## ABSTRACT

Marcia K. Manning, IMPROVING LEARNING THROUGH PRINCIPAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (Under the direction of Dr. R. Martin Reardon). Department of Educational Leadership, March 2018.

This dissertation examines how the creation of a Principal Professional Learning Community (PPLC) including principals at two high performing schools (STEM High and Early College High) and principals at two low performing schools (City Middle and City High) in a southeastern North Carolina school district (SNC) was used to facilitate cross-school collaboration, and to serve as a vehicle for the implementation of strategies which are hallmarks of the high-performing schools at the low-performing schools. The goal was to create a collegial environment where principals shared their knowledge and experience with each other, so as to support the implementation of instructional rounds, personalization, and rigorous instruction at two low-performing schools. Social justice-oriented mixed methods sequential design was utilized as the framework guiding the transfer of knowledge and skills from high-performing schools to low-performing schools. Data collected over the course of this study included meeting agendas and minutes, field notes, participant surveys, teacher reflections, and state and local assessment results. After one year of PPLC implementation, instructional rounds were regularly occurring at both of the low performing schools. City High also implemented several activities leading to an improved climate of personalization. Although both of the low-performing schools experienced increases in student growth, as measured by the North Carolina Education Value-Added Assessment System, neither of the two schools has yet shown significant increases in student proficiency on state end-of-grade or end-of-course testing. While the increases in student growth and strong improvement in other measures constitute noteworthy evidence of the effectiveness of the interventions implemented in this study, due to large reading and math

proficiency deficits as compared to state proficiency levels at both of the low-performing schools in this study, the continuation of this approach for several years may be necessary to demonstrate its potential to improve state proficiency levels at the low-performing schools.

# IMPROVING LEARNING THROUGH PRINCIPAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

A Dissertation

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IMPROVING LEARNING THROUGH

PRINCIPAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

by

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the students at City Middle and City High Schools, who are working every day to show the world they are intelligent, driven to succeed, and worthy of the best schools that America has to offer, and to their administrators and teachers, who show up every day determined to provide these students with the education they deserve.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Dr. R. Martin Reardon, whose inspired vision championing the problem–of-practice approach to educational research sustained me in finding my way, and who motivated me to continue my work despite myriad obstacles and career pathway recalculations.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

## LIST OF TABLES

## LIST OF FIGURES

# CHAPTER 1: IMPROVING LEARNING THROUGH PRINCIPAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

## Problem of Practice

In many school districts across the nation, gross disparities exist across the spectra of student achievement, school culture, and student socio-economic status when comparing one school to another. In the decades following the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling, school equity increased as districts utilized tools such as busing to create diverse school populations. However, changing political and social climates have adversely impacted the survival of equal educational opportunities in U.S. schools (Ayscue, Siegel-Hawley, Kucsera, & Woodward, 2018). Forces contributing to the increasing gaps in school quality, particularly in urban areas, include demographic changes in metropolitan areas and corresponding school enrollments (Frey, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017), reversals in judicial rulings on policies requiring racial balance in schools (McDermott, Frankenberg, & Diem, 2015), and a shifting emphasis from equity and access to accountability measures such as No Child Left Behind (Mehta, 2013).

Unintended consequences of these influences have combined to create districts where large intra-district discrepancies exist in school quality. While student assignment policies are ideally fair and balanced, demographic factors within a community often influence actual enrollment practices such that schools are socioeconomically and racially unbalanced. For example, in a study of three urban school districts in Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Kentucky, McDermott et al. (2015) found evidence for a reversal of school integration practices. They asserted that according to an idealized view, public schools enroll students who are a broad cross-section of their communities, and within a school district the schools themselves are

largely interchangeable in terms of quality. In practice, both policy analysts and parents recognize that the reality is generally quite different. Some schools develop reputations for being especially good, and others develop the opposite reputation; often, these reputations have a substantial basis in reality. Particularly in large school districts, savvy parents put a great deal of effort into making sure that they gain access to the best schools for their children, by living in the right neighborhood, successfully negotiating their way through a school-choice process, or participating in a lottery for magnet or charter schools (McDermott et al., 2015, p. 505).

Two large North Carolina metropolitan school districts, Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Wake County, exemplify a pattern of re-segregation leading to disparity in school quality across the district. Formerly touted as model districts for diverse, high quality schools, both of these metropolitan districts are home to high-minority, high-poverty and low performing schools as a result of changing societal, political, and legal forces shaping student assignment policies (Ayscue, Siegel-Hawley, Kucsera, & Woodward, 2018). Societal forces have included a shift leading to race neutral policies—such as student assignment based on socioeconomic status—becoming preferred over race-based policies such as affirmative action. The current policies were motivated by successful legal challenges to the use of race for student assignment (*Capacchione v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools*, 1999). Equitable diversity policy was further dismantled in the Wake County Schools when the long-standing socio-economic policy requiring that schools have no less than 15% and no more than 45% high-poverty students assigned to the school was dismantled by a newly-elected school board, with a voter mandate to implement a neighborhood school assignment policy (Ayscue et al., 2018; McDermott et al., 2015).

While intentional policy changes have had predictable outcomes, the impact of less intentional demographic changes in the US also are reflected in public school student

populations. The percentage of students enrolled in public schools who are White fell below 50% in 2014 for the first time, with a corresponding percentage increase of minority enrollees (NCES, 2017). An increase in private school enrollment and charter school enrollment, particularly for White students, contributes to uneven public school quality across communities and within school districts. Schools are designated as "high-poverty" when more than 75% of enrolled students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch under the National School Lunch Program. As NCES (2017) documented in "The Condition of Education 2017," although high-poverty schools account for only 25% of traditional public schools, nearly half of Hispanic and Black public school students attend high-poverty schools, as compared to only 8% of White students. Correspondingly, Black and Hispanic students have higher dropout rates (6.5% and 9.2%, respectively, as compared to 4.6% for White students) and lower graduation rates (88% of White students, 78% of Hispanic students, and 75% of Black students graduate with a diploma in four years). Further, while 2.5% of U.S. public school students were reported as homeless in 2014-15, this percentage was 3.7% in city schools that often enroll higher proportions of minority students.

These data illustrate that a student's peers in public school look much different for economically disadvantaged and minority students than for more affluent and White students. This is important, because Black and Hispanic students perform better academically in schools where the majority of students are White (and higher socioeconomic status) than they do in schools where the student bodies are predominantly minority and high-poverty (Borman et al., 2004). Multiple studies (Coleman, 1966; Jackson, 2009; Orfield & Lee, 2005) have documented that high-poverty and high-minority schools provide lower quality educational opportunities for

students, employing fewer experienced teachers, exhibiting high teacher turnover, and offering a curriculum that is both restricted in scope and less advanced in content.

Further problematizing the situation, North Carolina public schools, by legislative mandate, receive annual report card grades of A through F. At the high school level, these annual report card grades are based on test scores (including ACT, ACT Work Keys, and End of Course exams in biology, English II, and math I) and graduation rates, along with a growth score measuring student performance as compared to predicted performance (based on prior years' test scores for enrolled students). Intra-district disparities across schools is evident when examining the school grade and growth scores of various schools. For example, in the case of Charlotte-Mecklenberg and Wake County, there are a number of high performing, highly regarded schools, but also some that are persistently low performing. To reinforce this point with data, in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, 60% of high schools received a grade of A or B for the 2016-17 school year, while 10% received a grade of D. Similarly, in Wake County, 77% of high schools received a grade of A or B for the 2016-17 school year, while 4% received a grade of D (NC Report Cards, 2017).

**Project Context**

The disparities highlighted above are particularly evident in Southeastern North Carolina (SNC, a pseudonym), a school district which is comprised of thirty-two schools that serve a population of nearly twenty thousand students. Although SNC in its entirety is quite diverse, with student performance as a whole approximating that of the state, there is a school-level achievement gap within SNC that is most pronounced. Using the North Carolina annual report card grades discussed above, 25% of SNC high schools received a grade of A or B for the 2016-17 school year, while another 25% of SNC high schools received a grade of D.

Each of the schools in SNC has some measure of community support and each school evokes alumni pride, particularly the traditional, comprehensive high schools. However, in keeping with a trend that has been observed in many other communities, over the years the community has become increasingly segregated by income and ethnicity, leading to segregated schools. School attendance zones have been created, although SNC policy allows parents to request school transfers provided space is available in the school to which the student transfers and the parent supplies transportation. The effect of this school transfer request policy has been to exacerbate segregation, and this policy has led to large discrepancies in school performance across the district. For example, in the SNC northern attendance zone, all the schools have been awarded the North Carolina student achievement report card grade of B or C. By stark contrast, in the SNC central (inner city) attendance zone, the traditional schools have received grades of D or F (NC Report Cards, 2016), based on the academic achievement of their students. Because these "failing" grades have remained constant for a number of years, these inner-city traditional schools have been designated as persistently low performing and/or priority schools, and must follow prescribed improvement plans. The notable exception among the inner-city schools are two legislatively-created innovative schools which I will discuss in detail subsequently.

For the 2016-17 school year, one of the inner-city priority schools (City Middle), a persistently low performing middle school, was allowed to retain its administration and faculty as a result of implementing significant instructional reforms, including a school-within-a-school academy with a project based learning focus. City Middle has an enrollment of 329 students in grades 6-8, and is staffed by two administrators and 35 teachers, only 68% of whom are fully licensed. None of the teachers at City Middle have earned the prestigious National Board Certification, and only 37% of teachers have ten or more years' teaching experience.

A second priority school (City High) is an inner-city high school in the county seat for SNC. City High's student body size has declined by more than 50% over the past two decades due to a combination of population change and students transferring to other schools, and now consists of 527 students in grades 9-12. Because the students attending City High consistently struggle to perform adequately on North Carolina's state tests, SNC leadership replaced the principal of City High in late January 2016, and replaced 50% of the faculty prior to the start of the 2016-17 school year. For the 2016-17 school year, the faculty consisted of 38 teachers, 66% of whom were fully licensed and 45% of whom had ten or more years' teaching experience. One of the teachers held National Board Certification.

While both City Middle and City High remain priority schools, they both have an innovative schedule for faculty and students allowing for daily professional learning community (PLC) meeting time each morning prior to students' arrival. Professional learning communities (DuFour, 2003; DuFour, 2004) that involve teachers have been associated with positive change among the participants in terms of their teaching practice, leading to my project to adopt and, where appropriate, adapt this intervention to enliven the leadership practice of the principals who participate with me in my project.

As is clear from the above, not all the SNC schools are "failing." Two "high-flying" SNC secondary schools are designated by the NC Department of Public Schools as "cooperative innovative high schools" (CIHS). These two schools play a key role in my project. One of these is a Grades 9-12 school that is exclusively focused on providing an early college program (Early College High, ECH). ECH is located on the campus of the local community college, and is consequently afforded access to classroom space and technology in line with the rest of the institute of higher education. ECH serves 250 students, and employs one administrator and 12

teachers, all of whom are fully licensed in their subject areas. Furthermore, eight of the teachers at ECH have attained the prestigious National Board Certification, and 10 have 10 or more years of teaching experience. ECH has operated under the CIHS framework authorized by the North Carolina General Assembly for over a decade. Not surprisingly, ECH is highly regarded in the community. The student demographics at ECH mirror those of SNC overall, and also those of the state, with 50% economically disadvantaged and 80% first-generation college-goers (in keeping with the stipulations of the ECH charter). In addition to perennially receiving a report card grade of "A," ECH students consistently exceed the predicted student growth measure and ECH consistently returns annual graduation rates exceeding 90%.

The other "high flying" school is a Grades 6-12 school that is focused on catering to students interested in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), which I will refer to as STEM High—despite its non-conventional grade range. STEM High serves 437 students with one administrator and 25 teachers. Ironically, while STEM High is housed in a separate building, it shares a campus with City High (the persistently low performing inner city high school that is the focus of my project). Like ECH, STEM High boasts a 100% fully-certified teaching staff, two of whom are National Board Certified teachers and 11 (44%) of whom have been teaching for 10 or more years. STEM High is highly regarded across the county, and is sought out by incoming military families as the school of choice for their children. During its early years of existence, STEM High's student population was demographically similar to that of the SNC district. Arguably because of both its cachet and its success, the student population at STEM High slowly became more affluent and less diverse than SNC, giving rise to the institution of an admissions lottery process—attended by the customary drawbacks to such a process—that was intended to redress the imbalance.

In essence, both ECH and STEM High are selective—meaning that they accept students from across SNC who apply and meet both academic performance and discipline standards. At this point in time, because a large number of students apply for admission to both ECH and STEM High, offers of acceptance to both schools are determined using an admissions lottery process. Inevitably and unfortunately, many eligible students do not receive offers of acceptance each year, leading to much disappointment.

**Gap Analysis**

As it would be reasonable to expect, the disparity among student achievement and school culture indicators amongst secondary schools in SNC is starkly highlighted in the contrast between the North Carolina school-wide student achievement measures attained by City Middle and City High on one hand, and STEM High and ECH on the other. Table 1 compares the summary accountability measures for each of the four schools. The measures include the North Carolina-assigned report card grade discussed above (range: A through F), the numerical growth measure (mentioned above and discussed in detail subsequently), whether growth was "not met," "met," or "exceeded," the overall performance composite (representing the percentage of students who are estimated to be career- and college-ready); and the overall performance composite (representing the percentage of students regarded as grade level proficient). Clearly, City Middle and City High did not meet their growth target for the 2015-16 school year.

**Student Growth Measure**

The numerical growth measure is calculated by a predictive model incorporated in the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS, n.d.), based on scores of all North

Table 1

*Summary of Accountability Measures 2014-15*

| School | Report Card Grade | Growth Measure | Growth Expectations | Performance Composite: % Career- and College-Ready | Performance Composite: % Grade Level Proficient |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| City Middle | F | -5.94 | NOT MET | 11.1 | 17.4 |
| City High | D | -5.65 | NOT MET | 10.2 | 15.8 |
| STEM High | B | 1.01 | MET | 68.9 | 78.4 |
| ECH | A | 7.09 | EXCEEDED | 88.1 | 91.5 |

Carolina students and their testing histories across grades and subjects. The model predicts how students will perform based on students with similar assessment histories, who are academically similar. The growth measure, expressed as a scale score, illustrates the difference between a student's predicted score and his or her actual score. This scale score is meant to allow for the comparison between how students at a particular school performed and how an analogous group of students performed at any other school in North Carolina (EVAAS technical help, n.d.).

## Purpose of Study

The purpose of my project is to narrow the accountability measure gap between City Middle and City High on the one hand and ECH and STEM High on the other (see Table 1). At the broadest level, to do this I will conduct research into the experiences and expertise of the administration and faculties at the two higher-performing schools (ECH & STEM High) in order to develop potential student academic improvement strategies. Once I have developed these strategies, I will engage the principals at City Middle and City High with those academic improvement strategies in the context of a Principal Professional Learning Community. My theory of action is that if the principals of City Middle and City High adopt the academic improvement strategies that I distill from the practice of the principals of ECH and STEM High after adapting them appropriately in the context of a Principal Professional Learning Community, then the learning environment of their schools will be enriched, as measured by the North Carolina school accountability measures.

The purpose of my project is intended to provide benefits to all participants in that it will enhance student achievement at City Middle and City High, while allowing the administration and faculties of ECH and STEM High to grow professionally through district-level leadership opportunities.

The purpose of my project aligns closely to the stated intentions of the SNC district leadership. The SNC district leadership team has expressed concern about the disparities that they are well aware exist from one school to the next across the county. These disparities create pressure on the SNC district leaders to allow parents to move their students out of their assigned schools in order to attend higher performing schools in other attendance zones. Clearly, acceding to even one request to transfer creates a problematic precedent in that "good" schools will be overwhelmed with students, and "failing" schools will be decimated. Such pressure for movement of students from "failing" schools to "good" schools is precisely what the federal No Child Left Behind legislation envisaged—with the expectation that "failing" schools would be galvanized and take steps to improve—but, given the enormity of the task of school improvement, the "migration" of students is a logistical nightmare for school districts and a calamity for the students who are effectively "left behind."

SNC leadership has taken several proactive steps to address the disparities among SNC schools, including consolidating elementary schools in the central attendance zone into pre-K, 1-2, and 3-5 grade level schools to concentrate resources and supports. Crucially, all of the focus on school improvement in SNC is taking place in the context of North Carolina's adoption of the Common Core standards. Kornhaber, Griffin, and Tyler (2014) examined concepts of educational equity in the context of Common Core curricula adoption, and noted that the provision of compensatory educational resources to students who are minority, low-performing, or from high poverty environments is often justified. A major reason frequently provided for Common Core adoption is to provide equity for all students (Kornhaber et al., 2014; Wallender, 2014) - an admirable reason that is directly pertinent to the issue of inequality that I am addressing in my project.

In many instances, school districts have turned to technology initiatives in their efforts to improve educational opportunities for students in high-poverty and low-performing schools (Schwartzbeck & Wolf, 2012), but, in SNC, despite expansive access to technology at both City Middle and City High, student performance has not improved (NC Report Card, 2016). Currently, it is demonstrably true that the quality of education a student who lives in SNC receives is determined by zip-code—which closely correlates with socio-economic status.

As would be expected in a dissertation in practice, I am not a dispassionate, impartial researcher in my project. In fact, I am the Innovative Programs Coordinator in SNC, and I have been tasked with leading academic improvement at the two priority schools, City Middle and City High. There is a clear social justice orientation of my project. Students whose residential addresses assign them to City Middle and City High and who do not have the means to provide their own transportation to other, higher performing schools in SNC (even if there was enrollment capacity to cope with them ), can anticipate a lower quality educational environment (NC Report Card, 2016). From the alternative perspective, the principals of ECH and STEM High express dissatisfaction that their schools are unable to enroll more students, and wish to be able to impact the quality of education being received by those students who were eligible to attend but who were not selected to attend through the admissions lottery process. In fact, initial steps to utilize personnel from STEM High to improve instruction at City Middle have occurred over the past two years, with teachers from STEM High providing professional development on instructional strategies and lesson planning (Hales, 2017). It is on this foundation that my project builds.

Figure 1 encapsulates the social justice-oriented mixed methods sequential design rationale that underpins my study. The top left-hand corner shows the putative causative chain in

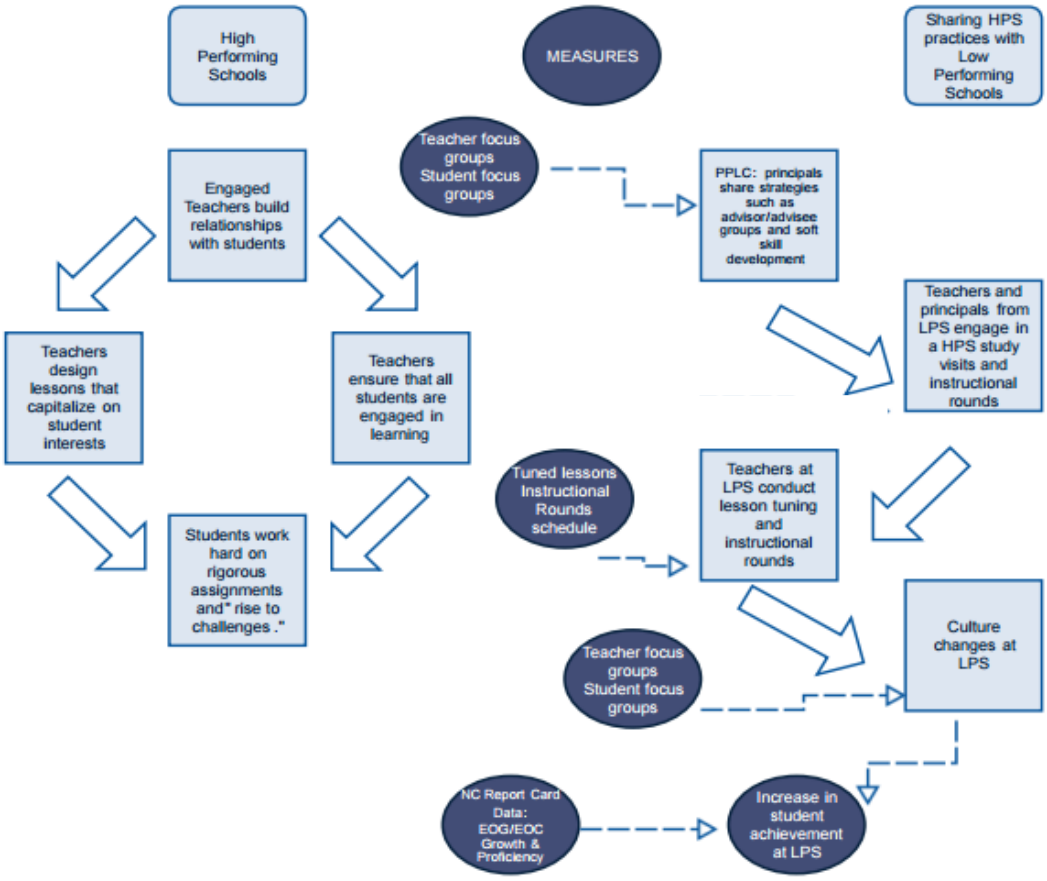


*Figure 1*. Social justice-oriented mixed methods sequential design.

place at the high performing schools (ECH & STEM High) by means of which engaged teachers impact student learning. The right-hand side conceptualizes how I envisage the measures (ellipses) and the actions (squares) interrelating to arrive at the increase of student achievement at the low-performing schools (City Middle & City High). One of my key actions involves the creation of principal professional learning communities (PPLC).

Currently in SNC, it is unfortunate that, all too often, the quality of students' education is most impacted not by their academic ability, but by their assigned school. For economically disadvantaged students who lack the resources to exercise school choice, their assigned school is inextricably linked to the students' geographical location. This inequity is currently assigning many inner city students to schools labeled "persistently low-performing" or "failing," yet they lack the resources to seek out more highly regarded schools that might better prepare them for college, careers, and life. Thus, reform efforts resulting in improvement at these low-performing schools is a moral imperative. All students deserve a high quality education that prepares them to achieve lofty aspirations. By developing a truly collaborative learning community amongst principals at both high- and low-performing schools, gaps between low-performing and high-performing schools can be narrowed so that all students will be enabled to attend better quality schools that inspire them to reach their potential.

## CHAPTER 2: IMPROVEMENT GOAL

I have given much thought to the extent of the improvement that I anticipate from my project. It has not escaped my notice that I am comparing the two highest performing schools in SNC with the two lowest performing schools in this district. In addition to the disparities in student achievement currently found in these schools, there is great disparity in the academic preparedness of the incoming students attending the high performing STEM High and ECH as compared to City Middle and City High (NC Report Cards, 2017). Contributing to differences in the student populations of the high performing SNC schools whose practices were emulated by the low performing SNC schools in this study, both ECH and STEM High, as discussed previously, require students to apply for admission, and select students from a district-wide lottery. Conversely, both City Middle and City High have student populations from the central attendance zone with a high concentration of students living in poverty. Table 2 details differences in academic preparedness of incoming students attending the schools in this study (NC Report Cards, 2017).

Clearly, both of the low performing schools in this study, City Middle and City High, have student populations that are well behind their peers across NC in terms of student readiness, while both STEM High and ECH have incoming classes that exceed their NC peers. City Middle and City High also have very high percentages of economically disadvantaged students as compared to both STEM High and ECH, and the NC student population in general. Despite the documented positive correlation between academic proficiency and student socioeconomic status, it is central to rationale of my study that no correlation exists between academic growth and student socioeconomic status. In Figure 2, NC EVAAS data illustrates this lack of correlation (Granados, 2017). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the strategies that appear to

Table 2

*Summary of Incoming Student Economic Status and Academic Preparedness*

| School | % Incoming Student Readiness | % Economically Disadvantaged |
|---|---|---|
| City Middle (6th grade) | 7.1 | 88.2 |
| City High (9th grade) | 6.7 | 83.4 |
| STEM High (6th grade) | 83.6 | 21.3 |
| STEM High (9th grade) | 57.6 | 21.3 |
| Early College High (9th grade) | 56.5 | 50.2 |
| NC (6th grade) | 46.8 | 49.2 |
| NC (9th grade) | 38.6 | 49.2 |

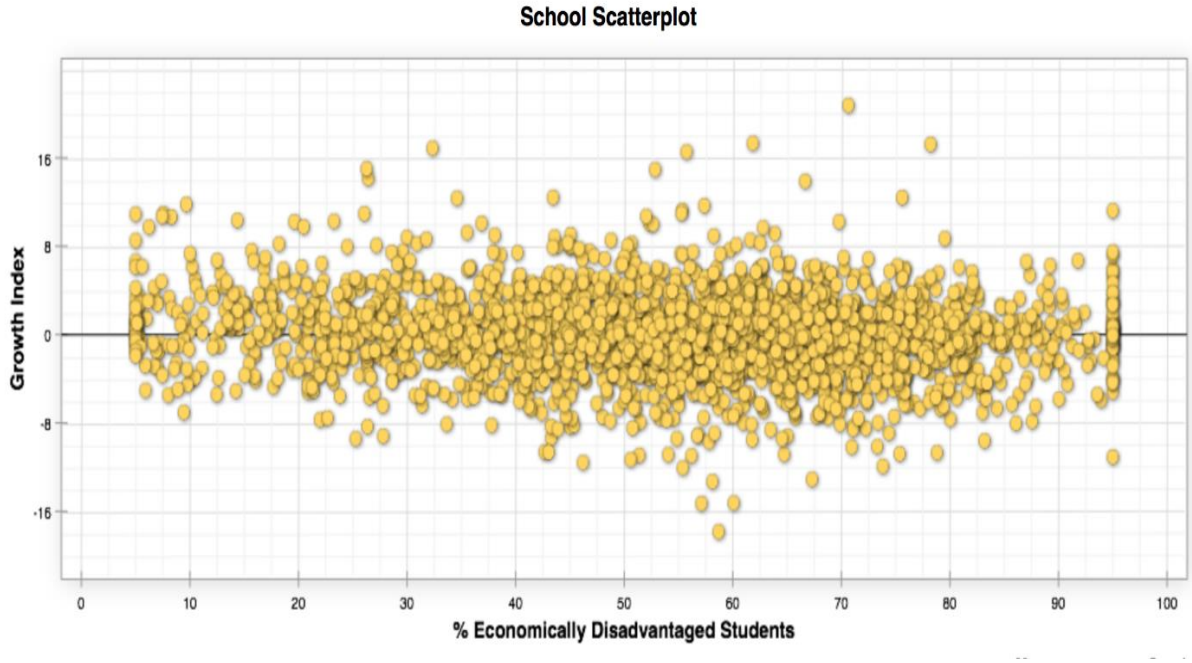


*Figure 2.* North Carolina's public schools EVAAS outcomes: Growth v. economic status (Granados, 2017)

engender an academically rigorous environment at the high performing schools in this study can be implemented at low performing schools in the hope that they will engender a similar student growth result.

Schools can be improved by changing school culture (Deal & Peterson, 1999), which then has a trickledown effect on student achievement. While school culture takes five to seven years to change (Deal & Peterson, 1999), Gruenert (2008) notes that school climate can be directly impacted by the actions of school leadership, and over time can change a school's culture. Thus, this project undertakes to implement actions to change school climate, with the goal of changing the culture of underperforming schools over the next several years. The implementation of these actions, which emulate actions occurring at high performing schools, can be measured.

Similarly, improving the proficiency of students who are far behind their peers requires more time than the scope of this project allows. However, academic growth is unrelated to students' starting point or economic status (EVAAS, n.d.). Thus, the improvement goals defined in this project are both challenging and attainable.

### Improvement Goal 1

In order to initiate improvement at lower-performing schools by emulating the strategies engendering student success at higher performing schools, I envision that the principals of the four schools must be willing to share ideas openly with each other in the context of a Principals' Professional Learning Community. Ideas gleaned from the higher performing schools, including strategies such as instructional rounds, must then be implemented at the lower performing schools. This goal will be measured by the number of teachers who participate in instructional

rounds at City Middle and City High schools, and will be considered successfully met if at least 25% of teachers at each of the schools participate in at least one instructional round.

### Improvement Goal 2a

A second improvement goal, which I believe will naturally occur as a result of implementation of the strategies which promote success at ECH and STEM High at the lower performing City Middle and City High, is related to school climate (2a) and academic performance (2b). School climate, or the attitude of an organization (Gruenert, 2008), may be shaped by intentional activities of the school's leadership. Over time, an improvement in climate can positively improve a school's culture, or "personality." In this study I propose that principals from the higher performing schools will share how their schools intentionally implement activities such as structured advisories to build relationships with students. The principals of City Middle and City High should then incorporate these activities, with adjustments for each school's context, to improve the climate at their respective schools. This goal will be measured by the extent to which students respond positively to survey questions designed to measure a climate of personalization, and will be judged successful if at least 50% of surveyed students answer these questions affirmatively.

### Improvement Goal 2b

The second part of this improvement goal is to increase academic performance at the lower performing City Middle and City High schools. Students who are far below grade level require several years of progress to demonstrate grade level proficiency; thus the improvement goal for this study will measure the actual progress of the enrolled students as compared to their projected progress.

For the 2015-16 school year, neither City High nor City Middle met their projected growth measure, which is a comparison of how students actually perform on prescribed exams vs. how they would have been expected to perform in a "typical" classroom in North Carolina. If this project is successful in assisting City Middle and City High to demonstrate improvement, then I would expect to see the growth measure at the end of the 2016-17 school year increase by "1," representing one-fourth of the statistically-assigned range of -2.0 to +2.0 allotted to designate a school has met growth (EVAAS, n.d.). Although this will not yet mean that the schools in question met their growth targets, the move in a positive direction by "1" or more will demonstrate that students are being taught more effectively, and that their mastery of curriculum is improving. For each of the schools in this study, a corresponding increase in performance composite (see Table 1) may or may not occur for several years.

Measures such as end-of course (EOC) and end-of-grade (EOG) proficiency and growth at the schools labeled "priority schools" (City Middle and City High) lag SNC and state averages by substantial margins. Student and teacher morale is suffering: students at both City Middle and City High, unprompted, confided to visitors prior to the implementation of this project that their school was "bad," "violent," and "the dumb school." It was a moral imperative that strenuous efforts were undertaken to improve these schools.

Conversely, the performances of students at STEM High and ECHS—higher- performing schools designated as cooperative innovative high schools—surpass the SNC and state averages in virtually every category. Throughout the second phase in the implementation of my project, collection of data to assess the changes in student achievement and school culture at the lower-performing City High following the implementation of high-performing school strategies gleaned as a result of the PPLCs was undertaken. Teachers' and students' attitudes regarding the

implementation of these changes, which included the creation of a structured advisory at City High, the continued implementation of instructional rounds with new faculty members, and an increased emphasis on rigorous instruction were assessed via surveys.

An analysis of academic achievement data for the four schools selected to participate in this initiative over the course of the study period provides insight into the changes that have occurred in the context generated by my intervention.

District leadership demonstrated a commitment to improving low-performing schools, while continuing to support both schools of choice (cooperative innovative schools) and school transfer requests. The success of my reform initiative has resulted in the creation of a personalized culture at City High, emulating the structures in place at ECH, and may result in academic improvements at this low-performing school. Chenoweth (2009) notes that academic success in low-performing schools can be accomplished through a laser-like focus on student achievement, with commitment from skilled personnel. My project aimed to model for teachers at low-performing schools what high quality instruction looks like, and then to provide ongoing support in improving teachers' skill sets to prepare them to deliver it. Prior experience in transferring the methodologies that have been proven successful in CIHS to larger traditional schools has been documented by Edmunds, Henson, Lewis, Hutchins, and Naumenko (2015) in work with rural innovative high schools. Pilot programs at smaller schools, such as CIHS, can be scaled up and implemented in larger schools such as City Middle and City High if educators view their work through the lens of continuous improvement (Cohen-Vogel, Tichnor-Wagner, Allen, Harrison, Kainz, Socol, & Wang, 2015) and rise to the challenge of becoming change agents. In addition, teachers at the higher performing schools have gained leadership skills through opportunities to share their teaching practices with colleagues across the district. While I

intend that each of the schools will retain its unique school identity, all schools should exemplify student-centered instruction and a positive school culture as a result of this initiative.

## CHAPTER 3: QUESTIONS AND TASKS

The questions and tasks associated with my study are informed by the literature. As shown in the literature map in Figure 3, there are six themes that I consider to be interwoven in this problem of practice. My overarching theme, high school reform, begs to be addressed further through the lens of equity for all students.

As supported by my review of the literature, in today's global society, it is important that America's students are academically well-prepared to compete with students across the world, particularly in mathematics and literacy. Myriad educational initiatives have addressed this issue, including the 1983 report entitled *A Nation at Risk* which asserted that "education is important not only because of what it contributes to one's career goals but also because of the value it adds to the general quality of one's life" (p. 14). Moreover, a sound education for all is the foundation for citizenship, raising the standard of living for communities of people (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008). However, despite decades of reform efforts, there remains much to be done to ensure that all students are receiving a high quality education. Chenoweth (2010) describes the disparity in educational opportunities generally afforded the white, middle class children of college graduates, as compared to poor children and children of color.

> Instead of dedicating themselves to making sure that all children learned to high standards, it seemed that the [poor] schools I saw simply sorted their children into different categories, each with their own educational opportunities. The "high" kids were offered what passed for a real education, although with reliance on the parents to provide a lot of the teaching; the "middle" kids were given some aspects of a real education; and the "low" kids were babysat until they were old enough to leave school. In crummy poor-kid schools, just about all the children were considered "low." The lucky few were skimmed off into magnet schools or other special programs. (p. 2)

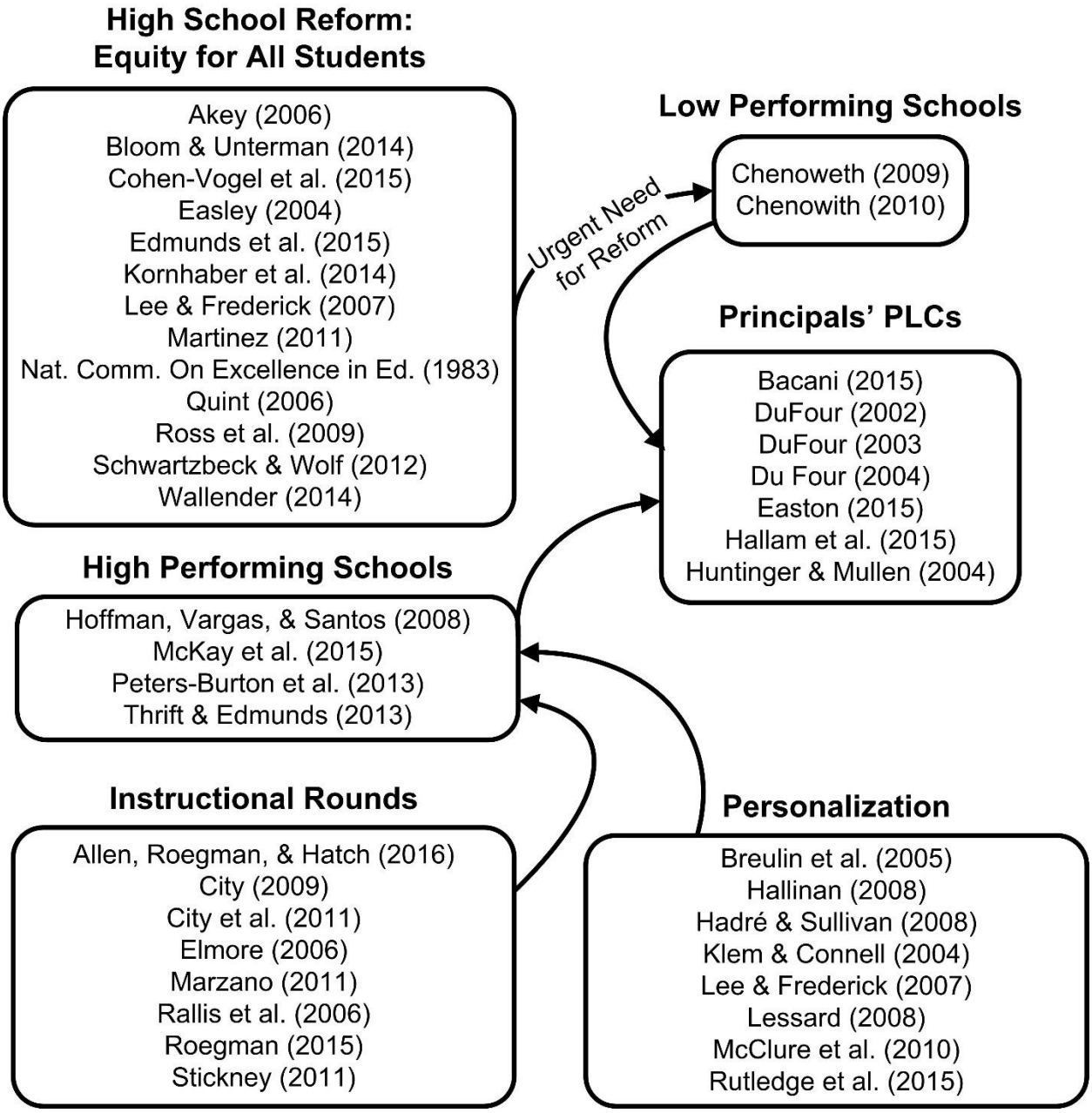


*Figure 3.* Conceptual overview of pertinent prior studies.

Many contend that a key factor of high school reform is to promote a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum required of all students. Martinez (2011) argues against high schools allowing multiple curriculum pathways such as career preparation tracks. Advocating for high school innovation that eliminates tracking, Martinez recounts personal experience stating "I know first-hand that academic unpreparedness is the greatest barrier to any form of postsecondary success. This alone is a good enough reason for me to stand behind the concept of college readiness for all" (Martinez, 2011, p. 75). University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts is one school that has embraced this idea; although located in a high poverty high minority neighborhood, University Park graduates all students proficient in reading and mathematics and sends them on to four year universities following graduation (Chenoweth, 2010). Quint (2006) has synthesized high school reform initiatives discovering that the twin pillars found in successful schools include personalization, created with structural changes such as smaller schools and faculty-led student advisories, and high quality curricula taught by well-trained teachers who connect with each other in personal learning communities.

To address inequitable educational opportunities, one practice of high school reform has been to create new small schools designed to improve student achievement, create a personalized learning environment, and provide equal opportunity for all students (Lee & Friedrich, 2007). The *Learn and Earn* initiative announced in 2004 by NC Governor Easley led to the creation of early college high schools in North Carolina (Easley, 2004), including STEM High School and Early College High School (ECH) in SNC. STEM High School followed the model of high school redesign, as a small autonomous themed school designed to attract a targeted population while operating on the campus of a traditional high school (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Peters Burton, Kaminsky, Lynch, Behrend, Ross, House, & Han, 2013). ECH follows a different small

school model, and is located on the campus of a two-year institution of higher education. Like other early college high schools, ECH targets first generation college-goers providing the opportunity for them to earn both a high school diploma and two years of college credit (Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2008). To recap, both STEM High and ECH have achieved notable success in SNC, engendering respect across the region. STEM High has served as a learning laboratory school for several years, and has hosted study visits from educators across North Carolina who aim to emulate the learner-centered strategies employed by the school (Thrift & Edmunds, 2013). Similarly, ECH was identified as a School of Innovation and Excellence in 2016, and designated as a study visit site (McKay et al., 2015). Although teachers from STEM High have provided some professional development for teachers of the low performing City Middle School, neither City Middle nor City High has participated in a study visit to STEM High, and have visited ECH for the purpose of professional learning but once. As stated earlier, students in the central attendance zone of SNC are assigned to persistently low-performing schools. SNC is not unaware of the problem, and much effort and funding has been dedicated to improving low-performing schools, including City Middle and City High. However, to date, there has been little in terms of tangible outcomes to point to as a result of the SNC initiatives. My project involves looking to the high-performing ECH and STEM High in SNC to identify best practices, and then to accelerate the incorporation of these best practices into City Middle and City High.

Ross and Berger (2009) identify strategies principals may use to promote equity for low socio-economic students. Curriculum interpretation, instructional practices, assessment and evaluation, and community involvement are key components to influence the achievement of disadvantaged groups, through an inclusive school mission. As school based administrators have

complex jobs that encompass many responsibilities, opportunities to collaborate with fellow administrators in a professional learning community (PLC) structure may positively impact principals (Bacani, 2015). Commonly utilized by teams of teachers, PLCs are defined by DuFour (2002) as "collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all" (p. 3). When principals support teacher participation in PLCs, making them a priority, Hallam et al. (2015) found that trusting relationships amongst teachers led to increased collaboration and student achievement. Benefits to administrators are less well understood. However, Bacani (2015) studied principal professional learning communities (PPLCs) that encompassed a team of school leaders within a building, including the principal, assistant principals, and Dean of Students. Noting the positive impact on student learning and achievement correlated with teacher PLCs (DuFour, 2003, 2004; Hutinger & Mullen, 2004), Bacani (2015) posits "there is great potential for PPLCs to address the rising levels of expectations on principals and the isolated nature of the profession" (p. 2).

The literature map in Figure 2 illustrates how high school reform, driven by the moral imperative to provide an equitable education for all students in SNC, has begun to be implemented in the low-performing schools of City Middle and City High by seeking inspiration from two high performing cooperative innovative high schools in SNC. The creation of a principals' professional learning community (PPLC) has begun to allow principals to share strategies which may lead to the creation of a personalized culture. This PPLC has been designed to incorporate five habits of effective PLCs (Easton, 2015), holding members accountable for the growth of their schools, using skills to manage change, and developing and maintaining professional relationships. This PPLC group is also tasked with connecting learning to action, with members acting on their passion for equity for all students.

Investigating strategies of high poverty high performing schools, Chenoweth (2009) identified characteristics that create a wheel of success, including personal relationship building, data-driven instruction, formative assessment, a laser-like focus on what students need to learn, and teacher collaboration. But more than suggesting a laundry list of items to implement, Chenoweth (2009) posits that successful schools have structures and systems specifically oriented to creating an environment in which consequential professional collaboration occurs.

> When teachers advise each other, consult with experts, think deeply about new ways to teach the material, and examine existing research in [a] systematic way…in order to help all their students learn the material, they are working in sharp contrast to the way teachers have traditionally been expected to work. They are working in schools that have incorporated the essential elements of the "wheel" of school improvement because they have the structures and systems in place that require teachers to work together and to make that collaboration meaningful. (Chenoweth, 2009, p. 181)

This level of collaboration is the hallmark of a strategy successfully utilized in CIHS, the practice of instructional rounds. Defined as "a professional learning practice for supporting school and district leaders' understanding of the instructional core, the interaction among curricular content instruction, and student learning, which is a foundation for instructional leadership practices," (Allen, Roegman, & Hatch, 2016, p. 837), cross-school and within-school versions of instructional rounds are being utilized to shine a spotlight on student engagement and learning. Adapted from the medical rounds model used by physicians (Teitel, 2009), the practice of instructional rounds has been utilized by superintendents, district leaders, principals, and classroom teachers to observe what and how students are learning, with subsequent discourse debriefing the observations aimed at creating high quality learning environments for all students (Allen et al., 2016; City, 2011; Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, & Elmore, 2006; Stickney, 2015; Teitel, 2009). Marzano (2011) posits that a common language of instruction must be regularly utilized between administrators and teachers to describe effective teaching, if teacher expertise is

to be developed. When educators have participated in the practice of instructional rounds, including shared classroom visits followed by discourse about observed lessons focusing on student learning, Roegman, Hatch, Hill, and Kniewel (2015) found statistically significant increases in shared understandings of district initiatives and professional relationships. There are two main questions to which my study seeks to provide answers.

**Question 1**

To what extent will principals of two lower performing schools effectively encourage teachers in their own schools to initiate the academic improvement strategies in place in two higher performing schools when those principals are introduced to such strategies in the context of a Principals' Professional Learning Community that includes cross-school instructional rounds?

Thus, Question 1 focuses on the effective instructional practices utilized by teachers at higher performing schools versus the presumably less effective instructional practices in place at low performing schools. The cross-school, intra-district Principals' Professional Learning Community (PPLC) among the four principals was designed to include the conduct of instructional rounds (discussed subsequently), during which school and district level educators engaged in study visits to Early College High.

The establishment of the PPLC was led initially by me in my role as SNC's Innovative Programs Coordinator. As soon as feasible, I relinquished my formal leadership role and assumed a supportive role in order to enhance the executive functioning of the principals themselves. In its initial phase, the PPLC was structured to facilitate the showcasing by the principals at the higher performing schools (ECH & STEM High) of both their expertise as instructional leaders and the instructional skills of their teachers. I collaborated with the

principals of the low-performing schools (City Middle & City High) as they adopted and adapted promising effective approaches to instruction to their circumstances and mentored their teachers in implementing these strategies.

I anticipated that there would be a critical juncture in this process at which the principals of City High and City Middle would host rounds at their schools, giving the principals of ECH and STEM High the opportunity to experience the challenges facing their colleagues, and insight into how schools confronted by the imperative for reform go about improving their instructional environment. Elmore (2006) noted that educators at high performing schools can learn much from their peers who are teaching in low-performing schools, including a sense of urgency about the need for reform, ownership of the achievement of all students, and a positive attitude towards learning new instructional techniques.

**Question 2**

My second question asks to what extent is the implementation of effective strategies in lower-performing schools associated with:

a. An improvement in school climate, as measured quantitatively by students' responses to surveys, and
b. An increase in academic performance, as measured by an increase in proficiency and growth measures on reading and mathematics end-of-grade exams and Math I, English II, and Biology end-of-course (EOC) examinations.

This second question—of strong interest to this study—delves into whether the creation of a personalized climate (refer to the discussion of the establishment of a personalized climate in the Active Intervention section of the Study Plan), characterized by close relationships among students and school faculty members (presumably engendered by the implementation of effective

approaches to instruction), contributes to the successful implementation of a rigorous academic program. Previous studies have concluded that student engagement enhanced by personal commitment engenders self-motivation among students (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Lee & Freidrich, 2007). In other words, even absent the expectations of parents and peers, students can be inspired to work hard on challenging academic curricula by other caring adults, such as teachers, counselors, or coaches with whom they have developed close personal relationships. Hardré and Sullivan (2008) asserted that such adults can serve as surrogates for parents, inspiring students to set lofty college and career goals and then providing students with the knowledge and skills that underpin the achievement of these goals.

## Study Plan

Table 3 displays a logic model that provides an overview of my project. I intended that there would three key resources and inputs leading, via the creation of outputs and outcomes, to the eventual highly desirable impacts. Following Table 3 is a brief outline of how key aspects of this project interrelate.

## Active Interventions

As previously discussed, in order to achieve my improvement goal, I sponsored discussion within the structure of a Principals' Professional Learning Community regarding academic improvement strategies that were in place at ECH and STEM High. These strategies were then implemented at City Middle and City High in an attempt to replicate the student achievement occurring at the higher-performing schools. The hallmark strategies observed in action at ECH and STEM High included collaboration between teachers through the process of instructional rounds, personalization of the academic environment, and an academically rigorous

Table 3

*Improving Student Learning through District-Level Principals' Professional Learning Communities (PPLCs)*

| Resources/ Inputs | Activities | Outputs | Outcomes | Impact |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participating principals | PPLC meetings | Collaborative discussions | Shared vision and under-standing of school models | Collaboration among principals at various school models |
| City High administration and staff | Creation of structured advisory | Teachers at City High serve as faculty advisors to advisees | Teacher advisors implement strategies to build relationships with advisees | Increase in personalization and relationships reported at City High |
| Teacher leaders at STEM High & ECHS | Teacher leaders host instructional rounds | Teachers at City Middle and City High participate in instructional rounds | Teachers at priority schools gain knowledge of instructional rounds | Increased professional-ism and respect between schools of varying models |
| Release time for instructional rounds | Teachers at priority schools host instructional rounds for colleagues | Instructional Rounds occur | Principals and teachers prioritize student engagement | Increased student engagement at low performing schools |

curriculum for all students. The Gantt chart shown in Figure 4 provides an overview of the interrelated timelines for the implementation of my logic model.

**Principal Professional Learning Community: Sharing Strategies**

The implementation of a Principals' Professional Learning Community (PPLC) to facilitate district level instructional rounds among four participating schools was the initial step in the implementation of this project. I laid the foundation of this initiative in my role as Innovative Programs Coordinator, and assumed the role of participatory action researcher as I continued to implement my agenda of planned change. After obtaining principal buy-in for this collaboration, a meeting schedule was generated to facilitate discussions between the four school leaders. Agendas for each meeting ensured that the time was focused, time-bound, and goal-driven. Topics included how to facilitate teacher collaboration through the practice of instructional rounds and strategies to create a personalized climate through the use of structured advisories.

**Instructional Rounds: Making Practice Public**

The instructional rounds process followed the model described by City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel (2009), with appropriate adjustments for the contextual differences. Study visits to each of the participating schools, to include instructional rounds, was a key component in the implementation of effective instructional practices at the two low-performing schools (City Middle & City High). In addition, I facilitated instructional rounds among small faculty groups at the two low-performing schools, giving teachers the opportunity to develop shared language about student learning, to build professional relationships amongst faculty members, and to provide collegial feedback to peers. The instructional rounds process loosely adhered to the four elements of rounds prescribed by City et al. (2009), where the school and/or the host teacher

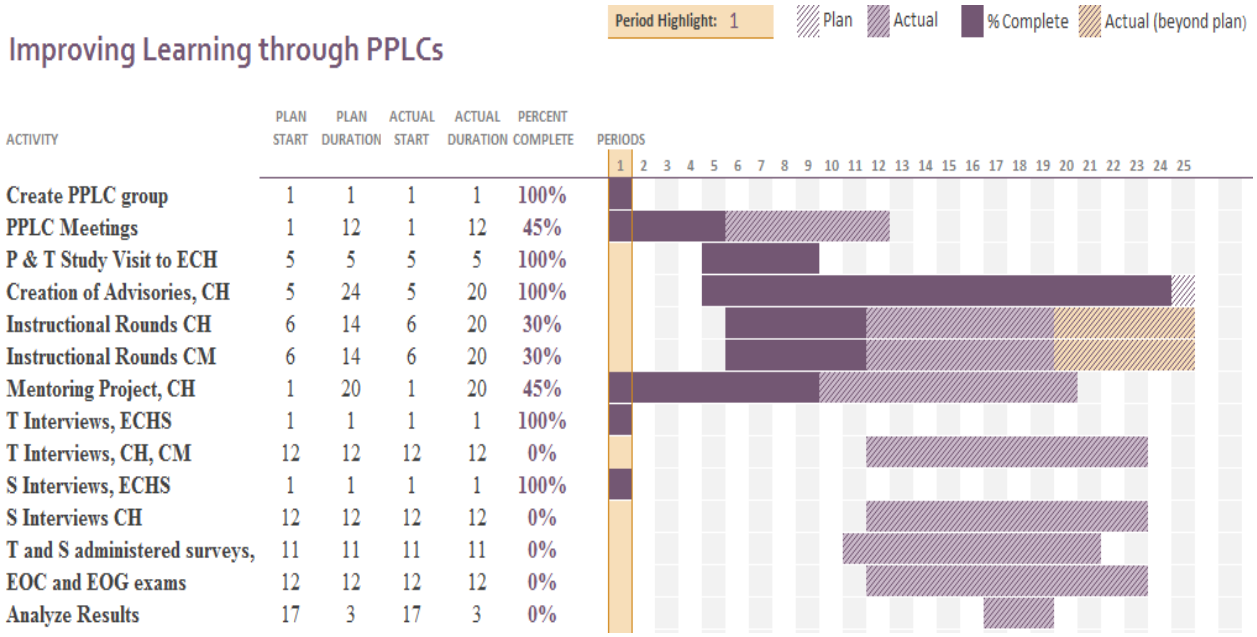


*Figure 4.* Study plan for project.

identifies a problem of practice, visiting educators observe in the host teacher(s) classroom(s) with a focus on the identified problem of practice, the host and visiting educators gather to conduct a debrief of the observation(s), and then the group discusses steps to be undertaken to achieve the next level of work. Teachers volunteered to serve as hosts, and most commonly identified their own problem of practice or "student learning question(s)." Led by a teacher or other educator trained in the facilitation of instructional rounds, each round consisted of a pre-round, a round, and a post-round. During the pre-round, the host teacher shared with visiting teachers his or her lesson plan, student learning targets, and particular instructional strategies he or she planned to utilize in the lesson. Background information including characteristics of the learners and how this learning related to prior lessons was also routinely shared with visiting teachers during the pre-round discussion. Although most of the observed classes were 90 minutes in duration, teachers and other educators participating in the instructional round generally visited the class for approximately 30 minutes, and host teachers informed visiting teachers of the optimal time, of the 90 minute lesson, for visitors to the classroom to provide feedback to the host teacher. Visiting teachers entered classrooms as a group, and then either sat with students to engage in the lesson, observed the lesson unobtrusively from a vantage point in the classroom, or interacted with students to ask questions about their learning. Following the instructional round the group reconvened at a predetermined time and place to discuss their observations and provide the requested feedback to the host teacher. Led by the trained facilitator, visitors shared data with the host teacher in turns using the sentence starter stems of "I noticed" and "I wondered." Data collected included statements made by the teacher and by students, along with evidence of student understanding of the lesson topic. Both student engagement level and misconceptions about the lesson topic were frequently mentioned by observers during the post-round debriefs.

The facilitator then prompted the host teacher to respond to the observers' feedback and to reflect on how this feedback might influence future lesson design to improve instruction.

### Personalization: A Lynchpin of School Reform

Multiple factors have been implicated in positive school reform, including personalized learning connections, restructuring of the school day, increasing the rigor of instruction, shared leadership, and community involvement (Akey, 2006; Rutledge et al., 2015). In a Florida study of four large urban high schools, Rutledge et al. (2015) found that the largest differences between high- and low-performing schools are related to the social and emotional aspects of schooling—personalized learning connections between students and staff members. Other studies of urban school reform also point towards personalization as a key to academic improvement (Breunlin et al., 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004; McClure et al., 2010). One approach to facilitating personalization has been to establish what McClure et al. (2010) referred to as "structured advisories" (p. 5). According to McClure et al. (2010), structured advisories involve "bringing students and an educator together for brief, regular periods in a non-content specific setting to deal with cognitive and affective educational topics" (p. 5). To inform schools in the creation of effective advisory programs to promote close relationships between faculty and students, Lessard (2008) suggests following prescribed steps including looping with students and developing curricula to develop students' social-emotional skills. Encouraging relationships between teachers and their students was shown by Hallinan (2008) to increase students' positive attitudes towards school, resulting in improved attendance and academic effort.

## Summary

The status quo in SNC means that the quality of students' education is most often impacted not by their academic ability, but by their economic status which is closely aligned to

their geographical location. This inequity is currently assigning many inner city students to a poor quality educational environment that may hinder their ability to graduate prepared for college, careers, and life. All students deserve a high quality education that prepares them to achieve lofty aspirations, and SNC provides precisely this educational environment—but not uniformly across the county. By developing a truly collaborative learning community that utilizes knowledge gained from intra-district instructional rounds, gaps between low performing and high performing schools can be narrowed so that all students will be enabled to attend high quality schools that inspire them to reach their potential.

# CHAPTER 4: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In my study, a social justice-oriented mixed methods sequential design adapted from Creswell (2015) was implemented. Strategies which were the hallmark of the high-performing schools in my study (STEM High and ECH) were implemented at the low-performing schools in my study (City Middle and City High), in an effort to provide a more equitable educational experience for students assigned to attend the two low-performing schools. The mechanism I selected for sharing those strategies thought to be contributors to the success of STEM High and ECH was a Principal's Professional Learning Community (PPLC). During regularly scheduled meetings, collaborating principals discussed strategies including instructional rounds, personalization, and instructional rigor. Data collected included artifacts from PPLC meetings (e.g., agendas, minutes, and field notes), artifacts from instructional rounds (e.g., schedules, field notes, participant reflections, and interviews), artifacts documenting efforts to infuse a personalized learning climate into City High (e.g., faculty surveys, student surveys, and mentor surveys), and artifacts documenting efforts to increase instructional rigor at City High (e.g., student assessment results and teachers' reflections). These data were selected to address the level to which improvement goals 1, 2a, and 2b were achieved during the course of my study. The next sections first describe the implementation of each component from my study plan, followed by the analysis of pertinent data as they relate to the relevant improvement goals.

## Principal Professional Learning Communities

The first task in my study plan involved the convening of a PPLC, to establish a meaningful connection among the principals from the higher performing STEM High and ECH and the principals at the lower performing City Middle and City High schools. With the support of SNC district-level leadership, in my role as the Innovative Programs Coordinator, I convened

the first SNC PPLC meeting in June, 2016. At this meeting, group norms were collaboratively established including a commitment to speak openly and honestly ("speak your truth") at the meetings, and to speak positively about each other's schools in public settings. Each of the principals in attendance shared background information about their schools, including what they believed were commonly held misconceptions about their schools amongst SNC educators and the larger community. A stated goal of the meeting was to identify how the participating schools could collaborate to drive innovation in SNC schools. This first PPLC meeting, hosted at ECH, laid the groundwork for a cooperative relationship which, I anticipated, would benefit all participants. Subsequent meetings were held at each of the member principals' schools in a rotating fashion.

In accord with my study plan, the PPLC met regularly during the 2016-17 school year, at a time which was collaboratively determined to be convenient to the participating principals. As the principals of City Middle and City High sought to develop schools that emulated the culture and academic practices of ECH and STEM High, the PPLC fulfilled the role I had anticipated for it, and served as a vehicle for sharing experiences, proposing solutions, and supporting colleagues in the difficult role of leading change. To provide an additional incentive, principals received continuing education units ("principal CEUs") in formal acknowledgment of their participation in the PPLC at the conclusion of the 2016-17 school year.

The effectiveness of the PPLC meetings was analyzed through qualitative data collected during year one of my project, as the PPLCs were established, as well as through data collected during year two of my project, when initiatives shared in PPLC meetings by the principals of STEM High and ECH were further implemented in City Middle and City High. These data included the PPLC agendas and minutes documenting initiatives discussed, along with field

notes collected by me as Innovative Programs Coordinator to document actions taken following these meetings.

**Principal Professional Learning Communities Data Analysis**

Each of the participating principals attended the five meetings held over the course of the 2016-17 school year, and, as a result, both contributed to and received benefits from this professional collaboration. For example, the principals of the high performing ECH and STEM High schools had shared with me—and also in the context of the PPLC—their concern that many students who were eligible to attend and desired to attend their schools were prevented from doing so through the lottery process. By working collaboratively with City Middle and City High, the principals of STEM High and ECH were afforded the opportunity to positively impact the quality of education received by students in the city attendance zone who were not selected by the lottery process to attend their higher performing schools. The principal of STEM High had created an alliance between STEM High and City Middle prior to my project, facilitating a process where teachers from STEM High regularly provided professional development for teachers at City Middle. As part of this collaborative effort, the STEM High principal assisted with the revision of City Middle schedule to incorporate time for daily morning teacher PLC meetings, and provided teacher-experts to deliver professional development on research-based instructional strategies for City Middle teachers. At the conclusion of this intervention, almost three-fourths of the City Middle staff reported that the PLC meetings had helped to reduce isolation and build a collaborative environment among the staff, and that the professional development provided on specific instructional strategies had been beneficial to their teaching. Corresponding improvements included increased teacher retention and slight decreases in student disciplinary referrals, along with slight increases in academic proficiency on state reading and

math exams (Hales, 2017). The creation of the PPLC allowed the STEM High principal to share his expertise with colleagues in greater depth, including his understanding of best practices for structuring morning teacher PLC meetings and student advisories.

The principal of ECH also benefitted from the PPLC alliance. Along with planning and hosting a study visit for the other schools at ECH, which included showcasing the practice of instructional rounds, the ECH principal provided expertise on the use of structured advisories to develop relationships between students and staff. This principal also provided staff to mentor City High teachers. Later, the ECH and City Middle principals gained experience as conference presenters at regional and state level symposia, sharing information about how advisories and instructional rounds—typically Early College strategies—can be implemented effectively at traditional and lower-performing schools.

An additional point that the ECH and STEM High principals made with their colleagues was that these selective high schools labored under their own reputation—some perceived that they were successful only because they enrolled the best students. The PPLC process itself may have lent credence to the elitist interpretation in that the two principals of the two high-performing schools frequently acted as information providers, whereas the principals of City Middle and City High were information receivers. This pejorative interpretation was unfortunate, even though mentorship was the modus operandi of the PPLC. The PPLC certainly afforded the principals of the high-performing schools the opportunity to share leadership strategies with colleagues, and formalized a structure where teachers from the high-performing school ECH were able to share instructional strategies with peers, but it would be simplistic to portray the flow of information as unidirectional. For example, the City Middle principal created a school-within-a-school, “Tiger Academy,” that implemented multi-grade classrooms and project based

learning. The City Middle principal shared with the PPLC group lessons learned in this endeavor, an initiative that other participating principals may later emulate.

By creating relationships first among the principals, and then providing them the opportunity to facilitate teacher collaboration across schools, knowledge and skills that worked with first generation college-going or at-risk students (the quite distinct target populations of the high-performing ECH) were shared with the low-performing schools (who, to a degree, have a similarly at-risk population). During the 2016-17 school year, the PPLC provided a secure, collegial environment in which the four participating principals were empowered to discuss instructional leadership, study current research into best practices, and brainstorm solutions to analogous problems.

Table 4 illustrates the PPLC major agenda items and the resulting actions that occurred following each meeting.

**Improvement Goal 1 Met: Instructional Rounds Begin**

A major outcome of the PPLC meetings was the second item detailed in my Study Plan in Table 3: The use of teacher-leaders from ECH to demonstrate how to conduct instructional rounds (City et al., 2009) for the purpose of soliciting feedback on student learning regarding the instructional environment maintained by their colleagues at the two low-performing schools. To facilitate my implementation of instructional rounds, selected teachers from all four participating school were released from classroom teaching to accompany the four principals in visits to the classrooms of teachers at ECH, which was hosting instructional rounds. The teachers' participation in instructional rounds included collaborating in the instructional rounds process—during which principals and teachers discussed lesson plans, observed students' engagement in the instructional process, and provided feedback on student learning to the teachers whose

Table 4

*Principals Professional Learning Community Agenda Item and Resulting Action*

| Date, Agenda Item | Resulting Action |
|---|---|
| June, 2016<br>Discussion of potential collaboration to provide supports and meet needs of low performing schools | Planned collaborative visit to ECH or STEM High |
| July, 2016<br>Principals will provide overview of morning PLC structure and strategies | City High implements PLC structure emulating that of the other 3 schools |
| September, 2016<br>Overview of student advisory time structure and strategies<br>Scheduling cross-school instructional rounds and study visits | Advisory structures attempted at City High<br>Cross-school instructional rounds and study visit scheduled at ECH |
| November, 2016<br>Principals reflect on learning tour and discuss ways to continue cross-school instructional rounds | Instructional rounds initiated at City Middle and City High |
| January, 2017<br>Principals will discuss ways to continue in-school and cross-school instructional rounds | Instructional rounds regularly scheduled and expanded at City Middle and City High |

lessons were observed. The first goal of this project was to make routine the practice of instructional rounds within, particularly, City Middle and City High, but also among all four collaborating schools. I anticipated that this practice would lead to the strengthening of professionalism among principals and teachers who serve diverse student populations in various schools by demonstrating that all students can benefit from high quality student-centered teaching in the context of a positive school climate. Table 5 provides examples of instructional rounds held at the participating schools, along with major takeaways resulting from post-rounds discussions.

**Expansion of instructional rounds.** During a June, 2016 PPLC meeting, the principals of City Middle and City High had expressed a desire to visit STEM High and ECH. Consequently, in October, 2016 (at the start of the 2016-2017 school year), the principal of City High and the principal of City Middle, along with teams of four teachers each, spent a day at ECH. During this visit all visitors participated in instructional rounds, including pre-rounds, classroom visits, and post-rounds. Four ECH core subject teachers, including math, English, and history teachers, served as instructional rounds hosts, and shared with the group their learning targets. The host teachers then asked the visiting observers to provide them with feedback on student engagement, effective collaboration with students, and evidence of student understanding of the learning targets. This intentional solicitation of feedback by the host teachers at a high-performing school, from visiting teachers assigned to teach in low-performing schools constituted an impressive demonstration of the potential for improvement through the process of instructional rounds. In post-visit reflections, the visiting teachers reported being surprised that their feedback was valued. One teacher noted that, prior to this visit, she had felt that teachers at high-performing schools felt superior to those at low-performing schools. After participating in

Table 5

*Instructional Rounds Implementation*

| Host Teacher | Visiting Teachers | Instructional Focus | "I noticed…" | "I wondered…" | Major Takeaway |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ECH | STEM High, City Middle, City High | Student engagement and collaboration | Students were asking each other for help before asking a teacher | What prior training did teachers do with students to teach effective collaboration? | Teachers from low performing schools felt like valued colleagues of teachers at high performing schools |
| City High | City High | Collaboration | One student did all of the writing while other group members observed | If each group member was given a different color pen would all to contribute to writing responses? | Teachers brainstormed ways to structure group work to ensure that all students actively participate |
| City Middle | City Middle | Evidence of academic rigor | Students read aloud complex text with fluency | Did students comprehend the text or just call words? | Academic vocabulary deficits interfere with reading comprehension |
| City High | City High faculty (fishbowl protocol) | Evidence the teacher is facilitating the learning of all students | Students articulated their value structure and defended them to peers | Did the students make connections between the activity and the text they were reading? | Instructional rounds visitors give a host teacher added insight into students' thinking by listening in to group discussions |
| City High | STEM High | Comprehen-sion of literary themes | Students used characters' traits to illustrate theme | Would asking students to respond to each other increase student voice in the discussion? | Cross-school instructional rounds built respect for students and teachers at City High |

instructional rounds, she felt like a colleague whose opinion was valued. This perception was reported in some fashion by all instructional rounds participants. The experience encouraged the visiting teachers to volunteer to serve as host teachers to begin the instructional rounds process at their own (low-performing) schools.

Consequently, following the visit to ECH, instructional rounds were scheduled at City Middle and City High. Organized by me as the Innovative Programs Coordinator, instructional rounds were scheduled weekly at each of the two schools. A host teacher, who either volunteered or accepted an invitation by the principal, shared his/her lesson plan and learning focus questions with a small group of three to four teachers during a regularly scheduled morning PLC meeting time. Using a lesson tuning protocol (National School Reform Faculty, 2014), the visiting teachers received a briefing about the host teacher's planned lesson, and asked clarifying questions about various aspects of the host teacher's ideas. (In essence, the lesson tuning protocol implements a structure for the orderly proposal and consideration of suggestions for refinement of lesson plans.)

Next, the host teacher shared with the prospective visitors an area of focus about which he or she desired feedback. Most frequently, the area of focus included student engagement, effective collaboration, and student understanding of the lesson objectives. In keeping with the archetype offered by City et al. (2009), visiting teachers were encouraged to ask questions of the students during the instructional rounds process, and to take detailed notes to share during the post-rounds debriefing. I developed a document detailing the roles and responsibilities of each participant in instructional rounds to facilitate the process (see Appendix B). Data collected to analyze the implementation of instructional rounds at City Middle and City High included a

schedule of visits (host teacher and visiting teachers), field notes from pre-rounds, rounds, and post-rounds, and written feedback from instructional rounds participants.

Twenty-five percent of the teachers at City High and 40% of the teachers at City Middle served as host teachers for instructional rounds during the 2016-17 school year. Additionally, most City High and all City Middle teachers participated in the process as visiting teachers. The instructional rounds process continued at City High in the fall of 2017 as well.

***City Middle instructional rounds & analysis.*** Teachers at City Middle had incorporated the practice of lesson tuning (National School Reform Faculty, 2014) into their weekly PLCs for several months prior to embarking on the practice of instructional rounds. City Middle teachers had also participated in professional development provided by teachers from STEM High on student-centered instructional strategies including collaborative group work, classroom talk, scaffolding, literacy circles, low stakes writing, and questioning techniques (Hales, 2017). Scaffolding refers to connecting a lesson objective with students' prior knowledge or experience to facilitate better comprehension. The City Middle principal noted that teachers knew what these strategies were, and incorporated them into their lesson plans, but that they were not always put into practice during actual classroom instruction. Consequently, the City Middle principal felt that the addition of instructional rounds would fortify classroom practice at her low-performing school. She divided her faculty into cross-curricular groups of four or five teachers, and from each group designated a teacher who would present his/her lesson to his/her group using the lesson tuning protocol. The City Middle principal solicited my support as the Innovative Programs Coordinator to facilitate instructional rounds in at least one classroom each week. The lesson tuning protocol served as the pre-rounds orientation, allowing the group to familiarize themselves with the lesson they would observe. One group member was designated

as the facilitator, who led the lesson tuning pre-rounds protocol, the instructional rounds visit, and the post-rounds debrief. By consensus, the teachers agreed that their guiding questions would focus on student engagement and evidence of rigor, although some teachers added an additional area of focus such as effective collaboration.

During instructional rounds, all of the participants entered the agreed upon classroom as a group, spread out, and quietly took notes or interacted with the students who were engaged in the lesson. Efforts were made to record accurately student questions and comments, as well as to note students who were actively participating versus those who were off-task. During a commonly agreed upon time the following day, the group re-convened to share with the host teacher group members' observations about the lesson, specifically as they pertained to the student learning questions.

Several common themes emerged at City Middle during the post-rounds debrief. Regarding student engagement, it was frequently noted that although the classrooms appeared to be quiet and orderly, many of the students were not actually engaged in the observed lesson. Students were observed fidgeting with items on their desk, quietly interacting with a neighboring student, and doodling during the lesson presentation. Often, up to half of the students in the classroom were off-task. These observations, when shared with host teachers, served to motivate them to provide more interactive tasks throughout their lessons to attempt to keep more students focused.

A second significant theme that emerged was a marked gap between students' reading fluency and reading comprehension. Many students were asked to read aloud non-fiction, grade-level appropriate text during observed lessons. In almost every occasion, students were able to enunciate words correctly, and read with grade-level appropriate fluency. However, when the

observers had opportunity to interact with students, asking questions about what they had read, it became apparent that students did not comprehend the meaning of the text they were reading. Some students had marked misconceptions, which led to incorrect completion of assigned tasks. For example, students in one instructional rounds host classroom were studying the Great Depression. Students took turns reading aloud portions of a text about the various roles people filled in society during the Great Depression, including farmer, banker, and shop keeper. Next students were asked to further research one of these roles, and to write a short narrative about the daily life of a person in this role during the Great Depression. As the instructional rounds observers moved about the classroom to interact with the students completing the task, they noted that many of the students were reading and writing about depression as a mental illness, rather than the economic catastrophe of the Great Depression. Post-rounds debriefs subsequently delved into students' vocabulary deficits, and the importance of scaffolding vocabulary prior to beginning an activity with students to ensure that they had enough background knowledge to comprehend reading selections and not just correctly enunciate words.

The instructional rounds process at City Middle was well-received by teachers. In a written communication to me as the Innovative Programs Coordinator, one City Middle teacher commented that

> instructional rounds has been so key to my professional development and has created a culture of collegiality among my coworkers. By hosting rounds, I get to create the focus for the group and am provided with real-time feedback from my colleagues. Also, participating in rounds, I am able to witness my coworkers in their environments and am able to see model lessons for me to adapt to my setting. Not all are great and those rounds are just as powerful. The rounds allow all teachers to have the same foundation to focus and drive professional development conversations.

The principal of City Middle noted that all staff were provided with professional development on instructional rounds during the 2016-17 school year, including visiting other schools in the district to conduct instructional rounds. She stated that

> morning PLC periods afforded a wonderful opportunity for pre-rounds and post-rounds conferencing with staff. When working with a system level Innovations Coordinator, staff were provided directions and facilitation with instructional rounds concepts and protocols.

The City Middle principal credits this practice, along with the improved school culture and climate, measured by increased teacher retention, along with a project-based learning initiative, with increasing academic performance at City Middle; the school met expected growth during the 2016-17 school year for the first time in a decade (Personal interview, City Middle principal, 2017).

***City High instructional rounds & analysis.*** The implementation of instructional rounds at City High followed a similar path. Initially, teachers who had participated in instructional rounds during a study visit to ECH volunteered to serve as host teachers. Visiting teachers were selected based on availability to observe during the designated date and time (e.g., teachers who had a planning period during the instructional rounds). Subsequent host teachers were selected from the visiting teachers, slowly spreading experience with the instructional rounds process throughout the faculty of 40 classroom teachers. To accelerate the faculty's knowledge acquisition about instructional rounds, the City High assistant principal (with the permission of the instructional rounds host teacher) conducted the post-rounds debrief in a faculty-wide setting using a fish-bowl protocol. In the fish bowl protocol, an inner circle consisting of the host teacher and the visiting teachers conducted the post-rounds debrief discussion, sharing their notes on the student learning questions posed by the host teacher. The remaining faculty positioned themselves in a larger circle surrounding this small group, listening to the process.

This further developed both faculty understanding of the process of instructional rounds, as well as helping to build teachers' comfort with the idea of colleagues coming into their classrooms to interact with students during their lessons.

Host teachers were free to select their own student learning questions, and there was more variation amongst the focus topics as a result when compared to the process at City Middle. Student learning questions selected by host teachers included "Is the teacher effectively facilitating learning among the entire group of students, as they work on independent assignments?" and "Can students explain how interactive journals help them demonstrate their understanding of literary structures?" along with questions about student engagement and content mastery.

As was the case at City Middle, post rounds discussions illuminated the issue of student vocabulary gaps and misconceptions. During group activities, students who appeared to be engaged were found, on close observation by visiting teachers, to be off-task and relying on their peers to complete assignments, which they would copy for credit. In many cases, fewer than half of the students were found to be actively participating in the observed lessons. Students shared with observers comments such as "I don't understand this" and "I'll just copy his. It's okay" when asked why they were not actively engaged.

Since their introduction at City High during the 2016-17 school year, instructional rounds have continued to be utilized by teachers there as well to assist with addressing student learning questions analyzing student engagement and assessing the effectiveness of instructional delivery methods. For example, as discussed earlier, reading comprehension is below grade level for many students who attend City High, as evidenced by the percent of students who enter City High prepared for high school work (7.1%), student mastery of end-of-course exams (17.3%

proficient on the English II exam for the 2016-17 school year), and ACT scores (14% of juniors scored at or above proficiency for the 2016-17 school year). Teachers in the English department at City High developed and administered common formative assessments to measure student reading comprehension at four-week intervals throughout the semester. However, the teachers implemented widely different instructional strategies to teach reading in their classrooms. For example, one teacher used technology extensively, individualizing instruction for students through the use of a series of online reading programs which targeted vocabulary and skill development. Another teacher focused on building vocabulary and reading comprehension through daily oral discussions (using selections such as Shakespeare's "Macbeth"). A third teacher used group readings, augmented by an oral narrator and regularly spaced questions and classroom discussion to decode complex vocabulary and sentence structure (using selections such as Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum"). A fourth teacher used a mixture of classic literature such as Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," combining oral reading of the text with lively discussions about how the stories in the literature were also themes in students' own lives. Instructional rounds allowed each of the teachers to create student learning questions, invite his/her colleagues into the classroom to observe student engagement and discuss with students their comprehension of the literature and their reaction to the various teaching methods, and then receive feedback from colleagues about what was working successfully as well as ideas for improving instruction.

During the second semester of the 2017-18 school year, these English teachers co-planned so as to incorporate into all of their classrooms components that they judged to be working successfully in the classrooms of colleagues. In a personal communication, one City High English teacher said,

> Instructional rounds have made me a better teacher through constructive comments and suggestions from teachers of various career lengths and subject content. Observing other teacher's practices inspires me to improve myself as a teacher as well as strengthen my relationships with my students. It is always eye opening to see how other teachers interact with their students and encourages me to try new things or take something they use and make it my own. The sharing of ideas and permission to take what we see and mold it into our own is something that is welcomed department-wide. Instructional rounds encourages dialogue between colleagues that may not otherwise be there. As we come together as a department, unity and sharing of ideas occurs. It allows me to be surrounded with fellow colleagues who want to be by my side and assist in my growth.

Overall, instructional rounds were viewed by teachers as a way to improve their teaching and build collegial relationships with their peers.

**Impact of instructional rounds.** Instructional rounds have long been incorporated into the instructional culture at ECH, utilized regularly as professional development process that involves host teachers inviting colleagues into their classrooms to observe student learning and subsequently to provide them with feedback on the effectiveness of their instructional strategies. Instructional rounds provides formative feedback to the host teachers that is oriented to refining professional practice. For example, a math teacher at ECH reported "when hosting instructional rounds in my classroom, I receive valuable feedback from colleagues that visit my classroom. I use this feedback to tweak my lessons for next time."

At both City Middle and City High, the process of instructional rounds served to illuminate why large numbers of students, despite earning passing grades in classes, were failing to demonstrate mastery on summative exams. The instructional rounds process laid the groundwork for implementing processes that required teachers to more closely monitor the mastery of objectives throughout a semester.

## Personalization

As stated previously, school climate is defined by Gruenert (2008) as the attitude of an organization. Gruenert proposed that intentional actions taken by school leaders can impact a

school's climate, leading to an improvement in the school's culture (or personality). Goal 2a involved implementing deliberate actions designed to build supportive relationships between students and caring adults, to create a climate of personalization. The PPLC meeting structure was utilized to assist City Middle and City High to first learn about, and then emulate the successful strategies in place at the high-performing schools which contributed to a climate of personalization.

**Advisories**

Both STEM High and ECH in SNC have successfully implemented structured advisories. One of the hallmarks of both schools is a close personal relationship between a group of students and a faculty advisor. The advisory structure at ECH consists of a group of fifteen or so students who are assigned to a faculty member upon entering the school as freshmen. The students meet regularly with their advisor during a period called "House," a term chosen to call to mind a family structure. Students remain with this advisor during their ECH career, and are ultimately "hooded" (robed in their commencement attire) by their House advisor in a commencement ceremony that takes place during their senior awards program.

The House period is intentionally designed to build relationships between the House advisor and the advisees, and amongst the advisees themselves. In its application for recognition as a School of Innovation and Excellence, ECH rated personalization as one of its greatest strengths, and listed House as the organizational strategy that ensured that students are well-known and that their affective needs are met. Students at ECH report that they feel connected to both their teachers and their peers. Students described their advisory experience positively, stating "you build relationships fast" with teachers, and that these relationships help them to

build confidence in themselves. One student reported "I was shy when I enrolled here, but now I feel confident in knowing what I can do."

Utilizing structured advisories to create a culture of personalization was a strategy the low performing high school, City High, wanted to emulate. At a PPLC meeting, the principal and guidance counselor from ECH shared information about how to create a powerful structured advisory. The ECH guidance counselor shared with the principals the strategies used by ECH for House. She explained that she prepared activities, games, and other lessons centered on topics such as collaboration, building relationships, college readiness, and communication. Teachers were required to read the plans and have the morning meeting time (PLC) to seek clarification regarding any aspects of the lessons they did not understand. The teachers then implemented the lesson in that day's House meeting. The counselor reported that about 80-90% of teachers implemented the lessons with fidelity, and the students enjoyed them. She emphasized to the group that school leaders need to hold advisors accountable for implementing the lessons. In addition, she noted that House did not meet daily at ECH, and that upperclassmen had House less frequently than their freshmen and sophomore counterparts.

**Advisories at City High**

Encouraged by the ECH's experience, City High initially implemented a structured advisory at the end of the school day, for 45 minutes. However, faculty and administration found this to be ineffective; students with abbreviated schedules or who had afternoon courses at the community college were no longer at school during the end-of-day advisory period, and the length of the period tended to contribute to off-task behaviors and disengaged students. Consequently, the advisory period was discontinued for a few months.

Later, the advisory period was reintroduced at City High in a format more closely following the ECH model. Faculty advisors were each assigned approximately fifteen students, with whom they met daily in a fifteen minute advisory period. Advisory lessons were created by City High administration, guidance counselors, the media coordinator, and the instructional technology assistant. As was the custom at ECH, the lesson plans were shared with teachers during morning meetings prior to the start of the school day. Advisory lessons covered topics including current events (e.g., a solar eclipse), career and college readiness (e.g., establishing a College Foundation of North Carolina [CFNC] account), academic advising (e.g., assisting students with monitoring their grades and attendance through an online data portal), and preparing students for upcoming exams (e.g., ACT practice questions).

**Goal 2a Met: Personalization Data Analysis**

Advisories are a hallmark strategy utilized by high-performing schools such as ECH, fostering the development of caring relationships between students and faculty which may contribute to a positive school climate (Hallinan, 2008). Goal 2a was designed to emulate characteristic strategies such as advisory, to improve the climate at the low-performing City High, and was to be judged successful if at least 50% of surveyed students responded positively to survey questions designed to measure a climate of personalization. Of note, faculty members were also surveyed to elucidate whether they judged the implementation of a structured advisory at City High to be successful. Both faculty and student responses are described in the following sections.

**Faculty perspectives.** After sixteen weeks of faculty members serving as advisors to a group of students at City High in the new format (fifteen minutes daily), a two-question open-ended survey was administered to the faculty to evaluate their perception of the success of this

initiative, particularly with regards to the development of a personalized culture which, in turn, could be a catalyst of improved student academic success (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Hallinan, 2008). The survey was administered online, and allowed teachers to respond anonymously to the survey questions. Thirty-five of 40 teachers chose to respond to two advisory-related questions, including "Do you have advisor/advisee time? Please describe your role in advisor/advisee time." and "How are you preparing students for life/college/careers after high school graduation?" Several themes emerged from the open-ended responses to the survey questions.

***Advisories build relationships***. The predominant response from teachers centered on the use of the fifteen minute daily advisory period to build relationships with students. Teachers perceived that leveraging relationships to motivate students to work hard is critical to academic success at City High, and many teachers commented on their use of this time to get to know their small group of advisees better. Although school administration provided a wealth of activities for faculty advisors to conduct during the daily advisory period, many teachers commented that the time was spent most profitably just talking with their advisees. Conversations allowed the teachers to learn students' plans for the future, and to offer advice. Some teachers even compared these conversations to the role of a big brother or other family member, noting that students were beginning to seek them out when they needed guidance on myriad topics. The comment, "advisory period gives me an opportunity to build relationships with students and allows me to give them valuable information needed for their success," summarizes the perceptions of many faculty advisors at City High.

***Advisories influence academic success.*** A second theme emerging from responses to the above survey questions was the use of advisory time to meet individually with students to discuss their grades and attendance. This was the most common topic mentioned by City High

faculty members in describing their role as advisors. These discussions have been particularly valuable, as school attendance is a concern at City High; more than 20% of the students missed more than the number of class periods (five) allowed by local school board policy to receive credit for courses. Advisors reported making students aware of their absences, and helping them to schedule "attendance make-up" time to recover class time so they could earn course credits.

The advisors also shared how they used the online grading portal, "PowerSchool," to help their advisees look up their grades in subjects, identify missing work, and schedule time to make-up missed assignments. Given the large numbers of students at City High with excessive absences, the advisory structure ensured that each student had a caring adult who could counsel him or her on the consequences of absenteeism as well as assist with identifying solutions.

***Reservations about the impact of advisories.*** Several respondents found the 15-minute time period too short for meaningful activities, and were discouraged that administration pressured teachers to deliver structured lessons during daily advisory. Teachers felt that the short time period was insufficient for these lessons, but was best spent simply "advising, nurturing, and forming relationships with our students." This emerged in response to the second question in the survey, as only some advisors reported successfully working with their advisees on college readiness or career readiness skills. Some advisors helped their advisees set up accounts with the CFNC, and others assisted with college or scholarship applications. One advisor stated, "I regularly communicate with students about future goals for life and college. I help them to look at their grades and credits needed for graduation. I encourage them to seek employment, volunteer opportunities, and summer enrichment programs." Respondents in the survey did not self-identify by their assigned advisory grade level, and the variance may be due to whether or

not an advisor currently supervised underclassmen or upperclassmen during the advisory time period.

A related theme that emerged in survey responses involved the fact that, in general, a teacher's assigned advisees were not students the faculty member teaches in a 90-minute period. This led to both positive and negative perceptions amongst the advisors. One faculty member commented, "the advisory gives the student time with an adult that may not ever teach them, and so they have another person who can build a relationship with them and get other opinions." On the other hand, some advisors saw this as being detrimental to their ability to work with their advisees. One advisor summed this up by saying, "I find myself frustrated with [students] whom I don't teach. If I taught them, I feel their attitudes and behaviors would be entirely different." This sentiment was echoed by others who find successfully working with their advisees challenging. One respondent lamented, "every day, I try to engage them in new information for them to utilize, but some students are a challenge for me. If I plan some activities, a lot of students do not want to participate." Teachers indicated the effectiveness of advisory period may increase in future years, when teachers loop to the next grade with their advisees and continue to build their relationship over time.

Clearly, teachers' responses were not uniformly positive, but overall, they largely expressed optimism that the advisory period was successfully addressing students' needs. The impact of this daily advisor-advisee communication on academic success is not yet clear. Minimally, the implementation of the advisory period has facilitated communication between faculty members and their students, as well as with parents. Advisors host student-parent-teacher conferences, assist parents with understanding the online grading portal ("PowerSchool"), and encourage students to take advantage of after-school tutoring opportunities.

**Student perspectives.** Near the end of the fall semester of 2017, City High students were provided an opportunity to share their thoughts about personalization and academic rigor at their school in a four-question survey (see Table 6)—each question of which sought an initial "yes/no" response followed by optional open-ended additional information. The survey was administered during the daily advisory period. Students were allowed to respond anonymously, reporting only their grade level. A slight majority (53%) of the student body chose to complete the survey, with 280 total respondents of the 527 enrolled students. The response rate varied slightly by grade level, with 64% of students in Grade 9, 40% of students in Grade 10, 51% of students in Grade 11, and 56% of students in Grade 12 submitting a completed survey to their respective advisors. The summary survey data regarding a culture of personalization are displayed in Table 6. In addition, a visual representation of student responses as they varied by grade level is displayed in graphical form in Figure 5.

As is clear from the graph of the binary yes/no responses in Figure 5, the responses from the Grade 9 students are quite consistent across all four questions. Only 60% of Grade 9 students reported they had an opportunity to pursue personal interests and make choices about what to study (Q3), likely due to the generally prescriptive nature of freshman course schedules, which are filled with required core courses with few slots for electives. Only 50% of ninth graders rated the culture of the school supportive to their learning and that of their classmates. The Grade 10 responses were consistent but agreed more strongly than any other grade level that they had the opportunity to pursue their personal interests in their schoolwork (Q3). Continuing to consider the personal interest aspect of schoolwork, the Grade 11 respondents concurred with the Grade 12 respondents regarding the reality of this opportunity. The Grade 12 respondents were less

Table 6

*Fall 2017 City High Student Reflection: Personalization and Relationship Building*

| | % Positive Response | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Question | 9th | 10th | 11th | 12th |
| Q1 - Do you have a teacher or another adult at this school that you are connected to and can go to with any questions, concerns, or issues? Can you give me some examples? | 63 | 64 | 74 | 77 |
| Q2 - Has your advisory class helped you in any way this year? If so, how? | 63 | 65 | 59 | 82 |
| Q3 - Do you have the opportunity to pursue your personal interests in your schoolwork? Do you have choices about what to study? | 60 | 89 | 77 | 80 |
| Q4 - Does our school have a culture that supports your learning, and that of other students? Give some examples. | 50 | 57 | 72 | 58 |

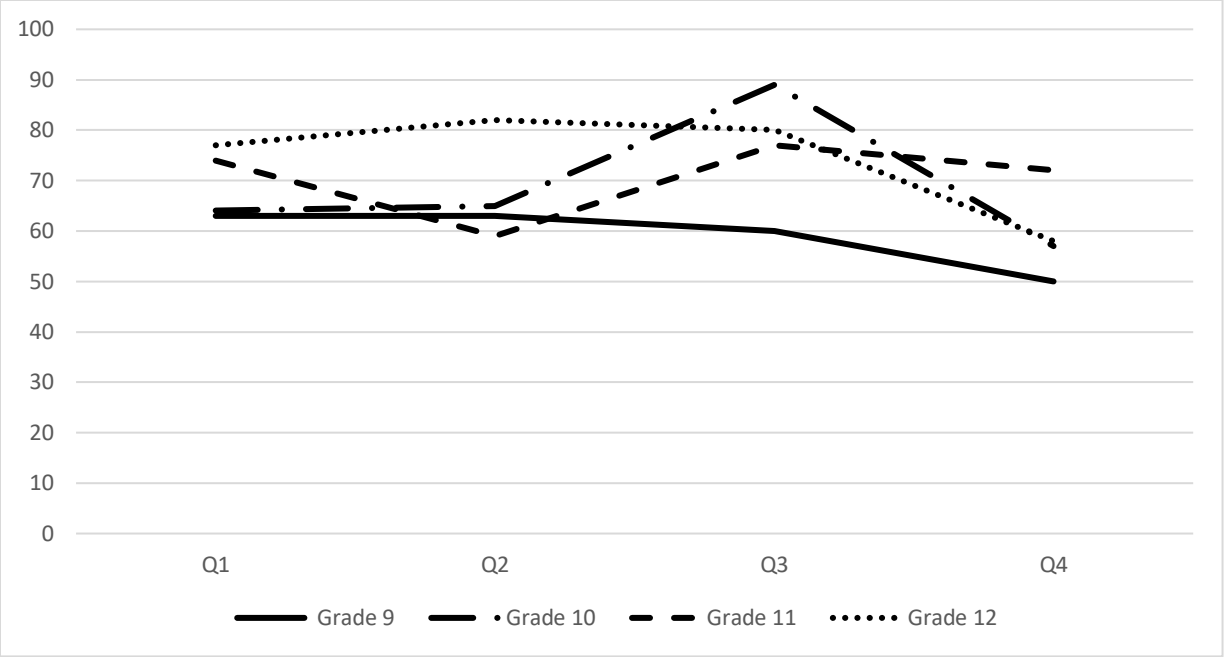


*Figure 5*. Comparison of binary grade-level responses to personalization and relationship-building survey.

ready to affirm that a culture of learning exists (Q4) than they were ready to return positive responses to each of the other three questions.

Freshmen reported that an adult at City High had helped with "school, home problems, etc." and that "because that teacher understands us kids he know[s] what we have been through and he can help." Students who found the advisory period helpful credited their advisors with providing them with great advice, helping them to become more knowledgeable about their grades and attendance, and teaching them how to calculate their grade point averages. Students also noted that the advisor helped them to develop social skills, make friends, and to "know what I could be when I get older."

Sophomores at City High had similar responses regarding personalization and relationships with caring adults at their school. One sophomore shared "we could pretty much talk about anything, and [the adult] gives good advice." Another student said the advisor "brightens up my mood when I'm not in a good mood."

Juniors enrolled at City High were very likely to have a relationship with a caring adult, however, they tended to cite a subject area teacher as the adult with whom they had established a rapport rather than their faculty advisor. One survey respondent said, "Teachers attempt teaching students what is necessary and beyond."

Seniors at City High were the most likely students to have an adult to whom they felt connected and in whom they were able to confide. Twelfth graders were also very likely to find the advisory period helpful to them. The focus of the senior advisory period on career and college readiness skills may be a factor in this response. Seniors elaborated on their responses citing how the advisory curriculum "made me really think about what I want to do after graduation" and "taught me about jobs and different types of majors in college." In addition, a

student said advisory "helped me learn some practical lessons and things in life that you don't learn in school that should be taught." However, only 58% of these students reported that their school had a culture that supported their learning and that of others, with one student lamenting that the student body had "too many complainers."

In summary, from the perspectives of an encouraging percentage of the bare majority of students who responded to the personalization and relationship-building survey affirmed that they connected with a teacher or another adult (Q1), were helped by Advisory (Q2), were able to pursue their personal interests in their schoolwork (Q3), and were supported in their learning by the school culture (Q4). Following the example set by ECH, City High administration made a concerted effort during the fall of 2017 to implement structures that would facilitate a culture of personalization at the low-performing school, including scheduling the advisory period during the morning when most students are on campus. Despite several obstacles to relationship building—including a large percentage of new staff members with diverse backgrounds, experience levels, and cultures—the creation of an environment that fosters personalization and relationship-building at City High has some indicators of success.

**Mentor Program**

Another way that City High is attempting to facilitate the development of close relationships between a caring adult and a small group of students is through a mentor program. A community-based advocate worked with the City High administration to develop a structured mentor program that would connect local community members to students at City High. Mentors were recruited by the advocate, and then, after initial training, mentors were assigned to groups of three to five students. Most of the assignments are gender-alike, with a female mentor working with a small group of girls and a male mentor working with a small group of boys. The

mentors meet weekly with their mentees during a portion of the students' elective class. The majority of the mentees are self-referred, as the students requested the opportunity to connect with a community member for weekly discussions. Five percent of the mentees are students recommended by teachers or school administration, in addition to those who self-selected to participate.

The mentors are not asked to serve as academic tutors for students. Rather, their focus is soft skills, including working with students to develop respect for themselves and others, discussing the importance of attitude, and working with students on college and career readiness skills. The mentors are knowledgeable about opportunities at the local community college, and may assist students with course selection. Mentors assist mentees with the development of resumes and job applications, and then facilitate mock interviews to help students prepare. Often, mentors support their students outside of school by attending school activities including ball games and concerts.

**Mentor perspectives**. At the conclusion of the fall 2017 semester, six community mentors who worked with a total of 24 City High students were asked to respond to two open-ended questions, including "Describe your experience as a mentor in the context of mentor-mentee relationships" and "What is the most powerful thing you have done with your mentees?" In response to the first question, mentors mentioned the importance of listening to their mentees. They described shared experiences with their mentees, such as being raised by a single parent, and their ability to serve as role models who had persevered despite facing the same obstacles that currently confront many of their mentees. Mentors acknowledged that at times some of their mentees were uninterested in the discussions of the mentor-mentee group, and how they continued to make an effort to build a relationship with the students. One mentor stated, "my

girls have shared information with me that they may not have had an opportunity to share with an[other]adult." Responses to the second question were in a similar vein. Mentors talked about the power of listening to students, and how this led to the establishment of an open relationship where mentees felt free to "express themselves, ask questions, and seek advice." Two male mentors described their work to help prepare their mentees for life after high school, including having a plan for the future, taking responsibility for themselves, and building their own self confidence.

**Student mentee perspectives.** Students who participated in the mentor program were asked a single question at the conclusion of the fall 2017 semester: "Would you recommend this mentor program to other students? Why?" Sixteen students responded to this query, and all of them answered with a resounding "Yes!" Some of the students appreciated the opportunity to meet new people, particularly an older adult from their own communities. Almost all of the students valued the focus on soft skills rather than academic tutoring during the weekly mentor-mentee meetings. One student shared that the interaction with a mentor showed him that there was more to life than what he had experienced. Another student summed it up with "It helps teach you about the practical lessons of life that you don't get to learn in school." Most students recommended expanding the mentor program, so that they could have more interaction with mentors and to allow more students to be served.

At the high performing Early College High and STEM High, there have been many opportunities for students to build relationships not only with their teachers, but also with community members. Job shadowing and working with community leaders are infused into their educational experience, and students reap the benefits of building relationships with many caring adults who then can assist them to achieve their future aspirations. The advisory program and the

mentor program have been intentionally structured at City High to emulate these high performing school practices, to create similar opportunities for the City High student body.

**Assignments Relevant to Students' Lives**

Another hallmark of the high performing schools emulated by the low performing schools in this study that contributes to a culture of personalization is the practice of teachers creating intentional relevance between academic assignments and students' lives. Teachers at the high performing schools, including STEM High and ECH, frequently find ways to connect the information students are learning to student interests or experiences, and create lessons that are cross-curricular. For example, at ECH, teachers plan instruction around "big ideas," utilizing a shared design process and promoting student leadership. This instruction is then mapped to multiple standards across curricula, and is woven into House activities and club events as well. Examples cited in ECH's application for Recognition of Innovation and Excellence (2015) include problems of contemporary society, global awareness, and cultural awareness. A specific topic studied during the 2016-17 school year used the award winning movie "Hidden Figures" as a way to promote the study of advanced mathematics, motivate discussions about the historical maltreatment of minorities and women in the workplace and ways to redress it, and the lack of recognition for milestone contributions made by minority women during the NASA's successful effort to launch an American into orbit and return him safely. Students studied the historical context, learned about the innovative mathematics created to accomplish NASA's goal, and viewed the movie as a group to promote discussion of changes in cultural awareness over time. In the context of such cross-curricular endeavors, both teachers and students in ECH reported that classroom discussions were dominated by student voice rather than teacher voice, as all

opinions were valued and students gained confidence in their viewpoints by sharing ideas with each other.

An example of how learning is relevant to student interests at STEM High can be found in the annual Statistics Exposition hosted by that school. Students are encouraged to select a topic of interest, and design an experiment to test a hypothesis, statistically analyze their results, and prepare a poster to support an oral presentation to an audience including representatives from the community and school district leadership. While students are held accountable for rigorous content knowledge, they learn the information in an engaging and self-directed manner that develops students' understanding of the mathematics as well as 21st century skills such as collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. Both City Middle and City High have some teachers who are emulating these instructional approaches, developing lessons that have direct relevance to students' lives and leveraging this relevance to teach complex topics.

**City Middle.** During the 2016-17 school year, some students at City Middle engaged in project based learning on topics relevant to their daily lives. For example, an historic flood struck the city in the fall of 2016, and many students were adversely impacted. Teachers at City Middle used this weather phenomenon to teach science, history, math, and English, along with 21st century skills including collaboration, communication, and community service. Students studied the pattern of flooding, mapped the neighborhoods impacted (which were predominantly economically disadvantaged), and spearheaded a food and clothing drive for their community. They presented their results in a public forum for community and school district leadership. In the spring of 2017, teachers at City Middle collaborated with local community college leaders to incorporate "soft skills" into their core subject curricula. As part of this initiative, students hosted

a luncheon for community and school district leadership for which they prepared and served the meal, and delivered an oral presentation they had created about their experiences.

**City High.** Some teachers at City High have also emulated this instructional approach in the fall of 2017. For example, an English teacher motivated students to become engaged in classic literature by creating intentional links between Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" and students' experiences with local gang violence. This teacher introduced the play by having students wear blue, red, or white bandanas to signal their "gang" affiliation for the Montagues, the Capulets, or neutrals. As students read the play, explicit connections to their own lives were made, including their impulse to defend close friends "like brothers," even with their lives, how warring groups may continue to have "beef" with each other even when the original slight is no longer remembered, and the tendency to confide in the non-parental figures who frequently play a major role in raising them (a role that Shakespeare's Nurse filled for Juliet). The intentional connections led to high level engagement from students despite their academic records indicating they were significantly below grade level, leading to their successful mastery of grade-level content on subsequent assessments.

Leveraging relationships with students to motivate them to work hard on rigorous curricula is an important step in improving student achievement, particularly at a low-performing school (Hallinan, 2007). As one City High teacher stated, "Some students seem to want to learn. They see that I care about them both in the classroom and out. Because of this, I think they put more effort into their work."

## High Quality Curriculum

In addition to structures which lead to the development of a personalized culture, the high performing schools in SNC have consistently provided students with a rigorous academic

environment in which they are motivated to work hard to achieve success. As was noted previously, differences exist when comparing the student populations of the high performing SNC schools to the student populations of the low performing SNC schools in this study. However, as no correlation exists between academic growth and student socioeconomic status (Granados, 2017), it is reasonable to expect that the strategies associated with an academically rigorous environment at the high performing schools in this study can engender a similar student growth result when implemented at the low performing school in this study.

**Improvement Goal 2b Met: Rigorous Instruction**

For the 2016-17 school year, both STEM High and ECH achieved the grade of "A," and met or exceeded the growth expectation (NC Report Cards, 2017). Although City Middle continued to receive the grade of "F," as it had in 2015-16, the school showed marked improvement and met growth. Indeed, City Middle's Growth standard measure improved markedly from -5.94 to -2.00. City High continued to receive the grade of "D," and did not meet growth. However, the growth standard measure of -4.41 was improved as compared to the grade of -5.65 awarded in 2015-16. Although overall student proficiency was largely unchanged (due to the low starting points), both of these low performing schools had growth measures that were higher than the previous year, and met the stated improvement goal of "1" or higher. However, both schools remain far below state and district averages with regards to proficiency, and City High is not yet meeting the prescribed growth standard, whereby students attending City High are receiving the same level of instruction (and thus achieving the prescribed growth) they would presumably receive at a "typical" high school in North Carolina (EVAAS Technical Support, n.d.). During the fall of 2017, as Innovative Programs Coordinator, I led work at City High to

further emulate the benchmark instructional practices which are routinely observed at STEM High and ECH.

**Instructional Practices**

In addition to the implementation of instructional rounds, discussing strategies oriented to creating a personalized learning environment where students are well-known by a school's adults, the principal professional learning community meeting agendas included discussions of strategies to create a rigorous instructional climate. Both STEM High and ECH emphasize the implementation of benchmark instructional practices. For example, in an application for Recognition of Innovation and Excellence (2015), ECH teachers described planning cross-curricular instruction aligned to multiple standards, and increasing the relevance of the curriculum by engaging students in tackling problems of contemporary society. Teachers created formative assessments which allowed for analysis of student learning data, and collaboratively reflected on student performance and, overall, sought ways to improve learning.

The next step, then, was to devise processes to regularly assess both whether or not all teachers at City High, where the school continued to fall below prescribed growth targets, were teaching the prescribed curriculum, and whether or not all students were successfully mastering this curriculum. Focusing on City High, as the Innovative Programs Coordinator I scheduled professional learning sessions for teachers prior to the start of the 2017-18 school year to allow time to "unpack" curriculum standards, create pacing guides, and develop lesson plans collaboratively with their subject-area colleagues. For each subject, a curriculum expert from the district or from the NC Department of Public Instruction was employed to facilitate the work. Teachers were directed to create learning units in four-week chunks, to be followed by assessment of standards. Teachers were instructed to create assessments to mirror, as closely as

possible, the state assessment such as end-of-course exams, North Carolina Final Exams, and Career and Technical Education final exams by using available released test items. Whenever practicable due to similar teaching assignments, the same exam would be administered to the students of multiple teachers to allow for further data analysis and comparison.

The incorporation of regular, rigorous assessments aligned to both curriculum standards and containing test items from released exams proved to be eye opening for both students and teachers. Teachers were directed to create assessments with four test items per curriculum standard, and to analyze the resulting data using a matrix designed to elucidate mastery of objectives both by student and for the class as a whole (see Appendix E). The assessments were also required to be assigned a grade, which was then incorporated into students' overall course grade. Many students initially expressed dismay at their scores upon learning that they would "count" as a portion of their course grade. Students shared with administration that the assessment scores reduced their grade, often significantly. This result indicated several potential issues. Were there serious misalignments between classroom instruction and commonly developed, standards-based assessments? If so, what should be done to close this gap? Alternatively, were students discounting the seriousness of the assessments, so that they did not accurately reflect student knowledge? If so, how can teachers better motivate students to work hard on challenging assessments, so that their scores accurately reflect their knowledge and abilities?

**Assessment and data analysis**. In addition to being addressed in instructional rounds post-round discussions, these questions were wrestled with by teachers every four weeks in written reflections submitted to administration along with data analyses. These reflections

illuminated several themes across subject areas and grade levels, which teachers then addressed during the subsequent four week instructional cycle.

After the first four-week assessment, the most commonly stated comment from teachers was that students did not give their best effort on the exams. English teachers reported that students gave up mid-way through the 90 minute exam, and math teachers reported that some students took less time per question than necessary to read the question (ex, 5 seconds average), so clearly did not spend time working out math problems. Teachers' comments included "My biggest problem is motivating them to take tests seriously." "I have to find a way to make the kids care." "Students do not do their best, they just mark answers." Content-related themes also emerged from the 4-week assessments. In English courses, all teachers noted that students struggled with the use of inference and citing textual evidence to support answers. They related this to deficits in students' vocabularies, particularly in academic language. This theme surfaced in math teachers' reflections as they noted that students struggled to comprehend word problems. One teacher stated, "My students do not understand the language of math." History teachers noted that their students struggled with lengthy, complex questions, and were not able to utilize inference or context clues to help them understand the question being asked. Science teachers noted similar issues. One science teacher stated, "I realized that I am using short, simply worded questions on my weekly assessments, which students handle well. Then when I gave an assessment using released state exam test questions, which were lengthier with more complex vocabulary, the students had no idea what was being asked." These assessments helped to illuminate a gap between what teachers were preparing students to do, and what summative state exams will demand of students. It is important to note that most of the core subject area teachers at City High are at the beginning stages of their careers. The English department has one teacher

with 4 years of teaching experience, and 4 teachers who are in their first year. The math department has 4 of 6 teachers just beginning their NC teaching careers, and the history department has 4 of 5 teachers with 0-3 years of experience. The science department also has 3 of 4 teachers with 0-3 years' experience as NC teachers. Contrasting this experience with the previously described staff at ECH and STEM High, where most teachers have 4 or more years of experience and many have more than 10 years spent teaching, affirms the national statistic that often the neediest students have the most inexperienced teachers trying to guide them.

The four-week assessments were not only used by the teachers to analyze data, identifying the "what," they were used also to guide them in how best to approach the next four week time span. Teachers provided examples of how they planned to address the issues that were uncovered during the first assessment. Vocabulary development was mentioned by multiple teachers, an acknowledgement of the serious academic language deficits that challenge most of the students at City High. Methods included use of technology, selecting software which could be individualized to target students' needs, and more intentional use of the complex assessment questions that populate state exams during ongoing instruction. Significantly, large numbers of teachers mentioned the need to develop relationships with students, to better encourage them to take testing seriously.

At the twelve week mark, teachers reported marked improvements in students' attitudes towards assessments. Teachers reported not only improvement in students' performances, but also that more students took the tests seriously, took more time analyzing questions and crafting responses, and demonstrated pride in their mastery of course material. Teachers were hopeful that they were beginning to "make a difference" and that students were "buying into" their classes, and the assessment scores inched slowly higher.

**Student responses.** Near the end of the fall semester of 2017, in addition to responding to questions about personalization, City High students were provided an opportunity to share their thoughts about academic rigor at their school in an open-ended survey administered during the daily advisory period. Students were allowed to respond anonymously, reporting only their grade level. As reported previously, 53% of the student body chose to complete the survey, with 280 total respondents of the 527 enrolled students. The response rate varied slightly by grade level, with 64% of students in grade nine, 40% of students in grade 10, 51% of students in grade 11, and 56% of students in grade 12 submitting a completed survey to their advisor. The survey questions soliciting students' opinions regarding academic rigor are found in Table 7. Interestingly, only a slight majority of freshmen at City High felt challenged by their courses as their first semester of high school drew to a conclusion, and more than four out of five freshmen felt they were ready for life beyond high school. Perhaps this confidence is due to both the structured advisory and the mentor program, both of which provided freshmen information about planning for their future in the military, college, or a career. Several freshmen specifically mentioned the National Junior Reserve Officers Training Corp (NJROTC) course, an elective which prepares students for a career in the military, as being challenging. Other challenging courses mentioned by freshmen included English and math. When addressing whether they felt prepared for life after high school, a typical negative response was "no, I still have growing and learning to do." Positive responses referenced "new strategies I've learned" and "I plan to join the Armed Forces after high school."

City High sophomore respondents were slightly less likely to report that their classes were challenging (60%), and 90% of sophomores felt they were ready for life beyond high school. Specific examples of challenging classes included math and English, but also referenced

Table 7

*Fall 2017 City High Student Reflection: Academic Rigor*

| | % Positive Response | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Question | 9th | 10th | 11th | 12th |
| Q1 - Do you feel challenged in your classes at this school? Describe activities or expectations that make you feel challenged. | 57 | 60 | 70 | 61 |
| Q2 - Are you ready for life beyond high school? How do you know? | 81 | 90 | 89 | 93 |

the amount of work, a faster pace, and assignments such as projects and essays. To most sophomores, "ready" for life beyond high school meant holding a job and earning money, rather than prepared for college or the military. One sophomore said, "I'm ready to make money and support my siblings." A few students expressed misgivings; one said, "It may not be as easy as I think it's gone [sic] be."

Juniors were the most likely (70%) to report that their classes at City High were challenging. Typical junior course loads support this perception, with advanced mathematics, English, American History, and Biology found on the schedules of most juniors. Students specifically referenced difficulty in math courses, writing papers for English, and the rigor and pace of biology. Nine of ten (89%) of juniors felt prepared for life beyond high school, but when pressed for specifics admitted that they were "ready to get out of school." That is, "ready for life" may have been interpreted not as "prepared," but "eager" to be finished with school. One student said, "I'm already on my own and experiencing the real world." A few students shared that they were unsure about college choices and future career goals, so did not yet feel ready for life beyond high school.

City High seniors were less likely to feel challenged by their course work than juniors, with only 61% answering this question affirmatively. The lack of rigorous advanced courses available to seniors (for example, the fall semester had no advanced placement courses offered, and the highest level of math taught at City High is Advanced Functions and Modeling, a step below the pre-calculus most college-bound seniors typically take) and the scant 24 credits required for graduation (a typical NC high school senior must earn a minimum of 28 credits to graduate) likely contribute to this perception. Seniors were the most likely to report feeling "ready for life beyond high school" with 93% affirmative responses to this question. One student

said “I am ambitious and responsible.” Another said “I’m slowly getting my life together so who really knows what I’m ready for?”

**Summative Assessment Performance**

Preliminary City High summative assessment data from the fall of 2017 is mixed, with indications that the project’s initiatives including actions to change school climate and attention to rigorous instruction are yielding some successes. In December, 2017, students completed end-of-course exams in Math I, English II, and Biology. Initial data for the students who were enrolled in these courses during the fall semester implies that the growth measure was met in biology and English II, although students continued to fall short of expectations on the Math I exam. Interestingly, scores were most promising for biology, a subject where returning teachers had established relationships with students prior to the current semester. In Math I, the subject where preliminary data indicates students during the fall of 2017 did not met the growth target, most teachers were new to City High, and in fact did not start work at City High until several weeks into the semester; this late start delayed the establishment of teacher-student relationships and may have been a contributing factor to the poor student performance with regards to the growth standard. Students also were administered North Carolina Final Exams (NCFEs) and Career and Technical Exams (CTEs). Growth data is not yet available for these exams; however, proficiency showed improvement overall as compared with the previous school year.

## Summary

In many respects, students’ responses are surprising. The number of City High students who enter high school prepared for the rigors of high school coursework is a scant 7.1% (NC Report Cards, 2017), and only a small percentage of them are successful on state exams. However, City High students do not yet equate success in school with performance on state

exams, as evidenced by their strong belief that they are prepared for life beyond high school. They expect to pass their classes regardless of their mastery of curriculum content, and bully and badger teachers to that effect. The disconnect between City High students' perception of challenging coursework, the lack of effort they routinely put forth on assessments, and the huge gap between their proficiency on state exams as compared to the average NC High School, illuminate the challenge of improving student performance at City High.

Despite these challenges, the data discussed previously supports my judgement that the improvement goals of this study have each been successfully met. Through the collaborative efforts of principals at the high-performing and low-performing schools chosen for this study, hallmark strategies of the high-performing schools have been implemented at the low-performing schools.

Goal 1, measured by the number of teachers at each of the two low-performing schools who have participated in instructional rounds, exceeded the benchmark I established of 25% of the respective schools' faculties participating in this collaborative process. Teachers at both of these schools reported satisfaction with the instructional rounds process as a means of improving their practice.

Goal 2a, aimed at improving the climate of the low-performing schools, was measured at City High through surveys designed to judge students' and faculty members' perceptions of efforts to create a personalized climate. These included the implementation of both a structured advisory and a mentor program at City High (Note that City Middle analysis for Goal 2a is not included; as a middle school, City Middle already had a "homeroom" structure in place, along with the previously described "Tiger Academy" school-within-a-school. City Middle

administration thus had previously existing structures designed to improve personalization in place).

Goal 2b, increasing academic performance at both City Middle and City High, was measured by examining student growth utilizing EVAAS data. Both City Middle and City High demonstrated improvement in the growth measure at the conclusion of year 1 of this study; the growth measure for year 2 is not yet available.

# CHAPTER 5: SIGNIFICANCE AND REFLECTION

In this study, I set out to improve the quality of education students who attend low performing schools in SNC were receiving. As the Innovative Programs Coordinator of SNC, my role afforded me the opportunity to work with the two highest performing schools in the district; indeed, two of the highest performing schools in the state, STEM High and ECH. Both of these schools had previously been recognized as exemplary. STEM High, one of the first cooperative innovative high schools to open in North Carolina (middle school grades were added at STEM High several years after it opened), was designated as a Learning Laboratory School, and hosted study visits from educators across the state who sought to emulate their innovative approach as well as their commendable student achievement. ECH opened in SNC a year later, and grew to equal STEM High in the achievements of its students. Perennially exceeding growth, along with the recognition of being an "A" school when North Carolina began issuing report cards grades to public schools, ECH is notable in that it serves a diverse student population (mirroring both SNC and the state in demographics, such as race and the proportion of economically disadvantaged students), and ensures, through a weighted lottery, that 80% of its incoming student body each year are first generation college-attendees. In 2016, ECH received Recognition of Innovation and Excellence (McKay et al., 2015), and was invited to host study visits from schools seeking to emulate their success.

Despite the documented success of both STEM High and ECH, for most of their existence they received little attention from other schools in SNC. This changed in 2014, when the principal of STEM High began collaborating with City Middle to provide professional development for teachers on instructional strategies, and support for a City Middle schedule change providing for morning PLC time for teachers, as was the practice at both STEM High and

ECH. Still, administration and teachers at City Middle did not participate in a learning tour at STEM High (although some teachers from City Middle visited some STEM High classes in conjunction with the professional development initiative described earlier). At the same time, ECH remained isolated within the SNC district and received little notice from other high schools in SNC, particularly the low performing City High.

## Summary of Findings

It was within this context as Innovative Programs Coordinator that I envisioned serving as a conduit between educators at the high performing STEM High (who already had a previously established relationship with educators at City Middle) and their adjacent school, City High, as well as between ECH and City High. Research in high performing, high poverty schools (Chenoweth, 2010) documented that high poverty schools such as City Middle and City High could be successful given the right school climate and instructional focus. In particular, I was interested in looking at the school climate and instructional focus that were characteristic of ECH. Since ECH enrolls a diverse student population, including 80% first generation college goers, I surmised that strategies embedded in the daily practices at ECH could be emulated at City High with a similar result. Figure 6 illustrates the framework utilized to undertake this collaborative work.

Beginning in the summer of 2016 and continuing through the 2016-17 school year, I sought to establish and lead a Principals' Professional Learning Community (PPLC) that facilitated regular communication between the administration of the high performing schools and the low performing schools participating in this study. Building on the scheduling changes previously made at City Middle, including daily morning PLC time set aside for teachers, and the training City Middle teachers had received on instructional strategies, PPLC meetings

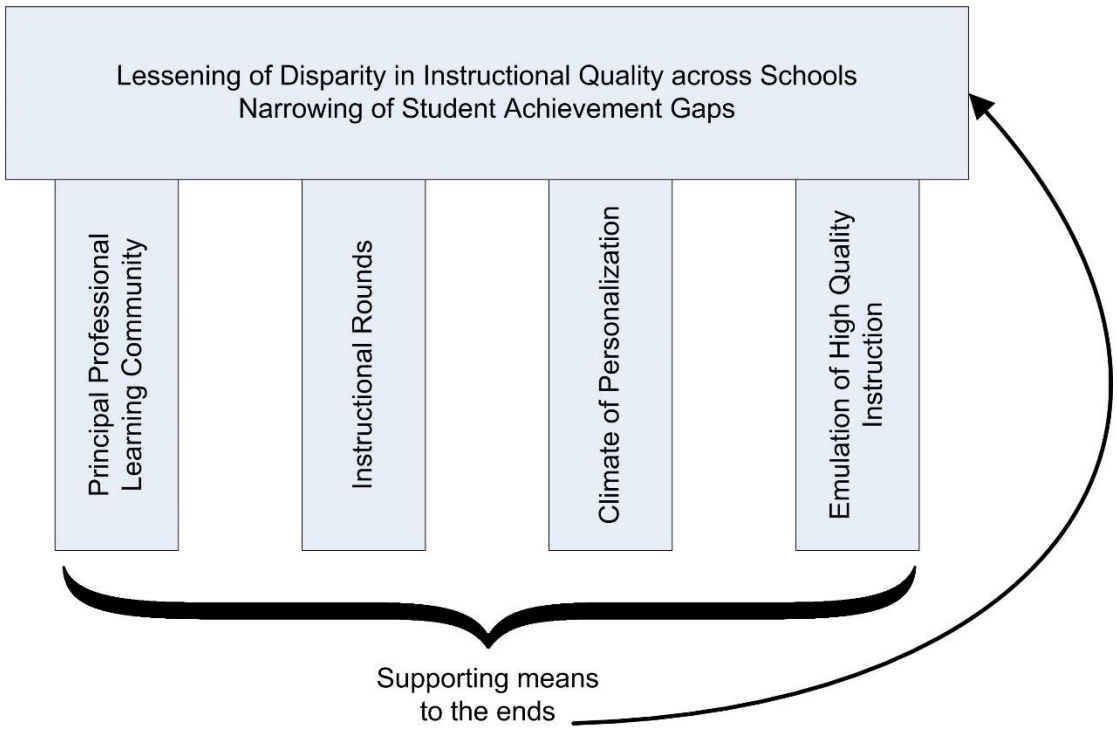


*Figure 6*. Framework for connecting high performing schools to low performing schools to lessen disparity in instructional quality.

discussed how high and low performing schools might further collaborate to share effective strategies. Agenda topics included effective use of morning PLCs, best practices for building staff-student relationships through structured advisories, and how to implement instructional rounds to improve instruction. A study visit to ECH was planned as a result of the PPLC meetings, and was attended by the PPLC participants accompanied by teachers from their respective schools. This study visit, held in October, 2016, served to reinforce changes already underway at City Middle, and was the catalyst for change at City High. Teachers who participated in the visit to ECH reflected that it was a powerful incentive for the creation of a personalized culture at City High. One City High teacher who took part in the study visit noted "all the students that I talked to were engaged and cared about what they were doing. The teachers created a very student-centered environment." This participant left with two questions: "How can we teach our students to focus and care? How can we begin to change their way of thinking about their futures?"

As Innovative Programs Coordinator, I was able to facilitate not only the PPLC meetings with school administration, but also play an active role in the implementation of instructional rounds at City Middle and City High throughout the 2016-17 school year. Additional changes in school climate at City High were introduced corresponding to PPLC agenda topics, including morning PLCs for teachers, training for teachers on benchmark instructional strategies, and the implementation of a daily advisory period. Although the advisory period was initially unsuccessful due to lack of structure and scheduling challenges, many of the other strategies were effectively implemented. Tweaks to the scheduling of the advisory period increased the effectiveness of this strategy as well, resulting in indicators of a personalized climate at City High noted in the response to survey questions (see Table 6). The implementation of these

activities at City Middle and City High corresponded with increases in the growth measures for both low-performing schools; City Middle met expected growth, and City High posted a growth measure which improved by more than "1" for the 2016-17 school year. As noted previously, the EVAAS statistical range denoting a school has met expected growth for its student population is from "-2.0" to "+2.0." Thus, an increase of "1" represents one-fourth (25%) of the overall expected growth range.

As highlighted already, my initial role as Innovative Programs Coordinator in 2016-17 was to establish the PPLC, to create a culture of trust, and to facilitate discussions that the participants found meaningful to their collaborative work. At the start of the 2017-18 school year, however, my role became both a participatory as well as a supportive one when the superintendent of SNC appointed me as the interim principal of City High, while retaining my role as Innovative Programs Coordinator for SNC. I was thrilled by the implied vote of support for what I had accomplished in the initial year. My superintendent knew that, before coming to SNC, I had honed my personal expertise as an educational leader for many years including as a principal of a high school that became high-performing under my leadership in a different district, so I was less overwhelmed by the dual role than might otherwise have been the case.

In my dual role, I set out to sustain interactions that had been established the year before between the high- and low-performing schools. Consequently, I worked with teachers at City High, through the supportive network I had created the previous year, to design effective student-centered lessons, create rigorous assessments to evaluate the impact of teaching, and to provide each other with data about student engagement and learning. My action plan envisaged building on the alliances established in year one of my study (2016-17), setting goals, and facilitating collaborative follow-through. My assessment of year one of my initiative involved the analysis

of data (including PPLC meeting minutes), and the implementation of identified action items, such as scheduling site visits at schools, and cross-school instructional rounds, as well as the implementation of instructional rounds at City Middle and City High. Additionally, a critical part of my action plan was relationship-building with SNC district leaders—all of whom were kept apprised of the progress being made at City High—in addition to the community stakeholders who had concerns about changes occurring in their neighborhood schools.

The re-casting of my researcher positionality, with the dual role of Innovative Programs Coordinator and Interim City High principal, coincided with a change in the administration of City Middle. The cumulative impact of these changes afforded me the opportunity to focus more in-depth on City High. It is important to note that my assignment as interim principal did not compromise the continued implementation of this project at City High. Instructional rounds are, by design, non-evaluative, and this process, while embraced by teachers at City High, remained voluntary. Data from instructional rounds are never part of a teacher's ongoing evaluation, nor is preliminary test data. Due to the groundwork established in 2016-17 as Innovative Programs Coordinator, my status as a non-biased researcher and facilitator of project implementation was preserved as noted by the City High teachers who continued to volunteer as host and visiting teachers for the instructional rounds process. One City High teacher commented during year two of this study,

> instructional rounds within our school department have strengthened relationships and shown our students that we, as their English Educators, are a united front. And, given the fact that, at some point, we will likely be teaching the very students we are observing, that's a big win. Beyond our own school circle, inviting outsiders into my classroom eliminated any potential politics associated with giving REAL feedback (constructive criticism), and I certainly learned a lot from the veteran teachers who spoke during the post-round and will be able to refine that particular lesson because of their thoughts.

During the 2016-17 school year (year one) the majority of my time as Innovative Programs Coordinator was spent at City High where I led professional learning for teachers during morning PLCs, participated in instructional rounds, and built relationships with students and teachers, and with the principal of City High. During year two of my project, in fall 2017, when I held the dual roles of Innovative Programs Coordinator and interim principal, I continued to build relationships with teachers and students. Becoming an active participant in the school's daily routines provided me with time to talk with students about their lives both inside and outside of school, and to model for the many teachers new to City High how positive relationships with students could be leveraged to motivate students to become more actively involved in their own education. I also saw firsthand students' frustrations when faced with academic rigor (for example, in an advanced math class with a highly qualified teacher, when their prior math course had been "taught" by a substitute teacher whose understanding of the subject was less comprehensive). Many times during the course of this study, I visited classrooms in the higher performing ECH and STEM High, witnessing high-quality teaching that commanded the attention of engaged students, and was dismayed that similar students in the two low performing schools in my study were not being offered a similar educational environment. My conversations with teachers at both City Middle and City High revealed the teachers' passion for their subjects and their caring attitudes for their students. They, too, wanted their students to thrive in a rigorous educational environment, despite the challenges they knew students faced both inside and outside of the school walls including poverty, homelessness, lack of space and time to complete homework assignments, and caring for younger siblings while adult caregivers worked.

At both of the low-performing schools in my study, teachers eagerly embraced the concept of instructional rounds as a means to learn more about their own teaching as well as their students' response to the lessons they were delivering. Collegial conversations during post-rounds discussions resulted in powerful revelations about students' misconceptions, knowledge gaps, and ways they could scaffold instruction to serve their student population more effectively. For example, during post-rounds discussion following a science lesson at City Middle, teachers discussed students' lack of comprehension of the concept of heat exchange, noting that students had no familiarity with terms such as "evaporation" and "condensation." Students' vocabulary deficits impeded their understanding of the role of these processes in heat exchange. Similarly, lack of comprehension due to limited vocabulary arose as a common theme in English classes, health classes, history classes, business classes, and math classes during the City Middle instructional rounds process. The visiting teachers brainstormed with host teachers approaches to pre-teach vocabulary with concrete examples with which students may be familiar prior to introducing a new concept.

City High teachers also found that students' lack of familiarity with common terms was an impediment to curriculum mastery. One City High teacher shared with colleagues during a post-round debrief that he had noticed a student selected to use the term "ransom" rather than "fare" for "what you pay to ride a bus." Realizing that the student rode the city bus frequently, the teacher questioned the student about the word choice. The student responded, "ransom is what you pay when you want to get something." The student had likely never heard the simple word "fare" used as a payment. Identifying the issue of vocabulary deficits, which created barriers to content comprehension and impeded students' ability to use context clues to elucidate

word meanings, was enlightening to the instructional rounds participants, and led to real changes in practice among teachers at both schools.

## Preliminary Signs of Promise

The implications of my study are promising. After many years of declining student performance at City Middle and City High, both of these schools showed improvements during the time period they worked collaboratively with their SNC high-performing counterparts, STEM High and ECH, in the context of my study.

City Middle did not improve student proficiency sufficiently to climb from a grade of "F" to a grade of "D." However, student proficiency improved in several areas, and the school achieved the expected growth measure for the first time in a decade (NC Report Cards, 2017). I fully realize that I cannot claim that this astonishing result is a direct consequence of my intervention, but I am strongly encouraged to continue along the path of the changes I have brokered throughout the 2017-18 school year when I dwell on the above phrase: "for the first time in a decade."

City High also continued implementing activities begun during the 2016-17 school year into the 2017-18 school year. A restructuring of the daily schedule was a prerequisite to a more effective student advisory, as evidenced by both faculty and student responses to my survey questions aimed at elucidating the benefits and challenges of implementing this hallmark of ECH at City High. Adult mentors from the community contributed to the development of a personalized climate at City High. These advisory structures may contribute to academic improvement at City High for the 2017-18 school year, if it holds true that students work harder when they are motivated by relationships with committed adults (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Hallinan, 2008; Lee & Freidrich, 2007).

Beyond the structured advisories, concerted efforts to improve classroom instruction have also been instituted at City High through the implementation of best practices such as student-centered instruction aligned to interest and life experiences, frequent standards-aligned assessments, and reflective practices fostered by instructional rounds and data analyses. Preliminary test results available at the conclusion of the first semester of the 2017-18 school year are promising in some areas, such as biology and English II, but also show there is much work remaining to be done in subject areas including mathematics. Increased collaboration between the educators working in the two high-performing schools in my study (ECH and STEM High) with those working in the two low-performing schools (City Middle and City High) is ongoing in spring 2018, and will provide additional insight into the effectiveness of implementation of these strategies at City Middle and City High.

## Recommendations

For those encountering a Problem of Practice analogous to mine, I recommend following a similar plan of action to the one I adopted. Most school districts in North Carolina have disparities in student achievement among schools, with high-performing schools enticing parents to seek admission for their students, and less-advantaged students, in effect, left behind to attend lower-performing schools. District level educators have both the vantage point to assess the strengths and challenges of all schools under their leadership, and the leverage to facilitate collaboration amongst administrators so that they can learn from each other. The PPLC structure used in my study, initiated and led by me as the district's innovative programs coordinator, served as the vehicle for this collaboration to occur. Key practices in the establishment of an effective PPLC (judged by its ability to facilitate collaboration and implement change) included district level support, the establishment of an environment of mutual respect, participants'

willingness to share best practices, and participants' willingness to learn from each other's mistakes. The improvement goals outlined in my study, resulting in an improvement in school climate and improvements in academic growth at both City Middle and City High, occurred contemporaneously with the positive relationships established between the four schools in this study. By supporting collaboration among principals, and by encouraging principals to identify teachers to accompany them in study visits to exemplar schools, the PPLC laid the foundation for sharing effective strategies such as instructional rounds among participating schools.

Beginning with the 2017-18 school year, SNC implemented changes in the lottery process used to determine admission to STEM High (in Grade 6) and ECH (in Grade 9). As the innovative programs coordinator, I oversaw the revised lottery, which broadened the student selection pool to be more inclusive of the districts' overall student population. Changes included providing support for the completion of applications which were submitted with missing components, simplifying the teacher recommendation form to eliminate bias in the ranking of applicants, and accepting applicants who were up to two grade levels below the designated grade-level. Additionally, the lottery itself was conducted by an outside research organization which used a random number generation process to select applicants proportionally from each of the districts' feeder patterns. These changes were designed to allocate the limited slots to students across the district more equitably, and to ensure that all qualified students had a fair chance to gain admission to the high-performing schools. Although there was some resistance from parents unaccustomed to the new lottery process, it was ultimately upheld by SNC district leaders who expressed commitment to improving all students' fair access to the lottery schools.

It is well documented that the quality of education received by applicants who successfully gain admission to STEM High or ECH far exceeds that of students who attend City

Middle or City High (NC Report Cards, 2017). Of particular interest over subsequent years will be a comparison between the academic achievement data of students who were eligible to attend either STEM High (as rising 6th graders) or ECHS high school (as rising 9th graders) but were not selected in the revised lottery process, and are now attending City Middle or City High. The newly revised lottery procedure constitutes a natural experiment in that the only difference between eligible students from the central attendance zone who are admitted to the higher performing schools vs the lower performing schools is the outcome of a random assignment process. Thus, in future years, these achievement data may be amenable to analysis using a regression discontinuity approach. My project will have achieved its goals if this future analysis shows equitable outcomes for both groups of students.

## Summary and Conclusions

As a result of what I have learned from my study, I will continue to seek ways to provide equitable schooling for all students in SNC. In Anderson's (2017) study, inner-city high schools such as City High, across the US, have devolved from proud institutions where academic achievement was a hallmark of the school, to majority-minority institutions characterized by impoverished and low-performing students. Anderson noted that, all too often, the final stage of the devolution of an inner-city high school is school closure. At times, this option has been bandied about among leaders in SNC. However, support for the initiatives described in this study at the district level, coupled with the improvements seen at both City Middle and City High described previously, have quieted this talk, at least for the time being.

As I facilitate the implementation of the activities described in my study which aim to improve school climate at City Middle and City High, these activities hold promise that they may result in a lasting improvement in school culture (Gruenert, 2013). My deeply held belief is that

the improvement in school culture that I confidently anticipate will go hand-in-hand with an increase in academic rigor. School effective research conducted by Rutledge et al. (2015) found differences between higher performing and lower performing schools were associated with social-emotional aspects, or personalization. While the adults working in lower performing schools point to barriers to connections with students, those at higher performing schools describe knowing their students well and using personal relationships to drive a culture of learning across all academic levels. In higher performing schools adults leverage personal relationships to motivate students to complete rigorous coursework. Although lower performing schools, including City Middle and City High in this study, are frequently staffed by inexperienced teachers, instructional rounds (City et al., 2011) is a powerful tool to help teachers understand what rigorous instruction looks like, improve learning and teaching at scale, and contribute to systemic improvement.

Coupled with the power of adults who have built relationships with students to influence them to set goals and work hard to achieve them, implementation of these strategies may lead to increases in student proficiency on rigorous state exams, and erase from City High and City Middle the stigma of being perennially low performing schools.

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# APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

**EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**
**University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office**
4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · **www.ecu.edu/ORIC/irb**

## Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

Social/Behavioral IRB

From:

To: Marcia Manning

CC: Robert Reardon

Date: 5/30/2017

Re: UMCIRB 15-002358
Improving Learning Through Principals' Professional Learning Communities

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 5/28/2017 to 5/27/2018. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category #6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

| Name | Description |
|---|---|
| Improving Learning through Principal Professional Learning Communities | Study Protocol or Grant Application |
| Interview and Focus Group Questions | Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions |
| Parental Permission Form 03 10 15 revised.docx | Consent Forms |
| Principal and teacher Informed Consent Document No More Than Minimal Risk 07.29.15 revised.docx | Consent Forms |
| Student Assent-12-17-years-of-age 03.12.2012.doc | Consent Forms |

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

## APPENDIX B: INSTRUCTIONAL ROUNDS GUIDING DOCUMENT

### OUTCOMES

- Make classroom and school-wide practice public to improve student achievement
- Focus on student work across classrooms
- Offer meaningful feedback to colleagues
- Establish the Common Instructional Framework
- Use School-wide Instructional Rounds on an ongoing basis

### GUIDELINES

- The rounds process should be completed entirely, including a pre-round presentation and a post-round debrief
- A host teacher will prepare student learning questions, present at pre-rounds, host a visit, and participate in the post-rounds debrief
- At least two guest teachers must visit for the instructional round
- The guests must stay for at least 30 – 45 minutes of the class period

### QUESTIONS

- Classroom guiding questions must focus on student learning and activity, grounded in the how students are responding to instruction
- Questions should be related to student behaviors (ex, collaboration) on which participants can collect data (ex, what students say to each other)

### ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

- Facilitate pre-rounds and post-rounds discussions
- Structure and facilitate the conversations to examine and improve student achievement.

### ROLE OF THE HOST TEACHERS

- Create student learning questions for classroom rounds
- Present student learning questions in pre-rounds discussion
- Host guests for a rounds visit
- Participate in post-rounds debrief
- Participate in ongoing Instructional Rounds to improve student achievement

### ROLE OF GUEST TEACHERS

- Participate in pre-rounds and post-rounds for host teacher(s)
- Observe host teachers' classes during a rounds visit
- Collect and share evidence in response to host teachers' student learning questions
- Participate in ongoing Instructional Rounds to improve student achievement

## APPENDIX C: FACULTY RESPONSE TO ADVISORY QUERY:

### Do you have advisor/advisee time? Please describe your role in advisor/advisee time. Provide any additional information you would like to share about advisory time at "City High."

Yes I do. 15 is a short period of time and I am not a big fan of this time frame. In between classes I go from 20 kids who are Juniors and know how to act to 17 freshmen who have absolutely no interest in academics. I know this because after COUNTLESS 1-1 discussion with my advisee students they still continue with the same bad practices and habits. One thing that I have done to circumvent this is to open up my class SnapChat to my freshmen and I let them see how I connect my classroom to everyday life. I let them see how I hold my students accountable. I approach kids with a "REAL LIFE" mentality. Everyone isn't college bound and so I have these candid conversations about what options are available to them based off their behavior. If they have a tendency to just sit and do nothing in class I tell them off gate, "aint no one taking care of a grown man who sits and does nothing, when this is over in 3 years you need to have a plan", I try to help them see beyond their immediate outlook. See beyond Day Circle, beyond Fairview and Lincoln Homes and show them that the key out of perpetuating that cycle is a solid education or a solid set of skills (ideally both).

I share what I have been told to share with them. Flocabulary

I'm some people dad and big brother but sometimes you must direct them in a way that helps them grow as an individual

Yes, during advisor/advisee time I ensure students are staying on top of their grades and attendance. Most of my seniors are applying to colleges and scholarship programs. We spend time discussing the 7 habits and completing things like the Common App.

My role as the advisor during my time with students is informing them of where they currently stand with their grades and attendance, and helping students come up with a plan to correct their problems.

Talking to students about absences and challenges they are facing at school

I do not have this time because of the time constraint. I barely have time to do this with my students in my full 90 minute classes.

Yes, facilitate school wide procedures, shared pertinent information to students

I talk with students one-on-one about how their classes are going and how they are interacting with their peers.

My role as an Adviser is to ensure my advisees are receiving the tools to make them successful in their immediate and long term future. Every day, I try to engage them in a new information for them to utilize.

I have been an adviser many times throughout my entire career. However, this school year is really a challenge for me. If I plan some activities, a lot of students do not want to participate. If I do not do an activity, there is one student who will say she's bored. Majority of the class do not want to do anything during advisory. In cases of very important announcements and requirements by the administration, I were able to deliver.

yes, I interact with my kids about real life situations. Why it is important to learn in class because you can always relate it to the real world.

NO

Yes, some of the students are willing to do work in the advisory class and some are not. facilitator of discussion

Yes, I take my advisory time to speak with each student to check-in so that I can have that one-on-one time.

Different activities each day I don't have an advisory.

Advisory for us is different being in the gym space. They have a different environment so they have a different experience with advisory. My advisees for the most part are very cooperative and take advantage

of the advisory
I give valuable advice concerning college eligibility. Also, we discuss the importance of attendance and maintaining good grades.
My role is to develop relationships with students and be an example of success for them to follow. Help them be successful in life and in whatever career path they choose.
Students share their concerns and questions related to school and many times to their own lives.We encourage the students to think on the benefits of getting a good education and be prepared for life.
The students all remark that they really like it, and feel that there is someone who is invested into them succeeding.
I think the idea of advisory is genuinely great however I find myself being frustrated working with freshmen whom I don't teach. I have 17 kids in my advisory and If I taught them I feel like there attitudes and behaviors would be entirely different as opposed to trying to dialogue with them for 15 mins everyday.
Either we commit to extending advisory to truly make it powerful or we give that time back to the students in some other fashion but I am not a fan of advisory this year. I am always willing to go above and beyond for any student whether I teach them or not but I can't connect to children who don't help themselves and the vast majority of my advisory students are boys who haven't learned that they are in high school. A lot of my 1st period students get the most out of advisory as they use that time as an extension of class to complete assignments or to get ahead. I will be honest. Advisory for me looks like this: Attendance, I do a quick lookup of all my kids, praise my students who are on track and I have a 1-1 with kids who are missing the mark. I do this daily and I hold 2-3 min conversations as to why their grades are so poor. That is the extent of advisory for me.
The idea seems noble but I am neither trained nor inspired to be a guidance counselor.
It is better than last year
i think we need to have to involve students we teach mostly not new students who we don’t know because some students are very rude
Love having the opportunity to get to know my students on a more intimate level. I like advisory
The 15 minutes for advisory is a limited time to interact with students on a personal level. It's beneficial for distributing information and making sure students are held accountable for their attendance and grades.
As beginning teachers I feel we need to be trained on what advisory is all about and what needs to be done during advisory
I find that advisory isn't really long enough to accomplish the activities other teachers say they accomplish. By the time the students arrive and listen to morning announcements, we only have a few minutes to do "something," and it usually turns into a hangout session. That's problematic when I am trying to go over grades with the students or address important issues. I run out of time.
I dislike advisory and my students do too. They don't see the point of trying to complete an activity in 15 minutes. They would rather relax and tall amongst themselves or talk to me. Without doing very many activities on live binder, I've build a great relationship with several of my kids. I think there is WAY to much pressure put on us to do the things asked of us during that time. There are announcements, papers to be passed out, talking about making up missing days, etc. It isn't enough time to be taken as seriously as some want it to be.
No comments
My concern is that each year I will have a different group of students. I think that students would be more apt to open up to someone that they know and have known for a year or two.
I like the concept of communicating with the students.
15 minutes is not a lot of time for advisory. Most advisory days are spent taking attendance and discussing grades/absences with students. I would be open to letting students come to my room during advisory to finish makeup work. I have found most of my students will say that they will stay after school one day, and then they forget to show up.
I like the advisory period for what it has been designed for, advising, nurturing, and forming relationships

with our students. I do feel that some are doing more of this than others...
Advisory resources are great; however, I feel it needs to be more structured such as providing specific content on specific days that WILL be covered. There are too many students not receiving content in their advisories.
Trying some activities in the HR is quite frustrating because the students do not want to participate. They just want it to be a free time.
Advisory is powerful and very much needed. It allows us as teachers to reach a group of kids on a different level outside of being one of your students in the class.
EXCELLENT Would like to see more teachers offer up what they are doing in advisory so that others can see how great it can be used.
Knowing students and their plans in the future is the best part of the advisory.
I think Advisory is a great opportunity to connect to the students. It doesn't always have to have a subject to cover, some days you need to just talk as a group.
It is a great program but my students feedback has been that they don't want to have to do work and a bunch of busy tasks.
Advisory is good
I don't have an advisory group, but I hear that a lot of staff members aren't doing anything productive during this time. Students are not listening to announcements.
I love the idea of advisory. I think it is a great opportunity for students to develop relationships with the teachers. Advisory groups needs to be more intentional. Student support services could be an integral part of the advisory group. For example, issues or problems related behavior, attendance, or social emotional issue that are a theme in an advisory group can and should be communicate to the support staff who then could be a part of that group for these discussions.
Advisory is disorganized for me because of location. The concept is a great idea and a great way to get a relationship with kids. Kids also have began to take this 15 minutes as a break to go do whatever. A 15 minute break where the can buy snacks and hang out for the students who have been on track and doing the right things will be a great incentive.
Should it be daily?
At the beginning of the school year Advisory was Great, but now the students and I do not see the point of Advisor every day. Many of the things that have been offered for the students to do during Advisory require internet and the classroom that I'm current located in doesn't have computer.
Advisory period gives me an opportunity to build relationships with students and it allows me to give them valuable information needed for their success.
Advisory is a great concept and the possibilities are endless. However, having time to provide relevant information to students is a challenge. Additionally, have school-wide meeting regularly with advisory groups to emphasize critical events (class trips, act/sat, etc.) and their importance.
They are doing a good job.

## APPENDIX D: CITY HIGH FACULTY RESPONSE

## TO INSTRUCTIONAL ROUNDS QUERY

**Have you participated in instructional rounds at your school, or at another school? If so, describe how this process has impacted teaching and learning at your school.**

Yes. I participated in instructional rounds last year in the science department and to me it was no different than when I go and visit other classes. I think it benefits the teacher who is hosting the round the most as they are the ones who are recipients of the feedback. I will say that it is wonderful to be able to watch how other teachers teach because I get to see some of my students in a different environment.
Not this
year
No I have not participated in Instructional rounds
Having the opportunity to step into other classrooms and other schools has been invaluable to my teaching. Participating in instructional rounds has provided me tool I can use within my classroom.
Yes. I loved it and think it was very
beneficial.
Not yet
I participated in instructional rounds at a different school, and it help to really see different methods of classroom management and teaching methodologies that i could use in my classroom too.
I have not participated in this
activity.
NO
No.
yes and I am very impressed with some of the ideas I can use.
no, but I would LOVE TO. Please allow support staff to be included! I would LOVE to see how teachers teach so I can use their techniques.
No
Yes, I have discussed lesson planning with other teachers in the PE department around NC. This has helped my daily routine because it allowed me to implement exercises and class procedures that worked for at other schools similar to this school.
I have not had the opportunity to go to some important instructional rounds at another school but in the ones I have participated have help me a lot.
Participating in instructional rounds has enable me to see the process from start to finish and has enabled me to better understand teaching standards I-V.
I have participated in workshops related to my subject and got resources to do better in my classes.

## APPENDIX E: FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT DATA RESPONSE TEMPLATE

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| | | | Formative Assessment 1 Fall 2017 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| standard 5.01 | 25 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 23 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 22 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 21 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 20 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 19 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| standard 4.2 | 18 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 17 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 16 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 15 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 14 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Standard 3.1.2 | 13 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 12 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 11 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 10 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 9 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Standard 2.01 | 8 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 7 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 6 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 5 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Standard 1.01 | 4 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 3 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| | | Name 1 | Name 2 | Name 3 | Name 4 | Name 5 | Name 6 | Name 7 | Name 8 | Name 9 | Name 10 | Name 11 | Name 12 | Name 13 | Name 14 | Name 15 | Name 16 |