needs.
5. All students will be provided with healthy meals, physical education and health instruction supported with needed medical and related services.

### *CP1 Focus on Direction*

- 1.1 Creating an organizational culture
- 1.2 Working with others to support, encourage, or require high-quality performance
- 1.3 Using a vision, mission, and strategic plan to make decisions and inform actions

### *CP2 Build a powerful organizational structure*

- 2.1 Working with others to create a powerful organizational structure
- 2.2 Leading an organization in becoming agile and flexible
- 2.3 Leading others in developing maintaining, and improving processes that increase the effectiveness of the organization.

### *CP4 Ensure student-focused vision and action*

- 4.1 Creating a vision and a culture that focus on student learning and student needs
- 4.2 Providing instructional leadership
- 4.3 Leading the development of guidelines and procedures for classrooms

### *CP5 Lead Learning*

- 5.1 Establishing an environment of daily learning and providing time for others to collaborate, reflect, and share knowledge
- 5.2 Challenging the status quo and working with others to achieve change goals
- 5.3 Implementing methods to motivate, support, and/or encourage innovation

## AL 2020 Objectives

## Five Critical Practices (CP)

### Alabama's 2020 Professionals

1. Every child is taught by a well-prepared, resourced, supported, and effective teacher.
2. Every school is led by a well-prepared, resourced, supported, and effective leader.
3. Every school system is led by a prepared and supported visionary instructional leader.

### *CP1 Focus on Direction*

- 1.1 Creating an organizational culture
- 1.2 Working with others to support, encourage, or require high-quality performance
- 1.3 Using a vision, mission, and strategic plan to make decisions and inform actions

### *CP2 Build a powerful organizational structure*

- 2.1 Working with others to create a powerful organizational structure
- 2.2 Leading an organization in becoming agile and flexible
- 2.3 Leading others in developing, maintaining, and improving processes that increase the effectiveness of the organization.

### *CP3 Give life to data*

- 3.1 Ensuring that key data are analyzed in a deliberate manner
- 3.2 Using data and current research to improve student learning
- 3.3 Communicating key data to all stakeholders

### *CP4 Ensure student-focused vision and action*

- 4.1 Creating a vision and a culture that focus on student learning and student needs
- 4.2 Providing instructional leadership
- 4.3 Leading the development of guidelines and procedures for classrooms

### *CP5 Lead Learning*

- 5.1 Establishing an environment of daily learning and providing time for others to collaborate, reflect, and share knowledge
- 5.2 Challenging the status quo and working with others to achieve change goals
- 5.3 Implementing methods to motivate, support, and/or encourage innovation

## AL 2020 Objectives

### Alabama's 2020 Schools/Systems

3. Schools and Systems will be granted flexibility to innovate and create 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environments to meet the individual and collective needs of their students.

## Five Critical Practices (CP)

### *CP4 Ensure student-focused vision and action*

4.1 Creating a vision and a culture that focus on student learning and student needs

4.2 Providing instructional leadership

### *CP5 Lead Learning*

5.1 Establishing an environment of daily learning and providing time for others to collaborate, reflect, and share knowledge

5.2 Challenging the status quo and working with others to achieve change goals

5.3 Implementing methods to motivate, support, and/or encourage innovation

Appendix G  
 Middle Grades Leadership Academy (MGLA)  
 Walkthrough Training Evaluation  
 February 5, 2014  
 1:30 – 3:00 p.m.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (Optional) Position/Title:

To what degree do you agree with the items below? (5 Strongly Agree – 1 Strongly Disagree) NA Not Applicable

<b>The MGLA Training</b>	5	4	3	2	1	N A
--------------------------	---	---	---	---	---	--------

1. Presentation and activities were of high quality.
2. Handouts were engaging and useful.
3. Sufficient time was allowed for learning and practicing concepts.
4. The workshop was well planned and interactive.
5. The atmosphere was enthusiastic and conducive to a collegial professional exchange.
6. Session content and strategies met the purpose of the training.
7. The format and structure facilitated my learning.
8. I acquired the intended knowledge and skills to meet the purpose of the MGLA Training.
  
9. Which of the following statements best describes the primary purpose of the MGLA Walkthrough Training? (Select One)

The purpose of the MGLA Walkthrough Training was:

- A. To provide an opportunity to learn more about MGLA.
- B. To conduct a MGLA Walkthrough and appropriately assess participating school.
- C. To prepare me to select the best school to participate in MGLA.
- D. Not Clear

10. What is the most significant thing you learned today?
11. What support do you need to implement what you learned?
12. How can we build on this session for follow-up learning/training?
13. What was the most useful part of the MGLA Training? Why?
14. What was the least useful part of the MGLA Training? Why?
15. Additional Comments:

Appendix H  
Middle Grades Leadership Academy (MGLA)  
Walkthrough Evaluation

Date of Walkthrough:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (Optional) Position/Title:

To what degree do you agree with the items below? (5 Strongly Agree – 1 Strongly Disagree) NA Not Applicable

<b>The MGLA Training</b>	5	4	3	2	1	N A
--------------------------	---	---	---	---	---	--------

- |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| 16. Master Schedule was helpful for the completion of the walkthrough.   |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 17. Map of School was helpful for the completion of the walkthrough.   |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 18. Overall atmosphere of the school was receptive.  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 19. Area for meeting after walkthrough was sufficient.   |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 20. Sufficient time was allowed for the walkthrough to gain information to complete the Five Critical Practices Grid.  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 21. The Five Critical Practices of the Grid met the purpose of the walkthrough.  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 22. The format and structure of the walkthrough allowed me to gather information needed to thoroughly complete the Five Critical Practices Grid .                            |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 23. Sufficient time for the exit conference at the end of walkthrough was scheduled.   |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 24. The atmosphere in the exit conference was enthusiastic and conducive to a collegial professional exchange.   |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 25. The exit interview allowed me to gain information to clarify any questions concerning the walkthrough or Five Critical Practices Grid.                                   |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 26. Overall, I felt I met the purpose of the walkthrough: to gain sufficient knowledge to gather information needed to thoroughly complete the Five Critical Practices Grid. |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 27. Did you complete the walkthrough with a partner?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| YES  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| NO   |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 28. What was the most significant part of the school visit that impacted your thinking concerning the Five Critical Practices Framework?                                     |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 29. What was the most significant part of the walkthrough? Why?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 30. What was the least useful part of the MGLA walkthrough? Why?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |

31. Did the Five Critical Practices Framework meet the purpose of guiding the “Look Fors” during the walkthrough? How could the Five Critical Practices Framework be improved?
32. What suggestions do you have for future MGLA Walkthroughs?
33. What support do you need to better implement a MGLA Walkthrough?
34. Additional Comments:

# Importance of an Effective Principal-Counselor Relationship

LaWanda Edwards, *Alabama State University*

Ronald Grace, *Alabama State University*

Gwendolyn King, *Alabama State University*

*An effective relationship between the principal and school counselor is essential when improving student achievement. To have an effective relationship, there must be communication, trust and respect, leadership, and collaborative planning between the principal and school counselor (College Board, 2011). Principals and school counselors are both instrumental leaders in the schools and they are most effective when they are able to carry-out their appropriate roles. It is important that principals assign appropriate counseling duties and responsibilities and not administrative and coordination responsibilities. Allowing the school counselor to implement counseling programs will help principals to identify and address issues that contribute to academic failure.*

The relationship of the school principal and school counselor is instrumental in student success. The College Board (2011) states, “The desired outcome of an effective principal-counselor relationship is to raise achievement levels for all students and ensure equity in educational outcomes” (p.8). To develop an effective principal-counselor relationship, communication, trust and respect, leadership, and collaborative planning should all be a part of the relationship (College Board, 2011; Ponec & Brock, 2000; Vaught, 1995). As the leader of the school, the principal makes decisions about the roles and responsibilities of the school counselor and other personnel in the school. When school counselors are given roles and responsibilities that do not allow the school counselor to implement counseling programs and interventions, the relationship loses its effectiveness, due to the lack of communication and respect for the appropriate duties of a school counselor. This literature review will address how to improve the relationship between the principal and school counselor. It will also address the effectiveness of school counseling programs and how these programs can positively impact all students in the school. It is just as important to discuss the barriers to implementing these programs and identify strategies that principals can use to help overcome these barriers. The principal wants to be knowledgeable of appropriate school counseling duties and allow the school counselor to implement school counseling programs and interventions. The collaboration between the principal and school counselor may positively impact student achievement and the overall climate of the school.

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## **Principal-Counselor Relationship**

There is little doubt among researchers that improvements in the principal-counselor relationship (PCR) must begin with each professional understanding and respecting the role of the other. Though recent research has shed more light on the subject, a better understanding can be garnered if this phenomenon is viewed from an historical perspective. Furthermore, understanding how the principal-counselor relationship has developed offers insight into how it might be improved.

Over a decade ago, Stone and Clark (2001) commented on the dangers of viewing the counselor's role as peripheral to the foremost function of schooling or student achievement. Recently, educational researchers have engaged in conversations concerning methods of bringing school counselors into the mainstream of school reform through enhancing the principal-school counselor relationship. In view of their overlapping roles, it is surprising school counselors and principals have not traditionally regarded each other as being partners in leadership. Despite this, recent research suggests when their roles are properly understood, these leaders can form a very powerful alliance in academic achievement. In fact, Zalaquett (2005) described counselors and principals as being "natural partners," who should form a relationship based on a positive regard for the role of each professional. As proactive leaders, counselors can play a vital role as advocates for students and in supporting academic achievement. The role of principal, in this regard, is well documented in relevant literature, but researchers have only recently begun to investigate important aspects and hindrances of the PCR (Stone & Clark, 2001).

Dollarhide, Smith, and Lemberger (2007) suggest principals frequently assign counselors to non-counseling duties (such as registration, testing and scheduling) diminishing the school's comprehensive counseling program. This is increasingly problematic in light of recent school changes demanding more from educators overall and counselors in particular. For example, Amatea and Clark (2005) pointed to this problem in their findings how schools are expected to compensate for societal changes impacting children such as single parent homes, an increase in minority student enrollment with limited English speaking skills, growth of violence and sexually oriented behaviors depicted in the media, and the ever-increasing occurrences of family economic instability and poverty. In this light, counselors are being asked to rethink their role and view themselves more as educational leaders, student advocates, and social change agents in addition to their primary obligation to provide direct counseling services. Though it is paramount to school effectiveness that principals understand and embrace these changes, it seems many have not.

Though it is well documented in literature the counselor's role involves leadership, social change, advocacy and direct counseling services, school administrators seem not to view them in this light and continue to charge counselors with tasks that do not correlate with school effectiveness and academic achievement. In fact, Amatea and Clark (2005) found school administrator perceptions of the counselor role could be categorized into a typology of four historical roles ranging from most traditional to least traditional or most contemporary. In the most historic perspective administrators deemed counselors as an administrative team player or additional administrator who fulfills functions such as scheduling, coordinating standardized test administration, discipline, and referral for college or community services. Afterwards, administrators began

viewing the counselor as the responsive direct service provider. In this light, counselors were seen as being experts in providing psycho-educational activities helping students to resolve problems or crises. Administrators in this group typically expected counselors to continue to carry out administrative functions, but allowed to them to deviate from these tasks to help students resolve crises.

In a more recent perspective, administrators viewed counselors as collaborative case consultants who were expected to have expertise about the psychological, social, and educational needs of students and, at the same time, keep parents and teachers informed about intervention strategies that could be used in response to individual students. Most recently administrators have begun to view counselors as innovative school leaders tasked with assuming an active leadership role with the entire faculty and staff in improving the functioning of the school as a whole. These administrators feel because counselors often seek out the perspectives of faculty, students, parents, and community members, they are in a unique position to see the needs of the school from a holistic point of view. Counselors viewed in this way, are also expected to inform teachers of skills to help them improve how they work with students (Amatea & Clark, 2005).

The various aforementioned conceptions not only provide an overview of how administrators have perceived counselors over time, but is useful in helping them to better understand the counselor's role as being essential to school improvement efforts. Mallory and Jackson (2007) offered confirming evidence in their findings in order for school principals to engage counselors in the school improvement process, both must understand the responsibilities, roles, and perspectives of their professions. Lack of proper training has presented a significant barrier to this understanding. Along these lines, principal training programs typically have not included information concerning the professional competencies of counselors. Likewise, counselor preparation programs have not made counselors aware of the role of principals and, in some cases, even the counselor's role in the school improvement process has been omitted. Discussions between the principal and the counselors and arming university training programs with strategies designed to improve the PCR will, in turn, increase the understanding of each role and help resolve this issue.

### **Counselor Impact on Academics, Behavior, and Attendance**

With the changing roles of the school counselor, it has become important for school counselors to implement and evaluate counseling programs. The implementation of these programs help principals and teachers address the many issues students face daily. The authors focus on the impact that counseling programs have on student test scores, behavior, and attendance.

Research has shown school counseling interventions positively impact student GPA and achievement tests (Whiston, Tai, Rahardja, & Eder, 2011). Not only did the meta-analysis conducted by Whiston, Tai, Rahardja, and Eder (2011) conclude that counselor implemented interventions impacted student GPA and achievement tests, but it also found school counselor implemented interventions were effective in decreasing discipline referrals and increasing student problem solving skills. Other studies have identified a comprehensive school counseling program as positively impacting student test scores. Brigman and Campbell (2003) observed students who participated in the

counselor implemented classroom guidance and small group interventions performed better on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in the areas of Mathematics and Reading and improved their behavior, when compared to their counterparts, who did not participate in the counseling interventions. When Campbell and Brigman (2005) examined the impact of group counseling alone, they found the students who participated in the group counseling intervention showed gains on the FCAT in both Reading and Mathematics and improved their behavior when compared with the previous school year. Other researchers found elementary students who attended schools in which there was a high usage of comprehensive school counseling programs, for multiple years, scored higher in Reading and Mathematics, when compared to students who attended school in which there was not a high usage of comprehensive school counseling programs (Sink & Stroh, 2003).

Student attendance is an important factor to consider when addressing student success. Poor attendance negatively impacts a student's academic success and contributes to low achievement (Gottfried, 2009). With attendance impacting academic success, it is important for school counselors to identify students at-risk due to poor attendance and implement individual and school-wide interventions to improve attendance. Studies have shown school counselors used counseling, incentives, and a check-in system to help improve school attendance. Combining counseling and incentives have been effective in elementary, middle, and high schools. Bickelhaupt (2011) used small group counseling and incentives at an elementary school to increase attendance by 12% for the students who participated in the program. Edwards (2013) used individual counseling and incentives to address attendance at a middle school. At the conclusion of the interventions, the school non-attendance rate dropped from 26% to 19%. Similar to Bickelhaupt's and Edwards studies, with the exception of the incentives, Enea and Dafinoiu (2009) used individual counseling to help decrease truancy rates for high school aged students. The students who were in the experimental group had a 61% decrease in their truancy rate, while there was not a decrease in truancy rate for the control group.

### **Barriers to Implementing Interventions**

It is evident school counselors can implement programs to positively impact student achievement. This does not seem to be true among all school counseling programs due to multiple barriers experienced by school counselors. These barriers include the following: the school counselor not being allowed to use 100% of their time to implement counseling programs and interventions, lack of administrative support, student-to-school counselor ratio too high, resistance from other groups, classroom involvement interferes with immediate response to crises, lack of resources, special services programs that take away from guidance and counseling duties, and lack of communication (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011).

These barriers are not only detrimental to the school counseling program, but are also preventing the school counselor from counseling students to improve academics, behavior, and attendance. The one barrier identified more than others is the inability to use 100% of the time to implement counseling programs and interventions. Instead of counseling students, many school counselors are given administrative duties to include

serving as the testing coordinator or building the master schedule. Along with the administrative duties, school counselors are given other duties such as 504 coordinator, RTI coordinator, LEA representative, new student registrar, substitute teacher, and elective or connection teacher. There is not enough time in the workday to effectively implement counseling interventions and also complete the multiple non-guidance duties placed on school counselors.

Another barrier is the student-to-school counselor ratio. When school systems do not follow the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2003) suggestion for the student-to-school counselor ratio in schools, it hinders the school counselor from implementing effective programs. ASCA (n.d.) suggests a student-to-school counselor ratio of 250:1, but the national average is 471:1. This is almost double the recommended ratio. Following this ratio guideline will help improve dropout rate and discipline issues in school to positively impact student achievement. According to Utphall (2006), lower dropout rates were associated with lower student-to-school counselor ratios. Carrell and Carrell (2006) concluded a low student-to-school counselor ratio decreases student discipline problems. Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley, and Pierce (2012) also found lower student-to-school counselor ratios were statistically associated with lower discipline incidents and higher graduation rates. It is evident a lower student-to-school counselor relationship can improve the dropout rate and discipline problems.

### **Addressing Barriers**

Given compelling empirical evidence pointing to barriers hindering school counselors from implementing programs that positively impact achievement, it is incumbent upon principals to employ strategies will remove such hindrances. The most significant hindrances involve principals utilizing school counselors in non-counseling duties, lack of support, high student ratios, resistance from other staff, classroom interferences, and lack of communication. The College Board (2011) in conjunction with the American Counseling Association and the National Association of Secondary School Principals identified four elements (communication, collaboration, respect, and shared vision) that will, in general, address barriers to a successful principal-counselor relationship. Beyond these, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2011) has put forth more specific remedies to address the aforementioned barriers to coincide with those put forth by the College Board et.al. (2011).

As it relates to principals assigning school counselors to non-counseling duties and lack of communication, in general, effective communication will help alleviate this problem because it stems, at least in part, from an ambiguous perception of the school counselor's role. More specifically, principals may work with school counselors or central office personnel to develop a job description for the school counselor position adequately coincides with the American School Counselor Association National Model and also generates a guidance program newsletter to make the program visible throughout the community. Another possible solution is for principals and school counselors to identify priorities and benchmarks school counselors must obtain in reaching program goals (Missouri Department of Secondary and Elementary Education, 2011). A basis for the Missouri Department of Secondary and Elementary Education finding was put forth by Mallory and Jackson (2007) who suggested it is of utmost important for principals and

school counselors to clearly discuss the explicit roles and responsibilities of each position. Janson, Militello, and Kosine (2008) put forth an example of such specificity by clarifying the role of the school counselor as it relates to testing. Jansen, et al. (2008) indicated interpreting the achievement test results is considered an appropriate activity for school counselors while administering such tests is not. When a proper understanding of roles and responsibilities is communicated between school counselors and principals, it enhances the relationship in a manner that will have a positive impact on learning. Communication should be open and provide opportunities for input in shared decision making, which, by its very nature, involves collaboration.

Pertaining to lack of support, generally, collaboration is useful to enhance understanding and support and to impact the administrator's perception of the school counselor's role and vice versa (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011). Furthermore, a key element in collaboration between the principal and school counselor is shared participation in decisions impacting school-wide improvement efforts. The American School Counselor Association National Model (2003) calls for school counselors to provide leadership in managing the school's comprehensive counseling program and for principals to provide continuous support, facilities, resources, and time for its implementation. When principals and school counselors form an alliance or cooperative relationship around this objective, it will serve to eliminate barriers and improve student achievement. A proper understanding of the specific roles and responsibilities facilitates a shared vision, which in turn, yields mutual respect.

Regarding the resistance from other staff, it would be beneficial for the principals to communicate the school counselor's role, the benefits of the program, and the expectations of the staff on a consistent and persistent basis will specifically address the problems created by such resistance (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011). More generally, in a study conducted by the College Board (2009), principals and school counselors identified respect as one of the most important elements in the principal-counselor relationship. Trust is also a key factor in building a relationship based on mutual respect. In the study, school counselors expressed fear in trusting the principal with certain ideas may be looked upon as contrary to what principals think, because the school counselors serve at the pleasure of the principal. In the same study, principals acknowledged school counselors are often looked upon as "glorified record keepers" as opposed to leaders or change agents. Despite this, it is encouraging to note some principals in the study also believe school counselors can and should serve as the link between academic success and applying knowledge to real-life situations. Viewing school counselors in this way will also help facilitate a shared vision.

As it relates to high student ratios and classroom interferences, administrators can address this problem by communicating the school's (shared) vision, becoming politically active in reducing ratios, and convincing community leaders responsive services to schools should be a top community priority. Shared vision is simply a mutually agreed upon ideal or direction for student achievement which is the key element and main goal of school success. Along these lines, principals and school counselors should come to consensus on specific criteria for school success and equity. Communicating such a vision can be quite effective in implementing programs to solicit teacher involvement in conducting activities in the class supporting the comprehensive counseling program. A shared vision can also be helpful in developing and

communicating a school policy describing the school counselor as a partner in leading school improvement efforts and not just as a person who is only relied on for crisis response (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011).

### **Suggestions for Principals and Professors of Instructional Leaders**

First, the literature concludes improving the principal-counselor relationship is essential in helping all students with academic achievement. As the leader of the school, the principal wants to take the initiative to build an effective relationship with the school counselor. This can be accomplished by increasing communication and collaboration with the counselor. Communication can be increased by meeting with the counselor on a regular basis to discuss program needs and accomplishments. Collaboration is increased by appointing the school counselor to the school improvement team and other school committees to assist with leadership and decision-making in the school. There also needs to be mutual respect between the principal and counselor to build an effective relationship. The principal can show respect by knowing the roles and responsibilities of the counselor and allowing the counselor to carry-out these roles. These responsibilities and roles are instrumental in helping to close the achievement gap and can be found in the American School Counselor Association National Model (2003).

Secondly, the principal wants to support the counselor by addressing barriers that might prevent the counselor from counseling duties. These barriers include the student-to-counselor ratio and coordination of testing and other programs. The principal can advocate to the school superintendent and school board for a lower student-to-school counselor ratio to help with this barrier. The principal can also request to add a counselor at the school when the ratio is higher than 250:1. This is much easier to request when the principal and counselor can show how counselor implemented programs positively impact student achievement. The coordination of testing, 504, ELP, and other programs can also be a barrier for school counselors to implement programs. These duties can be assigned to other school personnel. Principals who see the importance of school counselors implementing counseling programs have assigned these duties to other personnel, such as math coaches, reading coaches, teachers, or assistant principals to name a few. When school counselors are allowed to implement counseling programs and interventions, with the support of the principal, student academics, behavior, and attendance improve. The impact of the counseling programs will help to close the achievement gap.

Professors of educational leadership can also help with improving the relationships of principals and school counselors. Professors of instructional leaders can incorporate the literature on the importance of building this relationship throughout the instructional leadership program. Collaboration with school counselor educators to develop projects and assignments focused on building effective relationships with school counselors, can be instrumental in helping future instructional leaders learn the knowledge and skills needed to effectively build a relationship with school counselors. Lastly, professors can develop workshops to help current principals effectively collaborate and build relationships with current school counselors.

The College Board, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the American School Counselor Association (2009) have started research in the area of

principal-counselor relationships, but there is still much research that needs to be conducted in this area. It would be beneficial to principals and school counselors if further research was conducted on improving the principal-counselor relationship. Building trust and collaboration between these two school leaders would positively impact student achievement. Research on the principal's knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of the school counselor would also be beneficial. Identifying the most effective ways to inform principals of these roles and the effectiveness of school counselor implemented interventions would not only contribute to both professions, but it would also become a vital component of school leadership. The collaboration and teamwork of the principal and school counselor are essential when working with students at-risk for failure, poor behavior, poor attendance, or dropping out of school.

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# The Relationship between Middle Grade Student Belonging and Middle Grade Student Performance

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*This study examined the relationship between a middle school initiative to develop student voice, interpersonal relationships, and intrapersonal relationships and students' sense of belonging. The literature indicated a strong connection between students' sense of belonging in school and positive outcomes in and out of the classroom (Deci & Knowles, 2008). The design compared changes in students' perceptions across time. The subjects were 187 male and 156 female sixth-grade students in a suburban school system during the 2011-2012 academic school year. Results indicated a decline in students' perceptions related to teacher and peer support, overall satisfaction, and academic competence.*

*Belonging* is an essential human need that strongly relates to self-esteem, acceptance, and positive interpersonal relationships in middle school years but is usually absent from school services (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Kunc, 1992). Middle school is a period of greater vulnerability with challenges to values, norms, self-esteem, and a strong need for support and approval from peers and adults (Education, 2012). Students with a low sense of belonging are often at risk for joining gangs, dropping out of school, or abusing drugs (Beck & Malley, 2003). Physical development and varied rates of maturity create further a challenge for some middle grade students. Deci (1992) stated a sense of belonging may strongly motivate students' interest in school, and promote classroom engagement, self-concept, intrinsic value, and the pursuit of academic and prosocial goals and behaviors.

## Literature Review

In middle school years, personal development and social goals may take precedence over academic goals (Education, 2012). Adolescent development begins five years earlier for current adolescents than for those of the last century. Students' accelerated physical development and the varying rates of maturity may cause a lack of coordination and social and physical awkwardness. As the physical development of middle school students accelerate, pressures toward sexual behavior increase, often preceding adequate emotional and social development.

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Academic benefits from positive peer relationships evolve early in students' school careers (Parker & Asher, 1987). Students maintaining positive peer relationships have greater enjoyment in the school environment and make greater gains in academic performance.

Approximately twenty-five percent of students experiencing low acceptance from peers drop out of school (Parker & Asher, 1987). Low peer acceptance may result in easy distraction, confusion, and difficulty concentrating, resulting in an unpleasant school environment with undue or unwanted stress.

Changing demographics have transformed traditional sources of belonging for the adolescent stage of development (Beck & Malley, 2003). One-parent households, adults' long work hours, and the transient nature of families have contributed to some children experiencing alienation and apathy.

Middle school students are intensely curious, argumentative, inexperienced with independence, and fledgling critical thinkers (Education, 2012). Fledgling critical thinkers encounter an academic curriculum that transitions from concrete stages of learning to more abstract thought processes stressing the ability to hypothesize, reason, consider multiple ideas, and contemplate thoughts possibly contrary to fact. Analyzing and synthesizing literature and mathematical concepts and symbols require the development of students' higher order thinking skills. Developing deeper insights into poetry, music, and political ideology involve skills of questioning and debating the opinions, attitudes, behaviors, and values of others. Therefore, active learning experiences and real world problem solving grow more important for middle grade students than passive, disconnected, and irrelevant teaching.

Brain research is pivotal in understanding adolescents who often do not have sufficient brain maturity to organize, plan, prioritize, and evaluate the consequences of certain actions (McDonald, 2010; Sylwester, 2003). The typical attention span of adolescents is 10 to 12 minutes. This level of brain maturity suggests devising classroom structures and creating school climates that adapt to these characteristics.

Middle school students need healthy adult role models who listen and affirm their sense of well-being and belonging during a period of development that is often turbulent and challenging (Education, 2012). During this period, students transition from accepting adult moral judgments to developing autonomy and making judgments of their own.

Students often lack an innate sense of authority, and school leaders and teachers seldom consider students' perceptions a valid source of data regarding the learning environment (Angus, 2006; Cook-Sather, 2002). Allowing students' voices in the classroom empowers students to advocate for themselves and for their peers. Student voice encourages academic and social growth in areas of cooperation, compromise, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Having their voices heard and establishing positive relationships with teachers and peers increases students' satisfaction levels within the learning environment.

Allowing student voice in decision-making began in 1894 with the creation of student government at George Junior Republic School in Freeville, New York (Johnson, 1991). However, a decline in student voice developed with the social movements in the late 1960s had an adversarial relationship between some student organizations and school administrations and interfered with responsible student input (Mitra, 2008). Closing the achievement gap took primacy over other issues, including students' rights to peaceful

assembly and petition, freedom of association, due process, participation in school government, and educational opportunity.

Anderman (2003) examined 618 sixth-grade students in urban and rural public middle schools in a Southeastern state. The results indicated that the middle school setting decreases students' sense of acceptance and belonging and suggest the need for a respectful and psychologically safe instructional environment to prevent declines in belonging.

Rowe, Sangwon, Baker, Kamphaus, and Horne (2010) used the Student Personal Perception of Classroom Climate (SPPCC) survey to assess elementary students' personal perceptions of the classroom environment in four public elementary schools in an at-risk urban school district in the southeastern United States. Of the 267 students, 47% were male and 53% were female. Furthermore, 46% were African American, 34% Caucasian, 7% Latino/a, 2% Asian/Pacific, 2% multiracial, and 9% of unknown race or ethnicity. Results indicated the students who responded did not indicate a noticeable difference between support received from teachers and support received from peers.

Doda and Knowles (2008) analyzed 2,700 student responses to the question *what should middle school teachers know about middle school students*. Students identified compassion, fellowship, friendship, personalization, and mutual concern from teachers and peers as important information teachers should know. Specific attributes of teachers desired by students were encouragement, cheerfulness, helpfulness, kindness, patience, and respect. Students identified appreciation for uniqueness, commitment to success, personalized instruction, and less anonymity as high on the list of desired characteristics of teachers. Furthermore, students in the survey of Doda and Knowles consistently reported their desire for teachers' awareness of bullying, harassment, and competitive peer relationships. Students preferred a democratic and respectful teacher-to-student conversation that included insights from adolescent experiences and a review of their struggles, hopes, fears, and dreams.

This author's study explored relationships between students' perceptions of belonging, academic competence, and satisfaction with teachers who provided personal support throughout the school year. Participants included 343 sixth-grade students and their perceptions were studied over an academic year.

Throughout the school year, sixth-grade students and teachers participated in a class meeting initiative to give sixth-grade students opportunities to develop a strong sense of belonging, autonomy, and competence in individual classrooms and across the school day. The operating theory for this research focused on students' increase in academic ability and intrinsic motivation to learn when experiencing classroom and school-wide support for developing a strong sense of belonging, autonomy, and competence in individual classrooms and across the school day.

Class meetings supported the core elements research indicated were essential for developing middle grade students' perceptions of belonging. The core elements included respectful, supportive relationships, development of autonomy and agency, collaboration with peers and teachers, and a grade-wide emphasis on common goals and ideals.

The researcher modeled the initiative for teachers in professional learning meetings, with an emphasis on identifying the characteristics. Videotaped examples of a class meeting were provided for teachers to view and discuss. A re-enactment between the researcher and a teacher volunteer was provided as an example of the type of

conversation taking place. The group discussed facilitation techniques and teacher behaviors and responses.

Teachers received a list of possible questions to facilitate their respective class meetings, with encouragement to ask open-ended questions and to provide neutral, non-value-laden responses to students' answers. Teachers trained to spark thoughts and facilitate discussions of students' ideas in the classroom meetings.

During the class meetings, students discussed varying previous grade-level experiences and examined differing thoughts and ideas surrounding those experiences. Students also deliberated on the importance of student led conferences and the value of creating engaging homework. Teachers used their skills to redirect value-laden conversations and to respect each speaker's point of view.

The researcher videotaped class meetings in classrooms throughout the year. In collegial conversations, teachers studied the videos and refined their facilitation techniques and, also, studied students' responses, communication skill, and social skill development to guide the facilitation and students' dialogue during the next scheduled class meeting.

Class meetings occurred on a weekly basis in sixth-grade reading classrooms. Outside of Class meetings, teachers reviewed anonymous student responses in school wide, design team, and grade level meetings. Student responses from the class meetings influenced decision-making within the school and the implementation of many school initiatives. Application of ideas from the responses of students gave voice to the students and supported their development of communication and social skills.

## **Method**

This study used a quasi-experimental design, comparing changes in perceptions across time. The quasi-experimental design did not use random assignment, but inferences about the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable are possible. This study allowed for comparisons of perceptions across time while not interrupting the students' natural environment.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study included students enrolled in the sixth grade during the 2011-2012 academic year in a suburban school system located in the Southeastern United States. At the time of this research, the student population for the district was 4,300. The middle school student population included 1,018, with 343 students in the sixth grade and thirty-eight students qualified for the Free and Reduced Lunch program. Table 1 presents the breakdown of genders of the students who participated in this study. Table 2 presents the ethnicity of the student population.

Table 1  
*Male and Female Students*

Students	Males	Females	Total
6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	187	156	343

Table 2  
 Student Ethnicity

Students	Whites	African-American	Asian	Multi-Race	Total
6th Grade	303	27	10	3	343

**Instrumentation**

This study utilized the four factors of the Student Personal Perception of Classroom Climate: Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analyses (SPPCC) which consist of the four following factors: Factor 1 is Teacher Support; Factor 2 is Academic Competence; Factor 3 is Satisfaction; and, Factor 4 is Peer Support (Rowe et al., 2010). The Cronbach alpha ranged from .71 to .85.

The SPPCC is a 26-item Likert like response scale instrument with generated scores related to students’ overall perceptions of teacher academic support, teacher personal support, peer academic support, peer personal support, academic competence, and satisfaction. The score of 0-never represented the lowest rating, and the score of 3-almost always represented the highest rating.

Rowe et al. (2010) conducted two confirmatory factor analyses to determine the internal consistency of the factors. Factor correlations ranged from .03 to .43 in the first study. The second analysis yielded Cronbach alphas, ranging from .79 to .91. The factor correlations ranged from .27 to .60.

## Data Procedures

The researcher utilized the Student Personal Perception of Classroom Climate survey (SPPCC) to gain students' perceptions of the level of belonging in the school setting. Sixth grade students completed the SPPCC in the fall, winter, and spring of the 2011-2012 school year. Sixth grade teachers administered the survey to subjects in a morning homeroom period and returned the survey instrument to the homeroom teacher who returned all surveys to a designated teacher within another grade level.

A one-way repeated measure ANOVA determined if sixth grade students' perceptions of teacher personal support, academic competence, and satisfaction changed across time. Since the present study compared three time points, a post hoc test determined which time points were significantly different from baseline measures. A Bonferroni corrected post hoc t test for the error resulting from multiple comparisons.

Results indicated a decline in perceptions' related to teacher personal support, academic competence, and satisfaction from the fall of the school year to the spring of the school year. The initiation of the first implementation of class meetings and the new skill of facilitating non-judgmental conversations among sixth graders may possibly affect the comfort level of teachers and students and their willingness to interact freely. The focus of sixth grade teachers on the gathering and reporting of information from student conversations rather than a focus on developing student identities, self-worth, and sense of belonging may also contribute partially to the decline in perceptions.

Table 3 presents the statistical means and standard deviations of students' perceptions regarding teacher personal support, academic competence, and satisfaction.

Table 3

*Means and standard deviations across time*<sup>a</sup> Student Personal Perception of Classroom Climate Category

SPPCC Category <sup>a</sup>	M	SD
<u>Teacher Personal Support</u>		
Fall	3.34	0.705
Winter	3.15	0.680
Spring	3.24	0.621
<u>Academic Competence</u>		
Fall	3.61	0.515
Winter	3.51	0.540
Spring	3.57	0.546
<u>Satisfaction</u>		
Fall	2.95	0.523
Winter	2.85	0.546
Spring	2.83	0.564

## Findings Associated with Hypotheses

*Null Hypothesis 1:* There will be no significant difference in middle school students' perceptions of belonging from teacher personal support between the fall, winter, and spring of the school year.

A significant main time effect from a one-way (time) repeated measures ANOVA occurred in teacher personal support perceptions ( $F_{(2, 606)} = 10.822, p < 0.001$ ). Bonferroni corrected post hoc tests indicated a significant decrease in the winter surveys of teacher personal support when compared to the fall (mean difference of  $-0.189, p < 0.001$ ), and the spring surveys when compared to fall (mean difference of  $-0.104, p = 0.50$ ) (Figure 1). Therefore, the null hypothesis that no differences occurred across time in perceptions of teacher personal support is rejected. Sixth grade students' perceptions changed (negatively) across time.

Table 4  
*Repeated Measures Comparisons  
Teacher Personal Support*

	Fall Administration 3.3437	Winter Administration 3.1546	Spring Administration 3.2401
Fall	-----	-.189*	-.104*
Winter	-----	-----	.086
Spring	-----	-----	-----

\* $p < .05$

*Values are means  $\pm$  standard error. +\* indicates a significant difference of  $p < 0.001$  from fall. \* indicates a significant difference of  $p < 0.05$  from fall.*

*Null Hypothesis 2:* There will be no significant differences in middle school students' perception of belonging from academic support between the fall, winter, and spring of the school year.

A significant main time effect from a one-way (time) repeated measures ANOVA occurred in 6<sup>th</sup> grade students' perceptions of academic competence ( $F_{(2, 612)} = 5.105, p = 0.006$ ). Bonferroni corrected post hoc tests indicated a significant decrease in the winter surveys of academic competence when compared to the fall (mean difference of  $-0.100, p = 0.004$ ). No significant difference occurred when comparing the fall surveys to

the spring surveys ( $p=0.879$ ) (Figure 1). Although a significant decrease occurred between the fall and winter surveys, the researcher will retain the null since no differences occurred when comparing fall and spring surveys.

Table 5  
*Repeated Measures Comparisons*  
*Academic Competence*

	Fall Administration 3.6116	Winter Administration 3.5114	Spring Administration 3.5757
Fall	-----	-.100*	-.036*
Winter	-----	-----	.064
Spring	-----	-----	-----

\* $p < .05$

*Values are means ± standard error. +\* indicates a significant difference of  $p < 0.001$  from fall.*

*\* indicates a significant difference of  $p < 0.05$  from fall.*

*Null Hypothesis 3:* There will be no significant differences in middle school students' perception of belonging from satisfaction between the fall, winter, and spring of the school year.

A significant main time effect from a one-way (time) repeated measures ANOVA occurred in students' perceptions of satisfaction ( $F_{(2, 608)} = 9.325, p < 0.001$ ). Bonferroni corrected post hoc tests indicated a significant decrease in mid evaluations of satisfaction when compared to the fall (mean difference of  $-0.096, p = 0.003$ ), and the spring surveys when compared to fall (mean difference of  $-0.122, p < 0.001$ ) (Figure 1). Therefore, the null hypothesis revealed no differences occurred across time in perceptions of satisfaction was rejected. Sixth grade students' perceptions changed (negatively) across time.

Table 6  
*Repeated Measures Comparisons*  
*Satisfaction*

	Fall Administration 2.954	Winter Administration 2.858	Spring Administration 2.832
Fall	-----	-.096*	-.122*
Winter	-----	-----	-.026
Spring	-----	-----	-----

\*p<.05

*Values are means ± standard error. +\* indicates a significant difference of p<0.001 from fall.*  
*\* indicates a significant difference of p<0.05 from fall.*

A separate repeated one-way ANOVA analyzed each of the three categories. Significant main effects occurred for each category: Teacher Personal Support ( $p<0.001$ ), Academic Competence ( $p=0.006$ ), and Satisfaction ( $p<0.001$ ). Bonferroni corrected post hoc t tests indicated students' perceptions of teacher personal support and satisfaction negatively changed across time. While students' perceptions of academic competence were lower at mid-year, no changes occurred when comparing fall to spring. Figure 1 depicts the changes in sixth grade students' perceptions of teacher personal support, academic competence, and satisfaction across time.

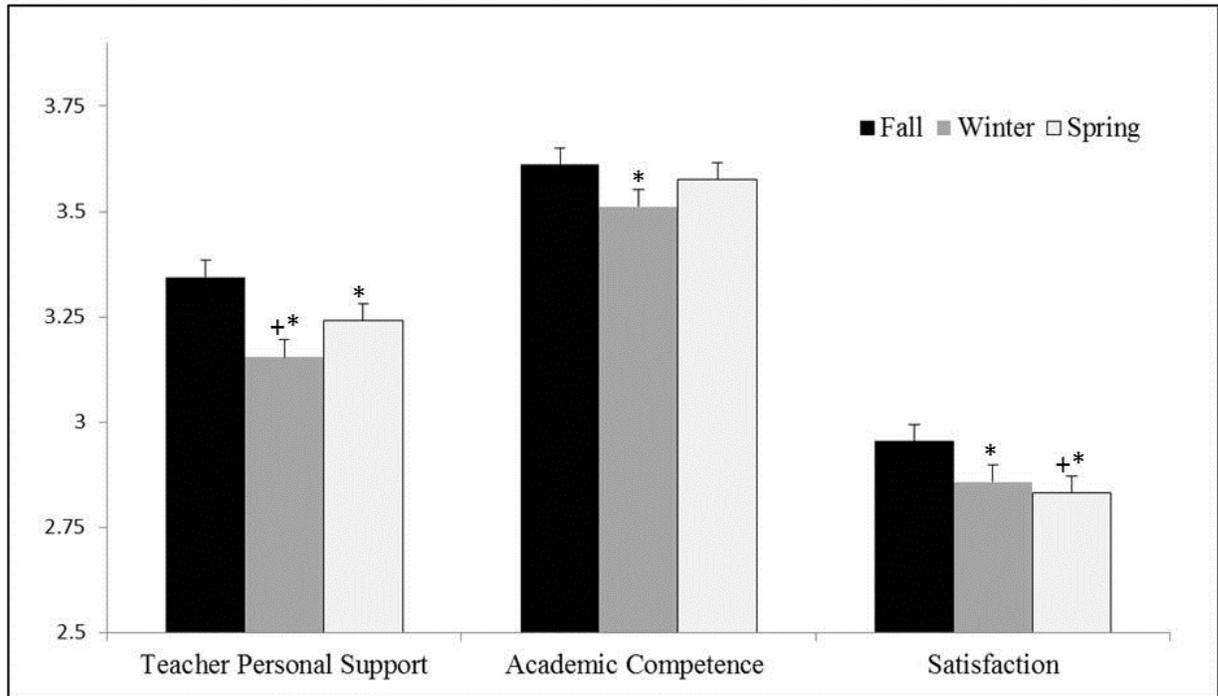


Figure 1: *Changes in sixth grade students' perceptions of teacher personal support, academic competence, and satisfaction across time.*

### Conclusions and Implications

Faircloth (2009) suggests students and teachers' engaging through ideas is one way to support student belonging. Students' interpersonal relationships, sense of self, sense of voice, and school satisfaction may develop from speaking and revealing their identities and opinions.

According to Benenson and Dweck (1986), students' positive self-perceptions decline from elementary to middle school. The decline in students' perceptions of teachers' concerns for their well-being may reflect the students' natural developmental changes.

The data collected from this study emphasized the need for positive teacher-student relationships in order for students' sense of belonging and satisfaction to increase. In this study, as teacher-to-student relationships decreased, student satisfaction and sense of belonging decreased. Similar to the results of the study conducted by Ma (2003), the teacher is a critical component in shaping the students' sense of belonging. This study revealed the decline in students' perceptions in teacher personal support, academic competence, and satisfaction throughout the school year. In sixth grade class meetings, teachers focused more of their attention and energy on gathering the information from student conversations than developing the students' identities, self-worth, and sense of belonging.

This study underscores the challenge in creating middle school communities that equally appreciate and confront social, emotional, and academic developmental needs of students. Integrating students' views and voices into policies and practices may enhance learning experiences and become integral to school reform.

## Recommendations for Future Research

This study was limited to one grade level in one school in a suburban school system located in the Southeastern United States. Additional studies could focus on other middle school grade levels to determine students' perceptions of belonging as students mature across districts, cities, and states.

Additional professional learning may supplement teachers' knowledge and understanding of middle school students, especially in the areas of brain development, emotional intelligence, and effective communication. Additional professional learning in the skills of facilitating conversations with groups of students and attending to their concerns may increase the effectiveness of the class meetings and add to the comfort and freedom of expression of the students.

A longitudinal study would provide data on students from the first to the last year in middle school. Tracking grades, behavior, school involvement, and family demographics would provide a statistical picture of students' progression or regression overtime.

Qualitative data from students and teachers would strengthen the quantitative data and supplement the analysis of students' responses. Expanding the study to include a comparison of teachers' perceptions of their performance with students' perceptions of their performance may provide insight into the issue of belonging and strengthen professional learning.

Class meetings related directly to students' identities and perspectives may strengthen the positive influence of teachers and peers. Relevant topics of interest to middle school students such as friendship, self-esteem, and preparation for high school may encourage self-exploration and revelation.

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# Transformational School Leadership and Stakeholders' Perceptions Regarding Cyberbullying, Its Effects, and Suggestions for Intervention

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*Cyberbullying is a growing phenomenon influencing schools, which must be addressed. Transformational school leaders, as the literature suggests, employ strategies for addressing cyberbullying including forming partnerships, implementing education and awareness programs, and applying disciplinary action. The purpose of this study is to understand how cyberbullying affects stakeholders and how transformational school leaders can better address the issue. Perceptions regarding cyberbullying were collected and analyzed using focus group interviews from school administrators, school counselors, parents, and external authorities. Content analysis identified five significant themes. Discussion of results, stakeholder implications, and recommendations include ideas regarding stakeholder partnerships, education and awareness programs, school disciplinary action, parental supervision and control, and ideas concerning relationships and trust.*

Transformational leaders in today's schools understand that cyberbullying has been identified and established as a major issue facing students who access online communication and messaging devices (i.e. computers, notebooks, tablets, and smart phones). Texting and social networking have become major forms of communication for this generation of school-aged children. Our current middle and high-school children are faced with the ever-growing pressure of social status, which has become compounded by the increased use of hand-held devices that connect them to others at almost any time and any location (Taylor, 2008).

Transformational leadership consists of four factors, often referred to as the four I's of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Bullying of any kind, including cyberbullying, is not to be tolerated by school transformational leaders who exhibit the 4 I's including individualized consideration as they are concerned for the individual well-being of each and every student. School leaders are faced with the difficult and complex cyberbullying problems that arise between students and result in upset, insecure, and concerned parents, students, and other stakeholders. Research has been conducted on cyberbullying, its contributing factors, its increasing rates, and its effects upon victims, bullies, and bystanders. A small percentage of these studies provide information about actual perceptions of those directly involved

with students (Beale & Hall, 2007). This particular study focused on the perceptions of school stakeholders regarding the effects of cyberbullying on society, their communities, and their schools. The purpose of the study was to provide in-depth, personal data acquired from the opinions, perceptions, and thoughts of school stakeholders via focus-group interviews. The collection and subsequent analyses of this data were intended to provide a rich perspective into the realities of cyberbullying and its effects upon groups of individuals connected with schools.

### **Setting of the Study**

The setting of the study was located in a single school system in the southeastern region of the United States. The school system serves a diverse population spanning an entire county, containing rural, sub-urban, and urban areas, various racial and ethnic groups and multiple socio-economic levels. Four distinct stakeholder groups were chosen to participate in focus-group sessions: school administrators, school counselors, parents of secondary students served by the school system, and legal-expert and law-enforcement officials who work in and serve the selected school system's area. Participants received information about the study prior to participation and all provided written consent prior to participation.

### **Research Methods**

This cyberbullying study was framed and driven by the qualitative methods of a case study. The data were collected from various stakeholders representing different roles and the connection between stakeholders was the single school system served by the region in which the stakeholders live, work, and raise their children. The school system itself represents the focal point of the study. Stakeholders' opinions and perceptions were driven by three questions: 1. What were the school system's stakeholders' perceptions and beliefs of how cyberbullying affected the community? 2. What were the school system's stakeholders' perceptions and beliefs of how cyberbullying affected the school; and 3. What were the school system's stakeholders' perceptions and beliefs of how cyberbullying incidents initiated off school grounds should be handled by school officials? While each question sought the perceptions and beliefs of stakeholders, the questions were distinguished by who was affected by cyberbullying and how it should be handled.

The focus groups were homogenous, with each focus group consisting only of representatives from a single stakeholder group. All focus-group sessions were guided by discussion questions deriving from the three major research questions. All focus-group sessions, were conducted in forty-five to sixty minutes. Each focus group session consisted of at least five participants and at most ten participants. A total of eighteen administrators (three sessions), twelve counselors (two sessions), eighteen parents (three sessions), and ten legal-expert and law-enforcement officials (one session) participated in the focus group sessions. During the focus-group sessions, participants discussed various topics related to the questions posed by the principal researcher. These discussions were scripted and recorded via audio-recording devices. The focus-group sessions were the only data source used during the study. In-session data notes and transcribed data from

the audio recordings were coded and analyzed. The coding procedure used was content analysis, resulting in a number of themes emerged from the analyzed data.

### **Discussion of Results**

Five major themes were identified during data analyses. One theme is directly related to the phenomenon itself, representing the idea that the number of cyberbullying occurrences were on the rise, which means that cyberbullying is perceived as a growing problem. A significant number of references were made regarding the increasing threat of cyberbullying. These references were made by individuals from different stakeholder groups and across multiple focus-group sessions. Two more themes were related to factors possibly contributing to cyberbullying and its perceived rise in occurrences. One of these pertains to the widespread use of technology and hand-held devices that make online interaction and social networking easy for children. The other theme relates to a perceived lack of knowledge and awareness of parents in relation to operating technology, understanding the power of technology, and understanding the threat cyberbullying poses to their children. Another theme involves the question of responsibility and authority. More specifically, participants discussed questions about who is responsible for dealing with cyberbullying, who has authority and when do they have it, and whether or not these roles are shared between parents, school officials, and law-enforcement. The fifth theme was about the perceived need for an educational component offered by schools to better address cyberbullying. This fifth theme focuses on a solution that can be used by schools to address cyberbullying.

The first theme, the effect of technology on society, particularly children, was mentioned throughout the focus-group sessions. The stated and implied “power” of technology was considered to be both beneficial and harmful to society, depending on how the technology was used. Participants mentioned technology as being a powerful vehicle for communication and media for entertainment, as well as information resources. The misuse of technology via cyberbullying, harassment, and other online negative behaviors were mentioned by all focus-group participants. A common theme was the polarized values that technology applications bring to society. These applications include texting, social networking, messaging, video sharing, gaming systems, and other online communication tools (Shariff, 2004).

Responses affirmed technology yields both positive and negative effects. Technology is an effective tool providing efficiency and unlimited connections to many resources. Technology also creates a platform for individuals with malicious intent to exploit potential victims, shed negative attention upon others, harass and cyberbully others through online devices and applications. Because of the mixed positive and negative impacts of technology, multiple participants referred to technology as both a “blessing and a curse.”

Stakeholder groups emphasized two elements as difficult and dangerous in relation to cyberbullying. One is the element of masked identity which creates a perception of safety among cyberbullies to harass, defame, and embarrass their victims without concern for being identified or facing any negative consequences (Mason, 2008). Technology’s capabilities to broadcast negative comments, embarrass others, and bully online victims are the other element mentioned by focus group members as being

dangerous. Technology has the capability for individuals to share information and communicate their thoughts and feelings to a large audience, ranging from a few to hundreds, thousands, and even millions of people.

Mass communication can be achieved by anyone through applications such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The ability to share information is a tremendous benefit to society where individuals can instantaneously receive important information pertinent to their lives and affects them in a variety of ways. Conversely, these same tools are being used by individuals to cyberbully others. With instant and mass communication, cyberbullying is extremely dangerous and harmful to victims and their families, while creating a sense of disturbance and negative feelings (e.g. insecurity, awkwardness, anger, discontent) for bystanders who view or receive these types of communications and interactions (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

A concern study participants emphasized was the lack of fear online users, especially cyberbullies, possess in terms of posting and communicating inappropriate and malicious content. Taylor (2008) dubbed this feeling of invincibility as the “disinhibition effect.” Taylor states that the disinhibition effect occurs when online users feel a sense of comfort when communicating through online means because of a lack of face-to-face interaction between the sender and receiver. Factors such as non-verbal cues and concern of immediate retaliation by the receiver are not present, which exists during in-person or face-to-face interactions. When users are not privy to in-person feedback from others or a real-world context, it may result in a false sense of security and lead to more harmful, malicious, and otherwise negative posts and comments, both in terms of severity and quantity (Taylor, 2008).

The second theme pertains to the apparent rise in the number of cyberbullying occurrences. Several participants perceive increased usage of technology has led to a direct increase in cyberbullying occurrences. Hinduja and Patchin (2010) noted this in their research. As with this study’s participants, Hinduja and Patchin stated increased use, access, and dependency to technology has and will continue to result in increased incidents of cyberbullying.

Many focus-group participants perceive an increase in the number of cyberbullying incidents. Hinduja and Patchin (2009) revealed that the increase of technology access and use has led to increased numbers of occurrences in activities considered to be cyberbullying. In addition to increased access and usage, user dependence upon technology has also increased. Youth dependence upon technology has increased. Other research supports the study participants’ responses about user dependency: Because of increased access and a perceived dependency upon technology among youth (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), more instances of cyberbullying will occur as a result (Wright, Burnham, Inman, & Orgochock, 2009).

Participants felt as if young online users would be reluctant to report certain incidents involving their use of online applications such as social networking, texting, and gaming; because it may lead to parents denying them access to use the devices. Taylor (2008) shared since technology is such a significant part of young peoples’ social lives, losing access to online activity or electronic communication is not a desired outcome for young technology users. The increase in cyberbullying incidents, because of increased technology use (Wright et al., 2009), coupled with a perceived reluctance by

young users to report issues compounds the issue and ultimately leads to bigger and broader negative consequences (Feinberg & Robey, 2008).

In addition to increased access, usage, and dependence upon technology as a source for communication, participants across focus groups felt as if society had a tremendous impact on the increased use of technology. Participants mentioned a “moral decline” in society, which includes a lack of values and skills for dealing appropriately with conflict, respectfully interacting with others, and making good decisions in general. This sense of moral decline in society is one of the reasons transformational leadership is needed now more than ever in our schools. Through idealized influence, transformational leaders are moral and ethical in their behavior and as such, are viewed as positive role models for followers to emulate because they are respected, trusted, and admired (Fenn & Mixon, 2011).

Participants in this study perceived a lack of solid family structures and support systems as being a negative contributor to improper behavior, interaction, and decision-making, including online activities. Family structures and support systems, according to participants, was the presence of parents who are actively involved in their child’s life and who provide the model for handling issues, making decisions, and establishing boundaries and expectations to create better opportunities for success. According to all focus groups, these structures and supports are missing in many families and parents are not taking responsibility to ensure these elements do exist nor do parents follow through with adequate development and establishment of expectations for proper behavior. Effective monitoring and supervision by parents is lacking to ensure the appropriate behaviors are present in their children.

The third major theme emerging from the analysis of responses is the lack of parental control, awareness, and understanding of technology and their children’s online communication and interaction with others. Participants felt parents did not have a strong knowledge and understanding of technology, particularly online communication tools such as texting and social networking. Participant responses indicated parents lacked a strong understanding in these areas and their children often had a greater level of knowledge, understanding, and skill for operating these types of technology. Therefore, parents were not capable of effectively monitoring and supervising their children’s online activities and technology use (Mason, 2008). Some participants believed because of this lack of knowledge, understanding, and skill, particularly in comparison to their children, parents become disengaged and otherwise disinterested in what their children are doing online. All four focus groups stated although parents may not have equal or higher levels of technology skill and understanding, it should not be an excuse or deterrent for establishing boundaries and rules for monitoring and supervising their children’s online activity. Online activity is not policed or governed strictly, and user rights to privacy and speech prevent many issues from being addressed from a law-enforcement standpoint. As one participant from the counselor focus group stated, “Cyberspace has no rules.”

Participants in the administrator, counselor, and parent groups conveyed parents are not aware cyberbullying is an issue of concern and has significant implications nor do they treat cyberbullying with a heightened level of seriousness or sense of urgency. One participant stated many parents allow unfiltered and unsupervised online activity and consider cyberbullying to be a non-issue. One parent shared many parents think cyberbullying is “not a big deal.” Others mentioned some parents allow their children too

much freedom and too much privacy. Participants agreed parents who allow their children excessive freedom and privacy are one of the contributing factors to increased online misconduct, including cyberbullying. Some commented there is an apparent lack of responsibility and maturity among our youth which is particularly evident in online conduct and decision making. The perceived lack of responsibility among children and adolescents emerged in every focus group session. Participants in all groups believe there is a responsibility for all stakeholders involved. Participants from the counselor and parent groups mentioned an increase in parents who engage in inappropriate online activity and conduct and the implications of such behavior. Parent participants mentioned irresponsible parents engage in cyberbullying behaviors towards their children's peers via social networking sites and texting. Parents will engage in these activities in defense of their own children or they will engage for fun, entertainment, retaliation, or simply malicious intentions. Regardless of reason, participants across stakeholder groups perceive this as unacceptable and possibly detrimental to their children's understanding of proper online conduct. Students have a responsibility to behave appropriately online and make good decisions. Parents have a responsibility to establish boundaries, monitor online activity, and supervise their children. School officials have the responsibility to monitor technology use at school, communicate with parents about issues related to cyberbullying, and raise cyberbullying awareness to students and parents. Law enforcement has the responsibility to partner with school communities to address cyberbullying is threatening to others or criminal in nature. Research emphasizes the significance of responsibility in addressing online dangers and issues such as cyberbullying. Juvonen and Gross (2008) and Franek (2005) suggested responsibility is important when confronting issues in cyberspace since it is considered uncharted territory.

A fourth major theme is the authority and responsibility of parents, school administrators, and law enforcement, who are responsible for policing online activity and cyberbullying issues and who hold the authority in addressing cyberbullying issues. Participants understood and perceived the responsibility of policing online activity both in and out of the home to be of the parents. While schools are responsible for what happens on campus and activities involving school technology, most cyberbullying issues remain outside of school jurisdiction where school administrators have little to no authority (Burrow-Sanchez, Call, Drew, & Zheng, 2011). This perceived lack of authority has been difficult for school officials in effectively addressing cyberbullying and other online misconduct. Law-enforcement officials were also considered to be an authority that could affect online activity (Beale & Hall, 2007). Some legal-expert and external authority participants revealed law enforcement can get involved in cases where specific threats to do harm have been made or illegal pornographic material has been shared or communicated. This is also known as sexting (Willard, 2007). Furthermore, a participant in this group emphasized young people who engage in sexting or texting nude pictures of themselves and others, are subject to felony charges based on the state of Alabama's law regarding the possession and/or sharing of child pornography.

The final theme relates to an educational component many participants across stakeholder groups believe is needed in order to better address cyberbullying. Participants shared schools should provide instruction about cyberbullying, its dangers, and how to

avoid or cope with the pitfalls in online interaction, electronic communication, and social networking.

### **Suggestions for Cyberbullying Intervention**

The analysis of participant responses provides an understanding of the causes of this phenomenon, suggestions for improvement, and strategies for addressing cyberbullying. These thoughts and suggestions if implemented properly with adequate collaboration among school system stakeholders, could positively affect cyberbullying situations. The following stakeholder suggestions present a set of tools and strategies for schools to use in combating cyberbullying in their school communities. One of the four components of transformational leadership is intellectual stimulation. Providing intellectual stimulation, transformational leaders engage all stakeholders in problem solving and identifying solutions while encouraging them to be innovative and creative in addressing problems and finding solutions (Fenn & Mixon, 2011).

One suggestion from the focus group responses concerned the development of education programs for students and parents. Transformational leaders educate school stakeholders about the effects of cyberbullying. These programs would focus on awareness of cyberbullying and its dangers. The audience is students and parents while school officials would provide the instructional program and resources. Schools could be directly responsible for providing resources and instruction with school staff for students and parents while partnering with community agencies and law enforcement. Participants felt this would be a great measure for prevention and creating partnerships between schools, students, and parents. Hoff and Mitchell (2009) emphasized the importance of this measure stating educational awareness programs should be established by schools with both students and parents involved. Beale and Hall (2007) stated these type programs help develop stronger relationships between schools, students, and parents, particularly in the case of addressing cyberbullying issues.

Burrow-Sanchez et al. (2011) believe specific criteria must be covered in the cyberbullying programs. The items addressed should include specific dangers present online, cyberbullying scenarios, potential pitfalls, and strategies to identify these situations. Students and parents should be aware of some of the possible legal implications resulting from cyberbullying including harassment, libel, violation of privacy (particular types of cyberbullying – hacking information, using account profiles, posing as another while online), and other laws protecting individuals from threats or malicious intent. Some participants, particularly in the parent, counselor, and external authorities groups, made comments alluding to the importance of specifying to students and parents about the dangers of cyberbullying and the legal implications for being involved in such behavior. One participant in the external authorities group shared cyberbullying needs to be treated as any other form of harassment, particularly when specific threats are made towards victims by individuals who have been identified as cyberbullies.

Another suggestion brought forth by study participants is the roles and responsibility of parents, in regards to cyberbullying. Participants representing each stakeholder group believe that parents play a crucial role in preventing cyberbullying as well as dealing with issues that are occurring. Parents can prevent cyberbullying with proper monitoring and establishing boundaries for their children's online activities

(Taylor, 2008). Participants from the parent and counselor groups believe many parents are lacking when it comes to monitoring their children's online activities and technology use. Participants suggested parents can accomplish this by first creating guidelines and rules for their children's online activities and their access to technology. However, participants also stated establishing rules is not enough. Parents must enforce the rules and directly supervise their child while using online applications such as social networking sites and text messaging. Supervising Internet use in general is another idea participants strongly suggest for success.

Modeling proper behaviors is another responsibility suggested for parents. Behaviors to model include interacting with others, handling difficult situations properly, and resolving conflict effectively without fighting or attacking others verbally, physically, or emotionally. In addition to teaching their children to handle conflict appropriately, without attacking others personally or with intent to harm them, parents should work with their children on respecting others regardless of their opinions. Participants from the parent focus groups felt children today do not know how to appropriately debate issues or disagree respectfully. Several participants discussed how children are too quick to attack others verbally, physically, and especially during online exchanges and comments posted to social networking sites. They felt parents modeling proper behaviors and correcting negative behaviors will be effective in the fight against cyberbullying. However, participants in all four focus groups believe parents are modeling negative behaviors through their interactions with other adults on social networking sites and other online communication applications, instead of modeling appropriate behaviors and teaching their children as they should. Modeling negative behaviors, according to many study participants, is extremely detrimental to the development of our youth in terms of using proper conduct in dealing with others and using proper interactions with others while online.

### **Conclusion**

According to responses gathered from focus group sessions representing all four stakeholder groups, parents have several areas they can exercise responsibility. Parents can be responsible by: 1) monitoring their children's online behavior and technology use, 2) directly supervising their children's online activity and behavior, 3) controlling their children's access and the amount of online use by establishing firm boundaries and clear expectations regarding online behavior and activities. Parents who execute these three responsibilities will take tremendous strides in preventing issues of inappropriate online activity and possible involvement in issues such as cyberbullying (Taylor, 2008).

The stakeholders who participated in this study's focus group sessions offered an array of thoughts and suggestions about how to effectively address cyberbullying issues young people are facing in their lives and community, as well as in general society. The suggestions offered were the general consensus of all four stakeholder groups. The ideas presented pertained to how stakeholders, including students, parents, school officials, and external authorities (i.e. law enforcement), can help prevent and thwart cyberbullying problems (Beale & Hall, 2007). Although the suggestions may spark interest from those who experience or understand the implications of cyberbullying and other online misconduct, the implementation of the following suggestions will require motivated

stakeholders who take responsibility in doing their part to understand and address these issues. It will require school officials who are transformational leaders that motivate all stakeholders to act by providing meaning and challenge to the work needed to address cyberbullying (Avolio, 2011). These suggestions are generally proactive in nature, focusing on ways to prevent cyberbullying issues before they begin.

Results of the data analysis indicated four major endeavors are required to effectively address cyberbullying. These four endeavors can be described as components of a single plan. The plan and each of the four components requires efforts from students, parents, school officials, and external authorities (i.e. law enforcement). Each component requires stakeholders to take on different roles and levels of responsibility. However, each stakeholder's participation in the efforts of all four components is critical to the overall success of these approaches.

As mentioned previously, monitoring and supervising children and adolescents' online activities is crucial to identifying and ultimately preventing online misconduct such as cyberbullying (Taylor, 2008). Some participants in each of the four focus groups mentioned the lack of maturity and responsibility of children and adolescents to make appropriate decisions, especially when no adult guidance or supervision is being applied. Therefore adults, particularly parents, must provide a level of guidance and supervision for our youth when they engage in online activities, especially when involving communication and social networking (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). While adult supervision is needed at both home and school, parents must take on the bulk of responsibility relative to monitoring and supervision. The reason parents must carry most of the load is because most unstructured online activity occurs away from school and at home. Not only should parents monitor Internet devices at home (i.e. desktop computers, laptops, netbooks, and tablets), but cell phones should be a major focal point for monitoring activity. This includes call logs, text messaging, internet activity, social networking (e.g. Facebook and Twitter), and other forms of online communication. In addition to monitoring activities, direct supervision of activity is also necessary in effectively addressing or preventing cyberbullying. Parents should set limits on the amount of online activity for recreation and socialization. They must directly supervise their children's online activity while it occurs or at least create a setup where children are not isolated or protected from immediate parent supervision (i.e. no online activities allowed in locked rooms or on different levels of a home). Children must realize parents can check their activity at any moment (Taylor, 2008).

School officials must monitor and supervise online activity as well. Although most recreational and social online activity occurs at home or away from school, more opportunities are being provided at school or within school-related functions. Because of this increased opportunity at school and school functions, school officials must make stronger efforts to monitor and supervise online activities of their students. School officials are already required to monitor and supervise all student activities (Willard, 2007); therefore this effort is not a major undertaking. The school system involved in this case study possesses and utilizes tools and equipment for monitoring student online activity on the school system network. However, many students' cell phones and mobile devices are equipped with cellular data plans access outside networks, which cannot be monitored by school equipment and technology.

Schools should constantly assess their policies and procedures related to student technology use (Beale & Hall, 2007). With increasing pressure for additional technology to be incorporated into schools for instructional and student communication related to learning (i.e. Skype, group activities, etc.), schools must pay closer attention to monitoring and supervising technology use and online activities. Schools must ensure their current technology use policies and procedures are applicable and effective in relation to today's technology demands and capabilities (Beale & Hall, 2007). In addition to developing, revising, and improving their policies and procedures for technology use, schools must also take a look at their current harassment policies, including how current state and federal laws apply to harassment cases (Willard, 2007). Many state legislatures around the U.S. have empowered parents and schools to take action against students who harass other students. The main difference between states lies in the definition of harassment and the criteria that defines whether cases are considered harassment. External authorities, particularly law enforcement, have a vested interest in the recent adoption and revisions of laws concerning harassment. Schools should increase their dependence upon local law enforcement in cases of harassment, particularly situations where significant threats to individuals have been made and potential danger is present. Law enforcement should respond accordingly when schools call on them to assist, especially when schools do not have solid jurisdiction to address issues. Students may be threatened or harassed by other students off school grounds, which may lead to a question of authority regarding who is responsible for dealing with the perpetrator and protecting the victim. Law enforcement can play a significant role in addressing the issues because schools do not necessarily have the authority to completely handle it due to a question of school jurisdiction (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

The development of partnerships and stronger communication among stakeholders was a suggestion made by many study participants across stakeholder groups. The formation of partnerships between students, parents, school officials, and law enforcement are critical to the success of programs and efforts to effectively address cyberbullying (Beale & Hall, 2007). Partnerships are crucial in most endeavors to involve multiple groups and entities. Efforts needed to effectively address cyberbullying are no different. Partnerships must develop between students, parents, schools, and external authorities such as law enforcement and other support agencies knowledgeable about cyberbullying and related issues (Willard, 2007).

These partnerships must be built upon the two critical elements of communication and trust in order for the partnerships to be successful. Communication between stakeholder groups must be established and maintained on a consistent basis. School-parent relationships thrive on positive and frequent communication. Therefore, in efforts to prevent and address cyberbullying issues, schools and parents must communicate their knowledge of what their children/students are involved in relative to inappropriate online activities and cyberbullying. Communication is also important between students and schools. Students may know information about cyberbullying issues which may affect the school in terms of physical altercations and harassment occurring on school grounds initiated online (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Students who have knowledge of these issues prior to events such as these occurring, can help schools prevent them by communicating their knowledge and feelings about potential problems, threats to other students, and dangers to the overall school environment. Students who feel threatened by others via

online communication should communicate this to school officials, who can help protect them and address the harassing behaviors (Willard, 2007). Without communication, these partnerships do not exist nor do they assist in efforts to stop cyberbullying (Beale & Hall, 2007).

The other critical foundation of partnerships is trust. Just like communication, trust must exist between all stakeholder groups before a true partnership can be formed. In order for students to communicate their feelings of fear and concern to adults, particularly parents and school officials, they must hold a certain level of trust with the adults in their lives. In the case of parents, a level of trust must exist between them and their children (Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006) so their children are willing to share when problems occur online. Adolescents are often reluctant to tell their parents when they experience problems online because they are fearful that their parents will take their communication devices away or limit their access to them (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Many adolescents will look for other ways to deal with negative online experiences so that they are not in danger of their parents limiting or stopping their access to technology or online activity. Some young people choose to keep their parents “in the dark” regarding these issues for fear of losing access to their online devices (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

Many children and adolescents have developed a significant dependence on technology to communicate and socialize with others. It has grown to the point that online communication, texting and social networking primarily, has become their preferred form of communication. Their dependence upon these devices and applications to communicate and build their social lives causes them to feel lost and disconnected from the world without access to their online communication tools (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009). This is why young people will choose to keep their problems a secret from their parents, for fear of their parents taking those devices away. Many would rather endure problems such as cyberbullying in order to continue using their devices and connect with their social networks and friends online. It is crucial for parents to develop a trusting relationship with their children (Smetana et al., 2006) in order to be “in the loop” when it comes to their children’s online activities. Parents should establish a sense of comfort with their children that provides a sense of security in relation to helping their children deal with problems (Borawski, Ievers-Lanis, Lovegreen, & Trapi, 2003) online without posing the immediate threat of taking away devices or denying access to online communications. If this type of relationship is established, it will create more opportunities for parents to play an active role in guiding their children in making good online decisions and practicing good online behavior (Beale & Hall, 2007).

Trust must also exist between the other stakeholder groups. Another important partnership requires a healthy amount of trust is the relationship between parents and schools. Although trust is important in all facets of relationships between parents and schools (Tschannen-Moran, 2001), establishing trusting partnerships in dealing with online behaviors and cyberbullying is imperative. Parents must be able to trust school officials are providing the proper safety and security for their children when at school. Transformational leaders articulate to parents, students, and teachers, a compelling and positive vision of what the schools believe and what they value (Fenn & Mixon, 2011). This helps to generate trust between the schools and its stakeholders. When school officials communicate information to parents to inform them of issues that are occurring,

there must be a sense of trust existing between the parents and school officials, in order for the issues to be addressed appropriately. Parents rely on school leaders to communicate certain issues become known to them, but maybe do not exist at home or away from school. Some participants from all four stakeholder groups felt because certain behaviors and relationships exist exclusively at school, parents rely on school officials to communicate these issues to them. In cases of cyberbullying, problems resulting from cyberbullying and online misconduct between students will manifest at school (Shariff, 2004). At this point, school officials may deal with the manifestations, but are still limited in dealing with the initial online misconduct. School officials can use their established relationships and trust with parents to address the online behaviors occurring and initiating the issues occurring at school. Trust and communication empower partnerships between school and parents (Tschannen-Moran, 2001) and lead to another effective approach for dealing with cyberbullying.

The most common suggestion mentioned among participants in all focus group sessions is the need for formal education programs in schools. These programs should be designed to build awareness about cyberbullying, its nature, and its dangers among students and parents. Study participants suggested schools should be the responsible party for implementing the educational program, but all stakeholders should play a role in its overall success and outreach. According to many participants, schools should provide a formal education program for students that cover cyberbullying awareness, proper use of technology, online etiquette and proper conduct, coping with cyberbullying, seeking help, and reporting problems. Also, schools should provide programs to educate parents about cyberbullying in general, its dangers, proper monitoring and supervision, understanding technology use and its affect upon today's youth, and helping their children cope with online issues, conflict, and cyberbullying (Burrow-Sanchez, et al., 2011). Also, parents can receive information about seeking help and forming partnerships with schools and law enforcement to effectively prevent and address issues such as cyberbullying.

Students must be addressed about the dangers of cyberbullying and other types of online misconduct. Schools should educate students about pitfalls and what to look for when unsafe and inappropriate things occur while online. Students must be taught about how to disengage, ignore, and ultimately report issues of harassment, cyberbullying, and other online misconduct. Schools must teach students the skills they need to properly cope with adversity, conflict, and situations such as cyberbullying (Burrow-Sanchez, et al., 2011). Conflict management is a set of skills schools can teach students, which may prevent issues from developing into bullying or cyberbullying situations, fights, and other harmful or threatening situations. When teaching about dealing with conflict, students should learn the difference between conflict and bullying and how to handle each situation appropriately and accordingly. The same strategies and skills taught to all students can be utilized by witnesses and bystanders to address issues such as proper response and reporting problems (Burrow-Sanchez et al., 2011).

According to student participants, schools may be more apt to focus on students with their educational programs about cyberbullying and cyberbullying response, but parents are an extremely significant piece to the overall effectiveness of the program. Parents must learn about the true dangers and implications of technology use upon today's youth, including cyberbullying and other forms of online misuse and abuse. Parents should be taught how to effectively monitor their children's technology use and

online activity. Schools can provide tools for parents on how to effectively supervise their children and how to establish the appropriate rules and boundaries for their children's online use (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009).

### **Limitations**

Several factors present limitations to this particular study. First, the study was conducted with participants representing a single school system in central Alabama, which may create a regional bias of opinion concerning cyberbullying, its effects locally, and strategies and solutions for dealing with it. The ideas and opinions gathered may not be applicable to other school systems, areas of the state, regions of the United States, or other parts of the world. Secondly, data analyses were conducted using subjective reasoning to determine key ideas, thoughts, strategies, solutions, and themes that emerged from the data.

Focus group sessions were conducted with single stakeholder groups only. No sessions were mixed with participants representing different stakeholder groups. All groups were homogenous in terms of stakeholder type. Therefore, no opportunities existed for representatives of different stakeholder groups to share ideas, questions, and discussion. Furthermore, only 56 participants representing four different stakeholder groups took part in the study. This number, although large enough to conduct numerous focus group sessions, may not fully represent the ideas, opinions, and beliefs of others living and working in the school system being studied or areas and communities served by the school system. Finally, various numbers of focus group sessions for each stakeholder group were required to achieve a sufficient number of participants representing the two demographic areas of the school system: rural/sub-urban communities and sub-urban/urban communities. The variation in the number of focus group sessions may have created a lack of consistency in responses between stakeholder groups.

### **Future Research**

In addition to the suggestions participants have provided in this study, analyses of the study data have led to a number of ideas for future research. It was suggested throughout the focus group sessions adults had an inferior understanding and skill for technology use as compared to children and adolescents. This was mentioned several times as a barrier for parents in effectively monitoring and supervising their children's technology use and online activities. More research should be applied in support of this assumption by many participants in this study.

Trust was mentioned throughout the study and is considered to be a major foundation for the establishment of partnerships, effective relationships, and the ultimate success in stopping or slowing the effects of cyberbullying. Trust is an element that transcending many facets of life, but more research in the area of school stakeholder relationships would be a benefit to subsequent research, school-related programs, culture, community support and connections. In addition to trust, partnerships in general should be studied to determine their effects upon the ultimate success of school programs, school culture, and the culture of the community.

More research is needed to determine the effectiveness of educational programs focusing on cyberbullying prevention and intervention. Since this is one of the major suggestions provided, evaluating educational programs to discover pitfalls, positive aspects, and overall effectiveness to continuously develop and improve the programs is absolutely necessary. Technology effects upon society and our youth were mentioned throughout the study and in many prior studies. More research should be provided in two distinct areas concerning the effects of technology on our youth and society in general. Dependency upon technology is rising among our youth and this dependency may be causing some to develop an insensitive approach to dealing with others, lacking control to determine what is appropriate and inappropriate when dealing with others online, and an overall feeling of living in an alternate universe where cyberspace provides a second world is as real as the physical world. Additional research should focus on these elements to determine the actual effects of excessive technology use and dependency upon our society, particularly our youth. Some participants mentioned an overuse of technology may be causing children and adolescents to struggle with face-to-face interactions and relationships. Comparing the effects of online communication with face-to-face interaction between and among children and adolescents is recommended, as is researching how or if school transformational leadership and the prevalence of student cyberbullying are correlated.

### Summary

While cyberbullying continues to affect our society, more knowledge about its implications on individuals involved is valuable. Also critical is stakeholder ideas and suggestions regarding best approaches for addressing issues such as cyberbullying. This particular study has established a foundation for how to acquire more information of this nature. Cyberbullying and other online problems are multi-dimensional problems which cannot be effectively addressed with simple solutions. These issues will require efforts from multiple groups of stakeholders operating with education, prevention, and supervision as the foundation for addressing the problems at hand. Our schools, communities, and society cannot afford to be reactive and look for solutions with the application of law and punishment alone. We must implement the preventive and collaborative efforts suggested by the participants involved in this study.

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