

AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT RATING SYSTEM'S IMPACT ON  
ADMINISTRATIVE AND INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

By

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School  
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In 2007, FL Statute 1008.34 mandated that alternative schools receive a school improvement rating based on student performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of the Florida alternative school accountability policy on administrative and instructional beliefs and practices in an alternative school setting. The researcher explored how factors related to policy design, organizational paradigm, resources, administrative supports, students, and current practices influenced administrator and faculty responses to the accountability policy and the implementation of school-wide change. The study took place in a rural public alternative school located in north Florida. The participants were six teachers, one principal, and one administrative assistant. Case study methodology was utilized; data collection methods included focus groups, interviews, instructional observations, and analysis of artifacts. Teacher and administrator interpretations and responses depended upon the strength and clarity of the policy, current beliefs and practices, organizational contexts, access to resources, administrative leadership, and external support.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### **Statement of Research Problem**

There is a dearth of accountability research pertaining to student achievement in alternative schools. Thus, how alternative schools can meet the needs of at-risk students and simultaneously interpret and respond to state and federal accountability is not well understood. To investigate the role of accountability in these settings, it is important to understand how alternative schools are classified. Since Raywid (1994) developed a typology for alternative schools, they have been classified by their program goals and structures. For example, Type-I schools are identified by innovation and choice. Type-II programs commonly lack educational resources and emphasize behavioral controls and remedial education. Type-III sites offer a therapeutic environment for students with social and emotional problems to address academic and psychosocial needs. Research indicates that the majority of Type-II alternative schools are designed to serve students who are at risk for school failure. Typically they are referred because of social emotional issues, truancy, or expulsion (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002). The majority of alternative school research has examined student, teacher, and administrative perceptions of school effectiveness of their efforts to meet at-risk students' behavioral and academic remedial needs (Darling & Price, 2004; Aron, 2003; Saunders & Saunders, 2001; Kleiner, Porsh, and Farris, 2001). Other studies have examined program climate, behavioral systems, and school resources (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006; Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006; Henrich, 2005). Little is known about the relationship between student enrollment in an alternative setting and academic achievement, improved behavior, and persistence toward graduation.

Lehre and Lange (2003) found that Type-II alternative schools are often comprised of students with a history of low academic performance, behavioral problems, low economic status,

attendance problems, and increasingly, a high referral rate of students receiving special education services. However, these schools characteristically have smaller class sizes, increased behavioral structures and supports, prescriptive instruction, positive student-teacher relations, and climates that are reflected by a positive overall effect on a student's alternative education experiences (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006). There is a lack of research that demonstrates how higher rates of course completions, improved GPA's, improved attendance, smaller class sizes, and improved student behavior translate into improved performance in traditional settings and higher graduation rates (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Limited access to instructional resources, curriculum alignment, and an emphasis on behavioral programming are factors that could mitigate teaching and learning outcomes in alternative settings. In a study comprised predominantly of Hispanic students, Munoz (2004) found that the school overemphasized behavioral control, lacked clear academic standards and evaluation processes, as well as opportunities for critical thinking (Munoz, 2004). At-risk alternative education programs often lack academic resources such as libraries, science labs, and computer labs (Foley & Pang, 2006). A national survey of key contacts at state departments of education who were knowledgeable about alternative education revealed that 44% of states reported that use of common state standards and curriculum was emerging, while 90% reported the curriculum emphasized academic basics, interpersonal skills, and content area instruction (Lehr, Moreau, Lange, & Lanners, 2004). Survey findings revealed that the three most important issues facing alternative schools were a lack of funding, quality and quantity of staff, and accountability and standards-based reform movements.

Some researchers have questioned whether at-risk alternative schools are conducive to promoting academic growth and sustained behavioral development (Sekayi, 2001; Van Acker,

2007). Concomitantly, there is a lack of research that describes how successful alternative schools increase student achievement, graduation rates, and successful transition back to regular schools. According to national data, 12% of alternative education students receive special education services, however 34% of districts reported enrollment of 20% or more of students with disabilities (Kleiner et al., 2001). In another study, administrators reported that a sizable number of students were receiving special education services for behavioral disorders (Foley & Pang, 2006). Few studies have examined the effectiveness of alternative schools in meeting the diverse academic and behavioral needs of students receiving special education services. A lack of special education personnel and inadequate resources could impact the level of services provided to disabled students in alternative settings.

Governance in alternative school settings is typically site-based management (Foley & Pang, 2006). Student placements and referrals to alternative education schools occur spontaneously throughout the year. Alternative schools must accommodate students who have experienced extended days out-of-school prior to enrollment and who enter the alternative setting with course credits in progress. A lack of research concerning how students exit alternative educational programs has implications for accountability and measuring student outcomes. Alternative sites are not permanent placements; students can transition back to their home school after specific behavioral and academic requirements are met (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Students with disabilities are protected by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provision that mandates a review before returning to their home school if it occurs within 45 days of being enrolled in an alternative school. The average length of enrollment in alternative schools might also impact results of accountability (Lange & Sletten, 2002). The aforementioned factors may help explain why there is lack of alternative education research exploring

accountability and school evaluation. Therefore, how administrators, teachers, and school district leaders interpret and respond to school accountability is of particular interest in light of these factors.

In October, 2007, the State of Florida implemented FL Statute 1008.341 which states that, Alternative schools that provide dropout prevention and academic intervention services pursuant to s. 1003.53 shall receive a school improvement rating pursuant to this section. This rating is based solely on student performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. The school improvement rating shall identify schools as having one of the following ratings defined according to rules of the State Board of Education: “Improving” refers to schools with students who are making more academic progress than when the students were served in their home schools. “Maintaining” means schools with students making progress equivalent to the progress made when the students were served in their home schools. “Declining” means schools with students making less academic progress than when the students were served in their home schools.

Prior to the implementation of this statute, alternative schools in Florida were not subject to state accountability measures or a school grade. Also, student performance on the FCAT had no impact on the alternative school or the referring school. As a result of new legislation, the alternative school improvement rating compares student gains across three years. Student gain scores are calculated from the first two years to determine the number of enrolled students who made learning gains in reading and mathematics. Reading and mathematics gains are calculated separately. The school improvement rating is based on the percentage increase or decrease in learning gains for the current year cohort compared to the same cohort’s previous year scores. In order to achieve the highest rating, “Improving”, 50% of the qualifying students must increase in

both reading and mathematics. If more than 50% of eligible students' scores decline in either reading or mathematics, the overall score will be "Declining".

Student scores included in the calculation are based on October or February FTE membership. Thus the time when students are placed in the alternative school may impact the school's rating. In some cases, students will have spent more time in their home school placement but will still be considered members of the alternative school during the February FTE count. According to the statute, the alternative school rating also includes consequences for low performance. Schools receiving a "Declining" rating are subject to the same requirements as a school designated School Performance Grade of "F" as outlined in State Board of Education Rule 6a-1.09981. The impact of the accountability mandate holds interest for alternative school educators and researchers. Under this statute, student FCAT scores are the sole determinant of state recognized program effectiveness. Alternate value-added measures of student growth and development such as improved behavioral performance have no impact on the rating. Alternative schools also receive an Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) rating based on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates. The annual AYP rating is used to determine corrective action outlined in the state's differentiated accountability statutes.

Accountability-related issues revealed in traditional school contexts have been studied to determine how local agents and the district office respond to accountability policy. A conceptual framework of school-based response to accountability policy identified key factors related to how state policy is interpreted by local actors (Gross & Supovitz, 2005). The clarity of policy design, local school and district values and expectations, accurate problem identification, access to resources, organizational structures, and the knowledge and skills to implement change were considered essential to effective interpretation and implementation. Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer

(2002) developed a cognitive framework to explain how implementing agents make sense of policy within a individual, social, historical, and organizational context, and how substantive change is difficult unless it affects a system of practices that support interpreting essential policy components. Research involving 48 high schools across six states revealed how the strength and stability of an accountability system, teachers' knowledge of state accountability, and the perceived policy value influenced local acceptance (Massel, Goertz, Christensen, & Goldwasser, 2005). Respondents identified implementation challenges such as problems endemic to students and school-based problems (Gross, Kirst, Holland, & Luschei, 2005). Student problems were characterized as skill deficits, low student motivation, and student background. Problems embedded within the school referred to weaknesses in curriculum, problematic teacher attitudes, weaknesses in teachers' skill, and problems with school organization. Accountability policy did little to impact local decision-making, or to address problems when there was a lack of quality information, resources, and coordination among key actors.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to conduct exploratory qualitative research and present a case regarding how the Florida Alternative School Improvement Rating influenced administrative and instructional beliefs and practices in one alternative school. To meet this purpose, this research explored teacher and administrative perceptions of the alternative school rating system, the available physical and instructional resources, teacher perceptions of instructional leadership, and the rating's impact on administrative and instructional practices.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are teachers' and administrators' beliefs about the school accountability policy?
2. What are the available physical and instructional resources that support teaching and learning?

3. What are teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership in the alternative school setting?
4. How does the school accountability policy influence teacher and administrative practices?

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms had specialized meanings for the purpose of this study.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS refer to any school that provides dropout prevention and academic intervention services to students who are referred to that site.

ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY refers to the State of Florida's Alternative School Improvement Rating.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION refers to individualized academic programming designed to allow students to complete courses at their own pace.

CURRICULUM refers to an academic program of study that includes state adopted core standards utilized by teachers in the classroom.

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES refer to all aspects of classroom teaching such as planning, delivery, supports, activities, and assessments.

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP refers to administrative-led supervision, professional development, critical study and reflective practice that may encourage effective teaching within a school setting (Blase & Blase, 2004).

MULTI-GRADE refers to classes that consist of students from more than one grade level.

MULTI-COURSE refers to classes that consist of students taking more than one course during the same period.

SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY refers to state and federal policies designed to hold schools accountable for curriculum standards and student performance on state standardized assessments.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCESSES refer to intentional planning, monitoring, reflection, and collaboration between staff, administration, and community stakeholders for the purpose of evaluating program effectiveness, enhancing instructional practices, and meeting students' needs.

TYPE-II PROGRAMS refer to alternative school settings that provide remedial and competency-based instruction with an emphasis on behavior management and control (Raywid, 1994).

### **Significance**

This study will contribute to understanding how accountability policy influences administrative and instructional practices in alternative schools and how participants'

backgrounds, beliefs, experiences, and contexts influence interpretation and implementation of the policy. Up to this point, there has been a dearth of studies that have explored accountability and school improvement in alternative settings from instructional and administrative perspectives. Research studies have explored how alternative schools help at-risk students change school-related behaviors; however, absent from these studies is any discussion of state accountability legislation and its impact on instructional and administrative beliefs and practices. One possible benefit of this study is that a better understanding of how teachers and administrators interpret accountability policies within the context of an alternative school setting would result. Another benefit might be the identification of the facilitators and barriers to effective teaching, instructional leadership, and evaluation in alternative settings and insights into how school staff collaborates on matters of instruction and behavioral programming. The findings will provide a conception about alternative education teachers' and administrators beliefs' about factors related to student expectations, the school mission, and school accountability. This research has the potential to advance knowledge related to alternative educator beliefs about accountability and school improvement within a context of addressing school reform. Currently there is lack of literature that explains how alternative school faculty and administration collaborate on teaching practices and school improvement goals.

### **Limitations**

Since alternative school structures vary in access to resources, school mission, curriculum, and instructional staffing formulas, the findings are not generalizable beyond the context of the school where the study occurred. The small selection of participants is also a limitation. Finally, the findings from the study will be restricted by the participants' authenticity.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of historical and current literature concerning alternative education, organizational characteristics of alternative schools, alternative school policy evaluation, and alternative school policy and improvement. For the first time in the State of Florida, alternative schools began receiving school improvement rating based on student performance on the March, 2008 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). This event prompted the researcher's interest in conducting this study. Prior to that time, alternative schools in Florida were outside the scope of state accountability processes. However, other states have already implemented alternative school accountability legislation to evaluate school effectiveness

### **History and Current State of Alternative Education**

Educators have provided alternatives to meet the learning needs of students who experience behavioral and academic problems since the inception of common schools in the United States (Tissington, 2006; Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006). Alternative schools emerged during the 1960s because of growing political and social pressure to serve students who were unsuccessful in traditional schools and to provide innovative and child-centered alternatives (Raywid, 1999). Private and public alternative schools emerged because the traditional model of education did not meet the diverse needs of all students (Aron, 2003). Institutions that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s were characterized as schools of choice with varying themes of innovation and purpose. Schools without walls, continuation schools, multicultural schools, schools within a school, fundamental schools, and magnet schools are all examples of the types of programs and innovations that emerged during this period (Aron, 2003; Young, 1990). Some of the alternative education innovations birthed during the 1960s were later integrated into larger

traditional schools. During the late 1970s there was a shift in alternative education. The primary foci for alternative education changed to include dropout prevention and behavioral modification programming for at-risk youth (Young, 1990).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the scope and definitions of alternative schools narrowed as these schools emerged to accommodate greater numbers of at-risk youth (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Young (1990) purported that academic and behavioral referrals increased as a result of conservative accountability measures that exposed academic deficiencies among at-risk students. Thus, students who failed to meet federal and state accountability standards were referred to alternative settings where remedial instruction and behavioral support was provided (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Zero tolerance rules and federal legislation regulating suspensions and expulsions from schools for serious offenses also led to a rise in student referrals to at-risk alternative schools (Brown, 2007; Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Measuring outcomes in alternative schools has proven difficult because of student antecedent variables, program characteristics, and inadequate or non-existent evaluation processes.

There is a general consensus that contemporary alternative education is comprised of programs that were designed to serve students who are at risk for school failure (Lange & Sletten, 2003). A NCES study, *Public Alternative Schools and Programs for Students At Risk of Education Failure: 2000-01*, revealed that close to 40% of all districts had alternative schools (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). School districts reported that students were enrolled in these programs because of substance abuse problems such as possession, distribution, or use of alcohol; physical attacks or fights; chronic truancy; continual academic failure; possession of a weapon other than a firearm; possession and use of a firearm; and disruptive behavior. In the State of Florida, alternative schools are defined by Florida Statute 1008.341: “any school that

provides dropout prevention and academic intervention services pursuant to Section 1003.53, Florida Statutes, and has students referred to the school by another school in any district” (p.415). Section 1003.53 includes provisions for voluntary and involuntary participation. Eligibility for involuntary placement is limited to students who have, “a history of disruptive behavior in school or committed an offense that warrants out-of-school suspension or expulsion from school according to the district school board’s code of student conduct” (p.238).

Because of the prevalence of alternative education programs, it is important to understand how well such programs meet the needs of at-risk students. Given the scope of behavioral and academic issues prevalent in alternative school placement decisions, program evaluation will necessarily need to consider a multitude of factors.

### **Organizational Characteristics of Alternative Schools**

As discussed, alternative schools evolved to meet the demand of students in need of academic and behavioral interventions. A review of the organizational characteristics common to alternative education schools shows how these settings have been designed to meet students’ academic and behavioral needs. Characteristics that were common among alternative education schools included program types and organizational features, curriculum and instructional practices, and student characteristics. The current status of alternative education provides a framework for understanding how their processes and structures might improve evaluation and accountability systems and influence teacher and administrator beliefs about accountability policies. Organizational paradigms may also influence responses to the accountability policy.

Raywid’s typology has been expanded and now includes additional designs that emphasize a wide range of services and programs for at-risk youth (Aron, 2003; Foley & Pang, 2006; Henrich 2005). The majority of alternative schools are a blend of Type-II and Type-III schools designed to provide dropout prevention and academic intervention (Aron, 2003; Foley & Pang,

2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002). In Raywid's typology, Type-II programs have been characterized as "soft jails" with punitive structures designed to correct problem behavior. Currently they are referred to as alternative-to-expulsion schools. Type-II schools frequently employ a behavior management system that utilizes a daily point-tracking system. Type-III programs are comprehensive programs that offer therapeutic educational services. They are specialized day schools that provide counseling services and a school-wide positive behavioral support program. Teachers employed in these settings are frequently certified in Exceptional Student Education.

Alternative school enrollment is small in comparison to traditional schools (Foley & Pang, 2006). Smaller class sizes result in small faculty and fewer administrative positions. The class size provides additional opportunities for individual instruction and behavioral control. Research indicates that a smaller class size in dropout prevention programs has a positive effect on student retention (Lange & Sletten, 2002). A study that examined the school climates in effective alternative schools showed that positive student and teacher attitudes towards the school were observed when rules were enforced equitably. Teachers treated students with respect, and staff remained open to change and problem solving (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006). Alternative schools, often housed in separate buildings, typically lack the physical resources of traditional schools (Aron, 2003). In a study involving a survey of 84 program directors, only 40% of schools had access to libraries and 70% reported no access to science labs (Foley & Pang, 2006). Site-based management and administrative autonomy is the principle that typically governs alternative schools. Research shows alternative school procedures related to student eligibility criteria, referral processes, and student return policies are governed by state and district level procedures and policies (Lehr, Lanner, & Lange, 2003).

## **Curriculum and Educational Services**

Kleiner, Porch and Farris (2002) found that the majority of districts with alternative schools reported having a curricula leading toward a regular high school diploma, academic counseling to support at-risk learners, smaller class size than regular schools, remedial instructional programming, opportunities for self-paced instruction, behavioral intervention programming, and career counseling. The majority of teachers held general educational credentials and the programs often relied on paraprofessionals to provide adequate services. An analysis of state legislative practices and policies for alternative schools at the state level revealed the following curricular and educational themes: basic academic skills based on core state curriculum standards, an emphasis on social services, an emphasis on individual instruction, and inclusion of community-based learning (Lehr et al., 2003). Aron (2003) reported that the predominant alternative education school curriculum emphasized basic skills within a general education format. Foley et al. (2006) found that 76% of program directors reported using a general education curriculum; other programs included work readiness (48%), vocational education (46%), and general education development programs (38%). Instructional delivery is often flexible, whereby students work on different courses at different paces using a mastery learning or competency-based model. A study of teaching models used at an alternative school revealed that 44% of instruction was mastery learning, 36% was information-processing, and 19% was social learning (Neuenfeldt, 2003). A review of several alternative school improvement plans from the State of Florida revealed that self-paced instruction is a common instructional delivery method to retrieve lost credits and accelerate progress toward grade completion.

Interventions that provide opportunities for student growth and positive behavior support are available in some alternative schools (Zweig, 2003). Some alternative schools utilize school-wide disciplinary programs, such as level systems that provide predictability and structure, and

counseling services. The essential responsibilities of counselors in alternative schools include creating student profiles to identify student needs, consultation and case management, and ongoing professional development to improve delivery of service (Mottaz, 2002). Academic counseling includes dropout prevention programming that emphasizes competency-based instruction and credit retrieval programs. Collaboration with outside providers and social service agencies who work with the at-risk population served in alternative schools, such as the Department of Juvenile Justice, is common (Aron, 2006).

### **Student Characteristics**

Alternative education schools serve students who are at risk for school failure and/or dropping out. As discussed, students are commonly referred to alternative settings for academic and behavioral reasons. Findings from a national survey of states (Lehr, Moreau, Lange, & Lanners, 2004) revealed that students in alternative education programs characteristically suffer from behavior problems such as an undocumented disability, history of poor attendance or dropout, suspension or expulsion, learning difficulties, social or emotional problems, referral from the court system, or an identified disability requiring special education services. Foley and Pang (2006) reported similar findings. The most frequently cited criteria for admission to an alternative education program were referrals due to social-emotional behavior issues, truancy, expulsion, suspension, academic underachievement, dropout, potential dropout, and teen pregnancy. A study of alternative education students in Texas found that a large percentage of the students used drugs and alcohol (Grunbaum, Tortolero, Weller, & Gingiss, 2000). Alternative school students used avoidant coping strategies such as staying away from home, and use drugs and alcohol in greater frequency than students who were enrolled in traditional high school settings.

In a study that compared regular education students and alternative education students on locus of control, Miller, Fitch, and Marshall (2003) found that alternative education students were more likely to have an external locus of control. A national study of alternative school students using the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) revealed that student engagement in high-risk behaviors was significantly higher for students attending alternative education settings than their mainstream counterparts (Grunbaum, Kann, Kinchen, Ross, Gowda, Collins, & Kolbe, 2000; Zweig, 2003;). Findings from the report revealed that alternative school students engaged in high-risk behaviors including carrying weapons, unprotected sexual intercourse, physical fights, and excessive alcohol and drug use. Another study involving alternative school students revealed higher incidences of violent behavior and treatment by health professionals due to physical altercations than their mainstream counterparts (Escobar-Chavez, Tortolero, Markham, Kelder, & Kapadia, 2002).

In a study comparing alternative school students' perceptions of traditional and alternative school environments, Saunders and Saunders (2001) found statistically significant differences between students' perceptions of teachers, administrators, counselors, and overall school experience between past traditional and current alternative settings. Favorable ratings among alternative school personnel and school experience indicated that students' experiences were much improved in these environments. Kallio & Padula (2001) found that student perceptions of an alternative school setting were more favorable when the school's primary focus changed from behavior management to academic improvement. In a study of 900 students who graduated from alternative schools within California's Orange County Department of Education, Darling and Price (2004) found that student perceptions towards educational and service opportunities, technology integration in the classroom, and teacher and staff instruction were favorable. De La

Rossa (2005) found positive themes associated with school size, class size, and relationships because students received more personal instruction and behavioral support in the school setting. Students also expressed anger about the public's negative perceptions towards alternative schools.

The design and function of alternative schools have also been questioned. Van Acker (2007) found that students with academic and behavioral problems are unintentionally segregated into a program that resembles tracking or an in-school-suspension model. He also asserted that positive behavioral interventions are needed to support homogenous populations of at-risk students in alternative schools. Munoz (2004) has questioned the efficacy of alternative school methodologies to meet the needs of at-risk Chicano students. He also questioned the efficacy of alternative school disciplinary approaches because of the lack of research demonstrating positive outcomes. In a study of alternative schools serving Hispanic students, he found that the programs lacked rigor, consistent academic standards, and pedagogy. Seyaki (2001) asserted that student resistance in one alternative high school was rooted in how the school was structured. Students resented being placed in an alternative setting that ostracized them from their traditional school peers. They resented the punitive school structure and lack of academic rigor.

### **Alternative School Policy and Evaluation**

Duke and Muzio (1978) were among the first researchers to examine the effectiveness of evaluation among alternative schools. They evaluated the contents of 19 alternative school evaluations and reports that consisted of descriptive data that had not been extensively studied previously. The evaluations and reports, conducted by various educational agencies and institutions, did not conform to a particular format or standard. Evaluations were based on a variety of sources of data including teacher, student, parent, and administrator interviews and

surveys and rating scales. Student record data sources included grades, attendance data, and standardized test scores. The authors also found that the standardized tests used in the evaluation of schools varied in content, design, and reporting criteria. Other criteria used in the evaluation reports included affective achievement, attendance, work habits and responsibility, social behavior, postgraduate activities, and cost. In their concluding remarks they wrote, “How well do alternative schools educate students? Data contained in the nineteen evaluations and reports we reviewed do not permit us to answer this question with any degree of confidence.” This study highlights the challenges associated with state and federal alternative school evaluation processes and the impact the evaluations have on school improvement, especially when data is not collected in a systematic manner.

Lehr et al. (2003) conducted research to obtain information about alternative school legislation and policies across the United States. In 1998, only 22 states had legislation and policies governing alternative education, compared to 48 states in 2003. The increase in states with legislation parallels an increase in the actual number of alternative schools (Kleiner et al., 2002). The report also revealed consistencies between states within specific areas. In the area of enrollment criteria, 88% of the states had alternative school enrollment criteria from which four themes emerged: meet suspension and expulsion criteria; meet some at-risk criteria; disruptive in traditional environment; and academically unsuccessful in traditional environment. One observation between enrollment criteria and alternative school definitions is that 71% of the 48 states have formal definitions that included the following criteria: nontraditional settings; serves students at risk of school failure; serves disruptive students with behavioral problems; and serves suspended or expelled students.

The relationship between the states' enrollment criteria and alternative education definitions indicates that current alternative schools are comprised of students who are at risk due to behavioral and academic problems. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), alternative schools are accountable for the annual yearly progress of all students, including student performance on measurable academic outcomes such as graduation rates and attendance (McKee & Conner, 2007). At-risk students and students receiving special education services often struggle to meet standard proficiencies on state exams. (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, & Jones, 2007). There is little research in the area of alternative education linking program characteristics with accountability and evaluation outcomes.

A National Governor's Association (NGA) brief entitled *Setting High Standards in Alternative Education* emphasized the importance of developing data-driven accountability measures for alternative education programs, and the transition to higher standards and accountability. In a national study of state rules governing alternative education, Lange, Lehre, Moreau, and Lanners (2004) found that only 18 of 36 states studied had procedures for collecting outcomes on alternative education students. Little is known about the accountability policies that do exist. Lange et al., also found that several states expressed concerns about how accountability and standards-based reform would impact alternative education. However, information about the actual evaluation processes that these states had for collecting outcomes was not collected. Additional research is needed in this area.

The alternative school rating system is new to Florida; however other states have policies to evaluate alternative schools. Kentucky, Texas, and Arizona have accountability policies that specify performance criterion and rating systems for alternative schools. Texas and Florida use standardized test scores as the primary measure of alternative school evaluations. Kentucky and

Arizona utilize a combination of academic and non-academic measures. A brief review of the policies of Texas, Arizona, and Kentucky that follows, describes alternative school accountability legislation and explains the measures being used to rate these schools.

In 2001, the Kentucky Board of Education enacted an alternative school accountability evaluation system in response to data showing that students in alternative schools scored 30% lower than their counterparts in traditional schools (Swarts, 2003). As a result, the Alternative Education Program Evaluation Instrument was developed. The Commissioner of Education contracted with the Center for School Safety to monitor and evaluate alternative school programs throughout the state. The final report published in 2006 included findings on: 1) Academic Performance: curriculum, assessment, and instruction; 2) Learning Environment: culture, support and professional development/evaluation; and 3) Efficiency: leadership, resources/organization and planning.

A summary of the results of 40 alternative school evaluations were published in a Kentucky Board of Education Report (2006). Findings revealed that the, “curriculum in most programs is not fully aligned with Kentucky's standards and/or local standards, resulting in a curriculum lacking rigor and challenge. Opportunity for assessment tasks that are both rigorous and authentic, based on Kentucky's performance level descriptions, is limited” (p.2). The findings also showed that school administration often consisted of one primary administrator or lead teacher, performance data was not commonly reviewed, and curriculum materials, textbooks, guidance services, technology and facilities were also reported to be lacking in quality and alignment with traditional schools. After hearing the findings, the Commissioner of Education sent a letter to all superintendents, “asking for the immediate correction of any violations of law occurring in alternative education programs” (p. 3). The School Board also directed the Kentucky Department of Education staff to “meet with the staff from the Center for School Safety on recommendations

for improving these programs" (p. 3). As a result of the evaluations an action plan was adopted by the Kentucky Department of Education organized around four major categories: administrative structures, accountability, curriculum instruction and assessment, and school culture.

In the State of Arizona, legislation includes standardized test scores as the primary outcome measure. The state clearly defines the evaluation process for alternative schools. According to the statute (A.R.S. §15-241), alternative schools are defined as providing educational services to at-risk populations. The primary criteria used in the evaluation are the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS). In 2003, the Arizona Department of Education approved the alternative school achievement profile that includes calculation of scale points on the AIMS using aggregate baseline data; graduation and dropout statistics; and adjusted classification scales for alternative schools. The Arizona Department of Education set lower AIMS performance scores for students in alternative schools. In 2000-2001, the performance of alternative students on the AIMS was between the 10th and 24th percentiles of schools in the state. Setting the achievement profile calculation lower for alternative schools indicates that alternative education students were expected to perform lower than students in traditional schools. The inclusion of dropout and graduation measures is consistent with this legislative policy that specifies that alternative schools are to provide educational services to at-risk populations.

In 2002, the 77<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature authorized a pilot program to examine alternative school accountability. The 2003 Educator Focus Group on Accountability made recommendations regarding alternative school accountability in Texas. Current procedures governing alternative education schools in Texas are based on an improvement model.

Alternative schools and charters can meet either an absolute performance standard or an improvement standard for each accountability measure. Rating labels were established; schools receive a designation of “Academically Acceptable”, “Academically Unacceptable”, and “Not Rated.” Alternative school registration requirements include an at-risk criterion. Base indicators included the state-developed alternative assessment exam, school dropout rate, and overall completion rate. The Texas procedures are similar to Florida’s. Both states refer to the overall process as an improvement model. Both states require schools to register based on specific at-risk criterion. The Texas rating label provides three ratings as does Florida. The Texas rating process includes completion rate and annual dropout rate as criteria.

In October, 2007, the State of Florida implemented FL Statute 1008.34, which required alternative schools to receive a school improvement rating based on student performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. The school improvement rating identified schools as having the ratings "Improving" ,"Maintaining", or “Declining” as defined according to rules of the State Board of Education. The alternative education school improvement rating raises the stakes for alternative schools in Florida. Prior to the implementation of this statute, alternative schools in Florida were not subject to state accountability measures or a school grade. Student performance on the FCAT did not impact the alternative school or the referring school. The alternative school improvement rating is based on a comparison of student learning gains for the current year and previous year. The accountability policy also has accountability rewards and consequences. Schools that improve one level or maintain an “Improving” level are eligible for school recognition award money, while schools that receive a “Declining” rating are subject to the same requirements as schools that earn an “F” grade.

Based on this brief review of statewide alternative education evaluations systems, it appears evident that alternative education evaluation and school improvement processes are becoming embedded in state accountability systems. Just how the new accountability legislation will impact alternative school administrators and teachers in Florida is a topic of this study.

### **Accountability Policy and School Change**

With the implementation of accountability policies, some alternative schools are faced with changes that could impact how students in these schools are served. School improvement in any school setting requires that staff, teachers, and students respond to forces of change. Similar to regular schools, alternative schools are confronted with accountability legislation that utilizes academic performance outcomes to rate overall effectiveness. Addressing the complexity of alternative school evaluation, Kellmayer (1994) wrote:

Academic achievement, credits earned, and attendance cannot be the only data analyzed in order to obtain a fair and accurate understanding of the alternative program. On the other hand, academic achievement is extremely important, and alternative schools must not forsake this responsibility by concentrating an inordinate amount of time and energy in attempting to rescue at-risk students from social pathologies. (p. 133)

Kellmayer's statement highlights some of the activities and services needed to provide a quality alternative education program. Just how alternative school stakeholders adapt to and change as a result of current accountability legislation and school evaluation is unknown. Research on alternative school accountability reveals that these programs have been insulated from the external forces of program evaluation and accountability.

Alternative schools are confronted with legislative changes that may conflict with organizational paradigms, institutional systems, and current teacher and administrator beliefs and practices. The degree to which alternative schools interpret the need for change and the actual change that is undertaken are still yet to be determined. The developmental path of a school

culture may be contingent on how change initiatives are employed, resisted, adopted, and/or sustained (Evans, p. 74). Cuban (2003) reported that most schools undergo incremental changes that have little impact on existing structures. He asserted school personnel need to assess, reframe, and develop new ways of managing problems or dilemmas by understanding personal, organizational, political, and social-cultural values. Wheatley (1997) asserts that substantive change occurs as a result of meaningful connections between individuals discovering something worthy of “shared attention”. Change theory examines the process of introducing, implementing, and sustaining change within an organization. The concepts contained within change theory provide a foundation for understanding how individuals and organizations respond to different levels and phases of organizational change. Lewin (1952) introduced change as a multi-step process which involves unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. Schein adapted Lewin’s model to include unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Lewin asserted that systems strive to maintain a state of “quasi-equilibrium” or homeostasis during the initial stages of change. He developed the concept of “force field analysis” to identify driving and restraining forces of change that can facilitate or impede the change process. He asserted that leaders play an integral part in creating the necessary conditions to facilitate change throughout the change stages.

During the beginning stages of change, leaders help identify areas within the present state of an organization that must change to bring about a desired future state. During this phase, individuals cope with new information or initiatives that create a sense of urgency or anxiety (Kotter, 1994). Schein (2002) asserts that two anxieties can arise: the anxiety of not changing despite conclusive evidence that change is necessary; and the anxiety associated with having to make changes that individuals fear will be difficult. During the “changing” stage, new concepts, skills, and processes are learned and practiced. Accurate problem identification and the

development of solutions are critical during this phase of the change process. The final stage involves anchoring or refreezing the changes into the culture of the organization. Sustainability occurs when new systems and practices become embedded in the organizational culture of the institution.

Research indicates that educators' beliefs and understanding of the accountability policy may influence their personal responses and practices. Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) found that as local actors identify and interpret accountability policy signals, their current practices and beliefs impact how they will respond to the policy. They found that sense-making necessitated by accountability mandates is influenced by individual, situational, social, and historical contexts. Ingram, Louis, and Schroeder (2004) found that local decision-making is often influenced by the perceived value of the accountability policy. How alternative school teachers and administrators interpret and respond to state accountability policies has yet to be determined.

Gross et al. (2005) developed a conceptual model of school response to accountability and change. The model depicts progressive stages of interpretation and response that schools and district actors work through, which begins with an awareness of the components of the state accountability policy. However, the policy's strength and design, local and district values, and school and district motivation to change can be open to varied interpretation. The authors found that responses to change are influenced by access to resources, accurate problem identification, and the organizational structures, knowledge and skills, and teacher acceptance and implementation of changes. They found that accountability policies with imposed performance goals create a situation in which implementing agents must assimilate new information and solve problems. Schools that assimilate policy information within a local context run the risk of improper identification of problems embedded in the core. Schools that relied on local

knowledge and information were less successful in adopting new instructional strategies and systems that lead to substantive change.

The degree to which alternative school personnel resist change at the structural level due to staff commitment to organizational systems and practices that provide security and predictability is unknown. Behar-Horenstein, Mitchell, and Dolan (2004) developed a multidimensional model for analyzing educational processes. The model shows how external, exogenous, leadership, organizational, and cultural variables interact to influence a school's curriculum, teaching, and evaluation. The model provides a systematic approach to evaluating school systems and processes that includes the interaction between external influences and student characteristics, teacher and administrator beliefs and practices, and the organizational paradigm of the school. This model might also have utility to studying the impact of legislated accountability on alternative schools.

There is also a dearth of research on how alternative school teachers and administrators participate in school improvement-related activities that lead to systemic change. Senge (1990) suggested that: "Developing an organization's capacity to work with "mental models" involves both learning new skills and implementing institutional innovations that help bring these new skills into regular practice" (p. 186). Thus, the creation of new skills, ideas, and results is a function of team learning and is accomplished through collaboration among team members around a common vision (Collins, 2001). For example, DuFour et al. (2005) asserted that collaborative learning builds collective capacity that can result in increased individual and organizational professional development and acquisition of skills. Schools that engage in high levels of inquiry and distributed leadership experience more leadership development, greater collaboration, and sustained school improvement (Copland, 2003; Lambert, 2006). Copland

found that improvements were rooted in sustained inquiry, student learning, high standards, and best practices. Many researchers asserted that the key to reforming education and reculturing schools is adopting the model of professional learning communities (DuFour et al., 2005; Fullan, 2005; Schlechty, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2005). Yet whether state mandated accountability in alternative schools will lead to collegial collaboration and the development of school-wide evaluation procedures and improvement processes remains to be seen.

There is little research that addresses instructional leadership in alternative schools. Mottaz (2002) reported that instructional leadership in alternative schools relies on allowing staff to make decisions about curriculum issues and staffing at the school site. However, performance-based accountability policies have placed new demands on administrators. Elmore (2005) developed a leadership accountability model that emphasizes coherence and alignment, individual and collective responsibility, technical and social/emotional dimensions of improvement, and distributed leadership focused on complex problem solving. Elmore asserted, “Educators have to learn and become fluent in new instructional practices, often with different content constructions designed around different expectations based on student capabilities.” Blasé and Blasé (1999) found that effective instructional leaders developed collaborative cultures, provided teachers opportunities for professional development, and facilitated reflective practice. Effective instructional leaders understand change, build relationships, and facilitate knowledge creation and coherence-making (Fullan, 2001). They understand tri-level reform processes and facilitate coherence-making about state, district, and school level reform processes.

### **Summary**

This chapter presents a review of the literature concerning the history of alternative education, organizational characteristics, and improvement and evaluation processes. Alternative

schools provide educational services to at-risk students who need individualized and comprehensive behavioral and academic support. Students who attend alternative schools have commonly engaged in high-risk behaviors that place them at risk for dropping out of school. Competency-based learning in small class settings provides students remedial assistance and opportunities to earn credits at their own pace. Student perceptions of program effectiveness vary. Alternative schools commonly utilize a site-based management approach. They tend to be highly structured with an emphasis on behavioral programming. However, there is a lack of studies examining evaluation processes in alternative settings.

Until recent passage of alternative education legislation, these programs have functioned outside the scope of the accountability movement. The new policies require that alternative education programs receive a school improvement rating equivalent to a school grade based on student performance on the FCAT. Other states are establishing formal evaluation standards for these schools as well. Because the schools have functioned without formal review, it is important to identify the impact accountability measures will have on alternative schools. Understanding how teachers, administrators, and students perceive and respond to the effects of the rating system has implications for identifying factors that contribute to the implementation of teaching practices, instructional leadership, organizational functions, and school improvement processes under these new conditions.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODS

This chapter describes the methods and procedures used in this study. The setting and the participants, data collection, and data analysis will be discussed. This study utilized a qualitative case study design conducted in a bounded naturalistic school setting. Creswell (2007) defines the elements of a case study:

A qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports) and reports a ... description and ... themes. (p. 73)

Yin's (1988) definition of a case study highlights the importance of investigating phenomenon within a real-life context while using multiple sources of evidence. Case study research allows the researcher to explore situations, people, organizational structures, and events to uncover meanings and patterns relevant to the participants within an integrated and bounded system (Merriman, 1998). Often it involves smaller samples that allow the researcher to probe for deeper understanding. The case or unit of analysis was an alternative school that received a school improvement rating during the first year of the accountability mandate's implementation. The case was examined through prolonged on-site engagement. Teachers involved in the case represented the content areas of mathematics, reading, science, ESE, and social studies. Multiple classroom observations were conducted. The school principal, administrative assistant, and teachers participated in focus groups and individual interviews. The classroom observations, focus groups, and interviews provided rich data on how the school improvement rating impacted their practices.

This study is grounded within the theoretical perspective of interpretivism (Crotty, 1998). As a research strategy interpretivism provides a basis for exploring complex social meanings,

concepts, and practices from the perspective of those being studied (Berger & Kellner, 1981).

Patton (1990) explains the purpose of qualitative data collection:

The purpose of observational data is to describe the setting that was observed, the activities that took place in that setting, the people who participated in those activities, and the meanings of what was observed from the perspective of those observed. (p. 202)

This study explored the influence of the alternative school rating on teachers' and administrators' beliefs and practices through the use of focus groups, interviews, and field observation. The studies explored how alternative school educators make sense of and respond to an accountability policy in their organizational context.

### **The Setting and Participants**

This study was conducted at Riverside School (Riverside is a pseudonym for the actual name of the school), a rural public alternative school located in north Florida. This school serves middle and high school students who are considered at risk for school failure due to behavioral and academic problems. Students are referred to the alternative school by way of expulsion, disciplinary hearing without expulsion, or a disability determination hearing. The school meets the criteria of an alternative school as defined by the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE). During the 2007-2008 school year Riverside School received a "Declining" rating as a result of student declines in 2008 FCAT reading gains when compared to 2007 student gain scores. The school demonstrated learning gains in mathematics but they were designated "Declining" because the accountability policy stipulates that the school will receive a "Declining" rating if either mathematics gains or reading gains decrease when compared from year to year.

The mission of the Riverside program, as described in their 2008 School Improvement Plan, is to "create a quality, respectful learning environment in which students, staff and

community members cooperatively build sound life preparation skills for all students” (p. 1). Incoming students and parents meet with school administration in a staff meeting during which school rules and student expectations are presented. The school employs a behavior management system that includes a daily student point sheet to track behaviors such as respect, attendance, on-task, completion of assignments, and cooperation. Teachers document points earned during each class period and the point sheets are calculated at the end of each school day. Eligibility for return to the home school is based on students earning 360 points during a twelve-week period. Students can return to their regular school at the end of a grading period if they have been in attendance for at least twelve weeks.

Students can be assigned to Riverside throughout the year or during the course of a grading period. The transitional nature of the school impacts classroom instruction, the composition of grade levels, and the courses of study that students were able to enroll in once they enter Riverside. Having students from different grade levels and courses together in one classroom is not uncommon. As a result of lack of personnel and resources, mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies classrooms often consisted of multi-course and multi-grade placements. Assignments are provided to meet the requirements of the varying courses represented in a single classroom. Often exit grades and records from the referring school are not readily accessible to receiving teachers, thus making the determination of assignments and grades difficult. Teachers use different methods to accommodate multi-grade and multi-course students in the classroom.

A review of demographic data from 2003 to 2008 showed that the school is comprised predominantly of white and black students. During this same time span other student sub-groups

were too small in number to be identified for reporting purposes. During the 2008-2009 school year more than 50% of students received exceptional student services, 89% were economically disadvantaged, 59% of the total student population were black. Prior to the 2008-2009 school year, the school district relocated selected students with disabilities from the regular school self-contained settings to the alternative setting.

According to school documents, the curriculum meets Florida Sunshine State Standards. All students participated in the statewide assessment program. Prior to 2007-2008, the alternative school did not receive a school grade or performance rating; however they received a school improvement rating for the first time in 2008. The “Declining” rating was a result of students not making gains in both reading and mathematics. To be counted as a member of the eligible cohort, students had to test for three consecutive years. Performance rating data and designation for 2007-2008 are shown in Table 3-1.

Table 3-1. Riverside school improvement rating 2007-08

School Improvement Rating Designation	Making Learning Gains in Reading 2007-08	Making Learning Gains in Reading 2006-07	Making Learning Gains in Mathematics 2007-08	Making Learning Gains in Mathematics 2006-07
Declining	42% (-10%)	52%	45% (+15%)	30%

Student grade level proficiency performance data are reported in Table 3-2. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports from 2003-04 to 2007-08 revealed that students reading on grade level did not exceed 31% with 15% of students reading on grade level during the 2003-04 and 2004-05 school years. Mathematics data were not reported from 2004 to 2005 due to insufficient student membership. Mathematics results from 2006 to 2008 reveal that students performed significantly below grade level proficiency on the mathematics section of the FCAT.

The Riverside staff consisted of a principal, administrative assistant, 13 teachers, and seven instructional assistants. The principal was contacted by phone to arrange a meeting to discuss participation in the study. The principal consented to participate and provided a list of six

Table 3-2. FCAT grade level proficiency: 2003-2008

	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
Reading % Grade Level on FCAT	10%	15%	31%	26%	27%
Mathematics % Grade Level on FCAT	NA	NA	20%	17%	14%

teachers, each of whom taught one of the following subjects: social studies, science, mathematics, reading, language arts, and exceptional student education. The administrative assistant responsible for behavioral management and an itinerant exceptional student education teacher were also included. Recruitment of staff participants was conducted through verbal invitation. Consent for participation was obtained prior to commencement of the study (See Appendix F). Approval of this study was granted by the University of Florida Institutional Review Board (Appendix G).

The experience levels of participants varied from two to twenty-five years of teaching experience. All of the teachers except for one were certified in the subject area they were teaching. One of the teachers served as part-time reading coach in addition to teaching middle and high school level reading courses. All of the teachers had taught in an alternative setting at least one full year prior to the study. The administrator was in her first year as principal of Riverside. All names reported in this study were changed to maintain the anonymity of the participants.

Table 3-3. Demographics of the study participants

	Gender		Subject Area Certification		Years Experience in Alternative Setting	Total Years of Teaching and Administrative Experience
	M	F	Y	N		
Teachers (n=5)	2	4	5	1	<5= 3 6-10 = 3 11-20 = 0 >20= 0	<5= 2 6-10 = 1 11-20 = 2 >20= 1
School Based Administrator (n=1)	0	1	1	0	<5= 1	<5= 1
Administrative Assistant (n=1)	1	0	1	0	<5= 1	<5= 1
Participant Totals (n=8)	3	5	7	1	<5= 4 6-10 = 2 11-20 = 0 >20= 0	<5= 2 6-10 = 1 11-20 = 2 >20= 1

### Data Sources

Data were collected from multiple sources. The documents reviewed included state accountability reports, state accountability rules, AYP reports, instructional resources, the school improvement plan, school handbook, and progress monitoring data. Fieldwork included the recording information that was related to school organization, classroom instruction, and school improvement. Data sources included the use of field notes, meeting agendas, and audiotapes. Focus groups were utilized with teachers. The study also included the use of individual interviews with the teachers, the principal and the administrative assistant.

### Data Collection

Initially, data collection and analysis consisted of the school improvement plans of all alternative schools in the State of Florida who met the eligibility criteria for school improvement ratings during the 2008-09 school year. A total of 51 school improvement plans were reviewed.

The review consisted of an analysis of organizational structures, academic performance goals, and behavioral goals. An analysis of program types, specific FCAT performance goals related to reading and mathematics, and goals related to academic programming was conducted to determine possible influences of the alternative school improvement rating.

Fieldwork included prolonged engagement in the school setting that included purposeful classroom observations utilizing a teacher observation protocol (adapted from Anusavice, 1999). The classroom observations were conducted from February 2009 to May 2009. A total of five teachers were observed five times each; another teacher was observed three times. The total amount of time spent in classroom observations was 1,120 minutes. The observations provided extended contact with teachers in the classroom and provided a deeper understanding of the school culture, curriculum, instructional strategies, and interactions between students and teachers. The following observational protocol provided a guide for the classroom observations:

1. Sequentially describe the tasks that students are asked to do.
2. Describe student and teacher roles and their respective involvement in the lesson.
3. Describe the students' and teacher's response to students' questions and answers.
4. Identify and describe how instructional supports are used throughout the lesson.

In addition to classroom observations, focus groups and individual interviews were conducted. Focus groups and individual interviews occurred between February 2009 and August 2009. Individual interviews and focus groups were conducted for the purpose of examining the perceived effects of accountability ratings on teachers and administrators. The five teachers participated in two 60-minute focus group interviews using an open-ended question format (Appendix B). Interview protocols were utilized to explore a specified range of issues with adequate structure and flexibility to maintain focus and to provide opportunities for participants to explore new directions (Morgan, 2001). Probing questions were asked during the course of the focus groups and individual interviews. The focus group sessions were audio taped and

transcribed. The data from the interviews were coded and analyzed. The administrator participated in two interviews using the Administrator Interview Protocols (Appendix D). Each teacher was also interviewed two times using the Teacher Interview Protocols (Appendix C). To ensure the accuracy of representation, teachers were provided opportunities to review the transcripts and provide feedback on the codes.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis consisted of readings and rereading of the data set, during which time data was coded for semantic relationships, patterns, and themes. During the initial stage of analysis, open coding consisted of identifying themes emerging from the raw data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The constant comparative method was used to analyze field notes and documents (Strauss, 1987). A research assistant also coded the entire data set. The data were sorted and coded utilizing NVivo (a qualitative coding software program). The coding resulted in 425 free codes and 10 tree nodes. As a result of consultation and refinement of the codes, six themes were identified. Interviews and focus group data analysis, based on the work of Spradley (1979), included selecting a single semantic relationship, preparing a domain analysis worksheet, selecting a sample of informant statements, searching for possible cover terms and included terms that appropriately fit the semantic relationship, formulating structural questions for each domain, and making a list of all hypothesized domains.

Teachers and principals were provided transcripts of their interview sessions and were given opportunities to provide feedback on codes and the taxonomy. Strategies utilized to strengthen validity included descriptive accounting, triangulation, member checking, and outside auditing (Creswell, 2007). Reliability involved extensive review of observation notes, audiotapes, and inter-coder agreement. Another researcher experienced in qualitative research reviewed and coded the data to decide if the emerging themes were relevant. The researcher has

served as committee chair at an applied research center in a university located in the southeast United States. He has also worked with graduate students for the past four years supervising qualitative research projects. In addition, his background in public school settings includes experience as a high school guidance counselor, gifted education supervisor, and district coordinator of management information systems. A taxonomic analysis was conducted to examine alternative school teacher, administrator, and student experiences in the context of the accountability policy. Throughout the process, all forms of data were examined using triangulation (Patton, 1990). Multiple datasets including individual interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and school artifacts were analyzed to identify convergent and divergent relationships. Interpretations were based on the triangulation of data sources. After analyzing the data at length, a completed taxonomy was constructed.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

Monitoring potential sources of research bias is an important aspect of conducting qualitative research (Patton, 1990). Bracketing is a process in which personal beliefs and assumptions are held in abeyance to safeguard against biased interpretations (Crotty, 2003). Creswell (2007) described bracketing as the “process of data analysis in which the researcher sets aside, as far as humanly possible, all preconceived experiences to best understand the experiences of participants in the study” (p.235). Throughout the research process the researcher was intentional about exploring the alternative setting as a bounded system with a systematic openness to understanding the underlying values and perceptions of the participants. During observations, the researcher attempted to view all phenomena with a fresh perspective to gain a deeper understanding of the school’s culture and climate. Critical reflection was used throughout the interpretive process to uncover new meanings and call into question initial interpretations (Creswell, 2007).

The researcher has been a teacher and administrator in both regular and alternative education settings. In March 2009, the researcher transferred to a new position outside of the alternative setting. Prior experiences in alternative settings could have potentially influenced interpretations of observations and data analysis. The researcher has worked with an experienced professor of qualitative methods using case study design to investigate how administrators involved in a professional development program engage in systematic and intentional study of their practices. Research experiences included video and audio taping professional development sessions, taking field notes, data transcription, coding, and triangulating data. The researcher also has experience conducting research in an exceptional student education setting while he investigated the influence of a school-wide positive behavior support plan on students and teachers. This study provided experience in analyzing and coding interview data, and the triangulation of school-wide documents and artifacts.

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

**Themes:** The purpose of this section is to present the findings related to each research question.

The dataset revealed six themes (Organizational Paradigm, Student Characteristics, Resource Poor, Policy Awareness, Instructional Practices, and Administrative Support). The frequencies of themes ranged from 5% to 24% across eight participants (sources) as shown in Table 4-1.

Table 4-1. Themes by frequency (n=425) by sources (# of participants)

Themes	Frequency	Sources
Organizational Paradigm	102 (24%)	8
Student Characteristics	89 (21%)	8
Resource Poor	72 (18%)	8
Policy Awareness	68 (18%)	8
Instructional Response	64 (14%)	8
Administrative Support	30 (5%)	7

Conceptual definitions were developed to support the identified themes. *Organizational Paradigm* refers to the school's mission and the academic, behavioral, social and organizational subsystems that control school operations. *Student Characteristics* include pre-entry attributes such as motivation, past academic achievement and academic skills, and background, such as prior educational experiences, family background, and socioeconomic status. *Policy Awareness* includes knowledge of the accountability mandate and perceptions of its efficacy to rate the school. *Resource Poor* refers to teacher and administrative beliefs about the lack of quality physical and instructional resources. *Instructional Response* refers to observed and reported teaching practices used in the classroom. *Administrative Support* refers to teacher beliefs about school-based and central office instructional assistance.

### **Question 1: What are teachers' and administrators' beliefs about the school accountability policy?**

Teacher and administrator beliefs were influenced by their awareness of the accountability policy, perceived efficacy of the policy, and factors related to the school's organizational paradigm, and participants beliefs about students.

**Policy Awareness:** All the participants reported that their knowledge of the accountability policy influenced their beliefs about its efficacy in rating the school. The assigned rating was based on the 2007-08 FCAT performance data. All of the participants except for the principal were members of the staff during the 2007-2008 school year. Evelyn, a first year principal at Riverside, demonstrated a basic understanding of the components of the accountability policy. She reported how the rating was calculated and what factors resulted in the "Declining" rating. Evelyn stated that she had read the technical assistance paper produced by the Florida Department of Education that provided her "with a detailed explanation of the components of the accountability policy." However, she was not certain that the faculty really understood the policy. Discussing the teachers' awareness level, she reported, "some of the staff may understand the criteria and some of them may not, and I'm thinking a lot of them do not understand how the rating impacts us." She explained that she felt it was important to, "observe the practices that were already in place to evaluate what was working." Evelyn reported that academic and behavioral programming would be impacted by the "emphasis on academics and FCAT scores." Because of the newly implemented accountability policy she felt that it was her responsibility to "make the teachers data conscious ... to move out of the old paradigm and make a paradigm shift." Evelyn was aware that the school's overall 2007-08 rating was based on declining scores in reading. Although the mathematics scores improved, declining reading scores resulted in the school receiving the lower rating.

Teacher statements revealed that they had a limited understanding of the components that make up the school improvement rating. They lacked an understanding about how the rating was calculated, how FCAT reading and mathematics learning gains were calculated for a specific cohort of students, and how the designations of “Improving”, “Maintaining”, and “Declining” were assigned to alternative schools. Although they were aware that students’ FCAT reading and mathematics scores were used to calculate the rating, they were less clear about how students’ scores were calculated and analyzed. Participants reported that the components of the rating were briefly discussed during staff meetings and professional development trainings. For example, while commenting on their understanding of the rating’s components Carol stated, “We assumed that our rating was not good [so] we didn’t spend a lot time discussing the specifics.” Carol explained that she did not understand all of the components of the accountability policy or how it might help her in the classroom. Discussing the application of the rating to classroom instruction she reported, “If I felt it was beneficial and it could actually help me teach better, I would incorporate it, but I really do not understand all of the components of the rating.”

The participants reported having a general understanding of accountability and school improvement. For example, Victor explained that past administrators had discussed accountability. He reported that they would “talk about it every year; every year it’s talked about how FCAT scores are going to be counted and how we are going to be held accountable for this and for that.” He was, however, unaware of any possible consequences associated with having been rated a “Declining” school. Moreover, he also seemed unaware that the school was being held accountable by the new accountability policy. He explained, “We weren’t held accountable last year for our FCAT scores ... it was always in the wings that it was going to come back to us so the sending school is not responsible.”

Other participants also had limited knowledge of the policy. For example, Susan reported, “I’m not sure I want to know and I don’t think it will change much of what I do in the classroom with my students.” Similarly, Rob reported, “I understand the components poorly because I choose to understand them poorly. I don’t find them relevant to what I do. I don’t find them relevant to what they are supposed to judge.” Ann, who reported a “vague understanding of the rating,” helped the school principal write the school improvement plan (SIP). She reported that the rating was difficult to interpret because she did not understand the technical aspects of the policy.

The perceived efficacy of the accountability policy was influenced by participants’ skepticism about the legislative intent of the policy. During the first focus group, participants referred to the policy as “unfair” and “punitive.” The focus group participants expressed their concerns that the policy did not include measures other than FCAT scores. They reported concerns about the underlying purpose of the policy and the impact it had on instructional practices. Expressing his frustration over having to “teach to the test” Rob reported, “It is not real learning, [just] what has to be done in order to make them successful according to the state.”

Participants questioned why the policy was developed and what the policy makers expected to see change in alternative schools. Carol stated, “I want to know who wants these ratings and what they are doing with them. I see all these tests and all these ratings, but what are they doing with them? I would like those questions answered.” Jeff questioned the knowledge and ability of policy makers to make informed decisions about how to evaluate alternative schools. He felt that the policy was developed without a clear understanding. He commented, “I’m concerned that they developed a grading system for the entire school that’s not valid...it’s hard to make policy that affects the people on the ground when you’re not in tune to what’s

happening here.” He reported that criteria such as student behavior were important to assigning ratings to alternative schools. Other participants expressed similar concerns about policy makers’ knowledge of alternative settings and doubt that they understood those factors that influenced academic and behavioral programming in alternative schools and the influence these factors have on student performance data. For example, Susan commented, “If they have never been here, they must not know what we’re doing.”

Rob discussed the punitive consequences of accountability policy. He explained, “When they decide to shut us down, they will shut us down, but they still have to deal with these kids ... if they choose to make arbitrary decisions for political reasons or economic reasons, I have no control over that.” Other participants held similar beliefs about the state’s ability to provide solutions that would help alternative schools perform better academically. Carol discussed how the state might help alternative schools if they were more involved at the school level, she reported, “If our school is declining I understand that, but I want you to tell me what I need to do to improve to get a higher rating. Are you going to punish me for things out of my control?” Rob concurred and stated that, “my setting is not good and my tools are not good...if you can make them better then make them better, don’t leave me alone, don’t say everything is wrong and leave me out here to struggle by myself.” Ann identified the perceived legislative intent of the policy, and pointed out, “That’s only more incentive for them to disregard alternative school students and spend less on them ... [then] they will say alternative schools are declining, they don’t do anything, the teachers are ineffective ... we are already ostracized here.”

The perceived efficacy of the policy was also influenced by participants’ awareness of rules that defined school membership and students’ required cell size; 10 eligible students qualified the school for a rating. School membership criterion stipulated that students who

attended one full-time equivalent (FTE) period were to be included in the rating calculation while the regular school grading policy required attendance across two FTE periods. Gale disagreed with this FTE rule stating, “I think it’s unfair because sometimes we get students just weeks before the FCAT, so their scores are assigned to our school . . . better students return to their home school . . . we should be graded for their accomplishments, but we’re not.” Rob explained that the school commonly had an influx of students just prior to the test. He reported that although the school should have finished FCAT on Tuesday, “we had 13 students come in on Friday just prior to the end of testing with no inkling of who’s getting ready to walk through that door.” Evelyn discussed her concerns about the fairness of the policy attendance rule. Ann explained that the system was skewed, “because the students that show progress are eligible to leave . . . that makes it harder to identify student needs and design an instructional program that addresses the components that we will be rated on.” Ann explained that requiring such a small cell size of only 10 students was one reason why she perceived the rating as unfair and inadequate to evaluate the school.

**Organizational Paradigm:** All participants identified the school’s organizational paradigm as influential in their beliefs about accountability in an alternative setting. The organizational paradigm refers to organizational structures and policies that govern school operations. The school meets the statutory requirements, qualifying it for an improvement rating. The school profile section of the 2007-08 School Improvement Plan described assignment to the school as the result of “the student’s misconduct or demonstrated inability to function within the regular classroom environment.” Placement in the program occurred when a student failed “to properly respond to numerous interventions and various attempts to correct such deficiencies.” The school environment was described in the 2008 School Improvement Plan as,

structured, consistent, and which provides the opportunity for behavior modification as well as improved social skills. A variety of educational, behavioral, and social intervention techniques are utilized . . . only students who demonstrate success and achieve established goals are prepared for transition back into the regular school system setting.

While reflecting on the school's organizational mission, the school's principal Evelyn reported that "we are educating the whole child here so you cannot discard behavior, discipline, and attendance . . . our mission is to produce a product that can be functional in the traditional setting and functional is not just academics." Gale suggested that the school's mission needed to be considered in the context of the accountability policy. "We have to ask the question, why did these students get sent here? It is primarily their behavior . . . it shouldn't be all academics, because we are not all about academics . . . it's why the students are here, because of their behavior." Explaining the mission of the school, Jeff reported that behavior modification was the "bedrock and the foundation" of the program and stated, "when you can get them to modify their behavior enough so that they are able to concentrate on the academics without disrupting the class or without causing everyone else problems, then you have achieved something."

Participants reported that student risk factors such as disruptive home settings, involvement in juvenile justice, and a lack of basic resources influenced students' academic and behavioral performance in school. Susan explained that the student population "comes mainly from an impoverished background relationally and emotionally, and they're used to running things at home." All the participants described how students' backgrounds influenced their perspectives about teaching, learning, and FCAT performance outcomes. Evelyn reported that, "students come to us with numerous behavioral issues, attendance issues, and just a lot of personal problems, and before we can get to any academics we have to get past those issues." Ann pointed out the importance of understanding that "personalities and background characteristics play an important role at Riverside . . . we have mostly free and reduced lunch,

single parent families, and . . . they pretty much raise themselves.” In a describing risk factors, Victor reported, “parents or guardians might be in jail or just not available . . . students are having to take care of themselves and others . . . we are seeing a pattern.” He also explained that, “a lot of the students carry probation papers or are involved in the juvenile justice system and private counseling agencies, or things of that nature.” All of the participants reported a lack of parent and community involvement in the school. Ann reported that the school only held one SAC meeting and that no students, parents, or community members attended. Participants described how students’ behavioral problems impacted the school environment. They reported a school climate characterized by classroom disruptions, low motivation, and negative attitudes toward academics and testing. For example, Ann reported that “some of them just fall into [an] alternative school mentality . . . they are going to be the biggest and the baddest, and it’s a trap that some of them fall prey to.” Participants reported how disruptive behaviors impacted classroom instruction and daily school operations. For example, Carol reported that “they will want to fight that first couple of days. It’s like a big uproar, and I am trying to keep those kids separated until they realize, ‘hey, what are we fighting for?’” School resource officers were observed walking the campus and sitting in teacher classrooms. Other participants identified the behavioral management plan as critical to the success of academic programming. For example, Victor reported, “first and foremost we must correct behavior . . . unfortunately that means we must focus on behavior before academics.”

Perceived misalignments between the school mission and the accountability policy influenced participants’ beliefs about the rating. They criticized the lack of behavioral criteria contained within the policy. All the participants referred to the goal of “equipping students” with academic, behavioral, and life skills as a critical component of the school’s mission. They

asserted that transitioning students back to regular school was a primary goal of the school.

Another common goal shared by participants was to equip students with “life skills” to help them be successful outside of school. Commenting on life skills, Victor reported, “They may not go to college, they may not all end up graduating with a diploma.” As he explained, “students needed skills that will allow them go out and make a living.” Similarly Susan stated, “The mission of our school is to prepare our students for the world of work.” All of the participants reported that students’ behavioral plans along with academic components should have been included in the rating criteria. For example Carol reported, “I really don’t see how the rating system and our mission have anything in common. We send back students who are improving, declining, and maintaining on the FCAT and their behaviors.” While commenting about the scope of the accountability policy in the context of the school’s mission, Evelyn pointed out, “Areas that result in student placement should be a part of the whole rating system ... discipline, attendance, and academics.” Ann reported that the mission and policy were in conflict because students who she prepared to do well on the FCAT and other academic assessments “earned the right to reenroll in their regular school.” She reported, “It doesn’t have any real meaning to me...I think we will always be considered declining ... the only people who stay at an alternative schools are those with behavioral problems and who struggle academically.”

Rob expressed concern that the state was “judging” him and the school on criteria that did not consider the school’s mission. “If the state wants to judge me on FCAT scores, then that’s fine, but my job is to equip these students with the [functional] skills for regular schools.” Rob expressed that unrealistic expectations were placed on alternative schools and that the state needed to “be real” in setting standards for alternative programs. “Nobody was killed today, there was no blood spilled, kids received some education, some discipline, some love, they got

some food, and they got to socialize in a regulated way ... with my setting, that's not bad." Other participants expressed difficulties in meeting the expectations of the accountability policy and the school mission. Gale explained "as a whole the rating doesn't impact me... they just want to throw these kids out of regular school and put them out here and expect them to survive."

Participants also described how academic programming influenced their beliefs about the accountability policy. They reported that students from grades six through twelve were scheduled into one class period or they were assigned to different courses during a single period. For example, the principal reported that a teacher could have "algebra, geometry, and algebra II all in one class... so they have to teach multiple subjects in one classroom." They described how difficult it was to teach the Sunshine State Standards for multiple courses and grades during the same period. Classroom observations revealed a common board configuration with assignments and standards posted by course. Carol described these difficulties, "I'm teaching five subjects in one class, I can't give them the attention that they need within a 50 minute class. They need attention, they need discipline, they need math, but there's only one of me." Victor stated that academic programming was a "barrier in itself" in meeting the academic needs of the students, state curriculum standards, and the accountability system. Discussing his frustration with the accountability policy, he commented, "the state wants to grade me, but how am I supposed to attend to a sixth grader when dealing with behavioral problems among eleventh and twelfth graders. It's a vicious cycle." Rob reported the virtual impossibility of meeting "the needs of the students" in his science classes that were comprised of students from sixth to twelfth grade. In addition to trying to meet content requirements, he focused on note taking skills and strategies that might be transferrable to the regular school environment. Carol expressed similar concerns

related to teaching her students who did not have the mathematical background necessary to perform on the FCAT.

**Student Characteristics:** All the participants described how student characteristics influenced their beliefs about school accountability. For example, students' lack of effort on the FCAT had a negative effect on the school's rating. Also, the social context of the school influenced their beliefs about school accountability. The participants explained that students held negative attitudes towards FCAT testing and other monitoring assessments. Participants reported that students did not take the tests seriously. Sometimes they did not make any effort at all. Jeff explained, "when the kid gets here they are already upset because they have to be at the alternative school so they are not going to do anything on the FCAT or the other progress monitoring assessments." Progress monitoring, a district initiative, consisted of periodic benchmark testing utilizing materials designed to test FCAT skills; the district utilized Kaplan products. Rob reported that student characteristics made his teaching difficult. Describing the difficulties of meeting the needs of all his students he reported, "I have multi-mixed grades, with kids with more than just one learning disability. I have some true malcontents ... there's no way to fulfill what I should do by the law so I can do the best I can."

The participants shared that the progress monitoring data was of little use when students did not make any effort. According to Ann, "the Kaplan was totally a waste ... they "Christmas treed" the entire thing ... some of them never opened the packet." Evelyn, the school principal, describing the student testing problems stated, "A lot of my teachers feel that some of the kids just don't care ... how we can get them to value the test more?" Incentives did not appear to have any noticeable impact on student performance. Carol stated that, "It is difficult to determine how much improvement our students make ... I have one or two that actually take it seriously."

Victor reported that students “lacked the motivation... to perform on the FCAT and other assessments.”

In addition to motivation, they were concerned about the students’ abilities to perform on the FCAT. They believed that students lacked the necessary grade level skills and that many were working below grade level in reading and mathematics. Victor stated that his students’ skill levels impacted the lesson pacing and the coverage. “I deviate from the standards in my classroom setting sometimes only because ... some of them their skills and abilities are a lot less than the others.” Jeff stated, “What we have counting toward the rating are students who are left behind because they did not meet behavioral and academic expectations.” Carol pointed that many of her middle and high school students struggled with basic multiplication and division. She stated, “Students may show some gains in the areas that they are weak in, but these skills are below the baseline tested on the FCAT.”

Another common frustration reported by all participants was that students would show some progress, but the progress was believed to be still too far below grade level to register as a learning gain on a grade level assessment like Kaplan or the FCAT. Ann, describing how one of her best behaved students struggled academically, reported, “She does everything I ask her to do, but reading over her final exam I found elementary errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.” Rob expressed frustration that the science FCAT included academic material that many of his students had not had. He reported that the science FCAT included chemistry content, a course that most of his student would not take. Gale, who was responsible for tracking students’ reading performance using the diagnostic MAZE assessment, reported that most of the students were working below grade level. She expressed more confidence in the MAZE results because completing and administering the test was much shorter than the FCAT. Gale reported

that diagnostic results indicated that many of the students “lacked basic reading skills.” She reported that they were more willing to try on the MAZE because “they would receive immediate feedback and they liked to compare their results with other students.” Carol, commenting on how student proficiency could not be accurately measured by the FCAT stated, “as far as their skill levels are concerned, I think that FCAT results are not always reflective of students’ abilities. Too many factors can impact how our students perform.”

Susan expressed concerns about how the accountability policy impacted students with disabilities placed at Riverside, who were placed as a result of a manifestation of disability hearing. She explained that the policy failed to account for the individual educational needs of students with severe academic deficits and behavioral problems enrolled in special diploma classes. Susan was assigned to teach students on what was commonly referred to by participants as the “ESE side” of the campus. Describing the impact of school accountability she reported that “it is all FCAT, FCAT, FCAT...I have tenth grade guys breaking down in my classroom because they can’t do it...I really can’t use FCAT because our guys are just floored by it.” She expressed doubts about the efficacy of the assessment to inform her on student progress. She reported that she was more concerned with the goals of a student’s individual education plan (IEP) and tracking student growth aligned more with individual ability levels. She used diagnostic assessments more sensitive to student growth factors in fluency and comprehension and favored using a value-added approach to assess her instructional effectiveness. She also reported that the accountability policy influenced her to consider new ways of evaluating student growth. She reported that she intended to begin “using progress notes to monitor her students’ behavioral and academic development.” She explained, “These kids are so tough and challenging

... I would not put myself through any of this and not see some gains ... I wouldn't be able to stay, but it might not be the gains that are measured by a rating system."

Other participants questioned the validity of the accountability policy with a student population comprised of more than 50% students with disabilities. Evelyn explained that the population of students with disabilities increased just prior to the beginning of the 2008-09 school year when the school district decided to allow schools to send selected ESE students from middle and high schools within the district. She expressed concerns that students on a special diploma graduation option were required to take the FCAT which contained standards not included in special diploma courses.

**Research Question #2: What are the available physical and instructional resources that support teaching and student learning?**

**Resource poor:** All participants reported that the school lacked instructional materials, including computers and software programs, multimedia and library resources, and science lab materials and equipment. Teacher and administrator beliefs about the accountability policy and their instructional effectiveness were impacted by the availability of physical and instructional resources. Limited access to the district's student data management system impeded their access to student data. The teachers reported that with the constant movement of students in and out of the school, it was imperative to have current student information. Evelyn's statement seemed to describe their lack of resources, "We have limited technology and limited funds when it comes to curriculum and the things we can purchase such as science and math labs and a media center." Evelyn also reported that she was actively working with the district to acquire the needed instructional and physical resources. She explained, "My teachers have to go to the warehouse for books, no other teacher has to do that ... we have to come out here in these conditions, it's unfair." She reported that additional district support was emerging and she anticipated improved

district support and additional funding in the future. As a result of her requests, the district committed to provide the school a guidance counselor position and administrative trainee position for the 2009-10 school year.

A lack of necessary instructional and physical resources hampered teacher work. For example Ann stated, “I think they really disregard Riverside ... out of everything that we really need such as materials, new buildings, labs, we are at the bottom of the list.” Carol described their instructional resources as “used things, equipment that needs fixing...it ends up being just leftovers.” Explaining the impact of not having lab and science materials Rob stated, “I do not do what a lot of other science teachers do.” He reported that if he needed something, he would purchase it with his own money, try to obtain it from another school or do without it. Victor and Susan used their own money to purchase books. All the participants reported that they had to ration the copies used for instruction. Victor stated, “I do not have workbooks so I have to make copies...I can burn up to 200 copies in a day’s time...I can reach my quota for the month in one day.” Carol reported that she was unable to purchase a social skills program that she believed would help her students with emotional behavioral disabilities. All of the participants mentioned that they needed a guidance counselor. According to Jeff, this was “Just another example of us not having the resources we need... [and] don’t have.”

The lack of adequate instructional resources, such as sufficient textbooks and grade level materials also influenced their delivery of the curriculum. For example Gale, Ann, and Susan reported that they had to “share textbooks” because the school was unable to purchase the adopted reading textbooks for all grade levels. For reading adoption they only received books for one grade level rather than the full set. Ann was bothered by the incongruence between the curriculum at Riverside and at other high schools. Gale reported that if they did not purchase

additional books for the following year, they would have to find additional materials to use with the students who remained at Riverside. She also reported that she did not understand why monies were unavailable to purchase anything for the high school program.

A lack of technology led to an “overreliance on textbooks and worksheets,” according to Rob. Evelyn, comparing the technology available in an alternative setting to regular schools, reported, “We don’t have as many computers as they have, hardware ... [or] software so our resources for creating an interest...are limited.” Carol reported that computers would provide her “more opportunities to differentiate instruction.” She reported that teaching multiple courses at one time meant that she had to divide her time between small groups or individual students. She reported that if she had computers in the classroom she could use software programs to individualize instruction. Carol also reported that it was important to “provided students with hands-on activities in mathematics.” Carol reported how a mathematics workshop on how to use manipulatives influenced her beliefs and recounted how one of the lessons from the workshop “dramatically increased participation and student performance.” She expressed a desire to purchase more hands-on materials.

Others reported how technology could be used to deliver instruction. Jeff reported that, prior to the 2008-09 school year, he supervised a computer lab that was equipped with a competency-based reading and mathematics software program. He reported that the district moved to a new software program with curriculum content that was too difficult for the majority of the students at Riverside. Rob reported that the computer lab was not being utilized for competency based instruction. Victor became frustrated while attending a recent technology workshop in which the trainer gave each participant an mp3 player. Commenting on the training he stated, “What was I going to do with an mp3 player? I don’t have any computers.” Jeff

commenting on how technology might impact academic success said, “If you were going to look at how to improve academic success in an alternative school ... set it up where each student was engaged in something via technology via a computer program.”

Classroom observations revealed limited use of instructional resources other than textbooks and handouts. For example, none of the participating teachers used a multi-media projector or the internet during instruction. Textbooks were used for assignments such as outlining, answering review questions, and worksheets. Teachers listed assignments on the white board with dated instructions, the textbook page numbers, and expected dates of completion. Assignments would be posted for the entire week. Students would work quietly or in small groups to complete the assigned work. Rob’s students used the textbook to complete three column notes and to find the main idea of a subsection or a chapter. Victor primarily utilized the textbook with his social studies classes and the publisher’s worksheets and assessments. He would ask questions and lead discussion after each section. Students were allowed to use their notes and worksheets during the assessments. Carol used the textbook and FCAT preparation materials to teach specific FCAT benchmarks. She developed separate assignments to accommodate the multiple courses in the classroom. Susan and Gale’s classrooms were equipped with three computers each. The computers were utilized for reading instruction. Students were observed reading from the computer with audio headphones. Susan also used Great Leaps during instruction, which is a phonics-based reading program.

**Research Question 3: What are teachers’ perceptions of instructional leadership in the alternative school setting?**

**Administrative support:** All of the teacher participants reported that administrative support was influenced by principal experience, district support, access to resources, and concerns about behavior. One of the primary factors that influenced teacher perceptions of

instructional leadership in the alternative setting was the fact that the principal was in her first year as administrator at the school. The principal also emphasized her first year status during her interviews. She reported that during the first year it was important “to observe current practices to assess what is working and what needed changing.” The teachers reported that the principal’s limited experience might have influenced how she responded to academic and behavioral programming. For example Carol, discussing the background experience of the principal, stated, “I know you can only do what you’ve been taught, and they have not been taught the things that might actually be a support to teachers in an alternative setting.” Commenting on how the principal might have collaborated with the faculty on academics, Gale reported, “I think that was a lacking area this year...this was her first year.” She thought the principal could have provided more professional development opportunities to discuss best practices and to address instructional needs. Jeff reported that the principal was “active in learning how the behavior system works...she also looked at student data to determine what direction we should go.” Carol reported that she appreciated that the principal did not “micro-manage the staff” during her first year.

Teacher perceptions of administrator effectiveness were influenced by perceived institutional support that participants believed mitigated the current and past principals’ abilities to provide adequate levels of support. One of the primary barriers mentioned by all participants was the lack of fiscal support provided by the district. For example Carol reported, “I do not see much support from the district at all on anything.” Susan stated, “I know our principal and every principal we’ve ever had is always going to the school board . . . the school board gets tired of hearing about what we need.” Other participants commented on the principal’s efforts to obtain requested resources. Victor, describing the efforts the principal would make to obtain resources,

stated “we have always been a school that had trouble getting resources. She did help me get books for my courses.” However, he acknowledged that the current and past principals faced the same difficulties while trying to obtain resources for the school. Ann reported that the principal “always attempts to secure the resources we need ... the district is actually going to provide us with a guidance counselor next year.” Carol reported, “If there is something I need, she will definitely try to get it for me.” The wide range of responsibilities associated with being the only administrator on campus also influenced teacher perceptions of instructional leadership. For example Rob, commenting on how the principal meets “ESE demands” and all of the other organizational issues of the “behavioral side”, stated, “I don’t believe that’s her fault, I think it’s just asking one person to do something that three people should do ... her ability to do anything is phenomenal.” In the area of instructional support, the teacher participants reported that the principal conducted classroom walkthroughs and was visible on campus. The principal reported that she would conduct classroom walkthroughs to observe instructional strategies and provide feedback. For example she stated, “I am in and out of the classroom doing walkthroughs, making sure effective practices are taking place. I look at lesson plans and make sure the Sunshine State Standards are being implemented on a daily basis.” Rob reported that “the principal walks through on occasion and if she sees something she likes or doesn’t like she will mention it.” Ann reported that the principal would use classroom walkthrough data to reinforce effective teaching practices and highlight some areas needing some attention. She also stated that the principal conducted “best practices sessions” and by sharing “effective practices that she observed and she would share other things that maybe she did not get to see.” Susan reported, “sometimes the principal’s walkthroughs were more than once a day and that she likes to be visible and have her

presence known.” Carol reported that the principal would walk through and talk with her about instructional practices on a frequent basis.

A review of meeting agendas revealed the topics that were discussed included student behavior, progress monitoring data, FCAT preparation, and upcoming events. The principal explained that she meets with subject area teachers and departments “to keep the line of communication open” and asserted that she and the faculty needed to work together because the staff was so small. Discussing the principal’s willingness to listen, Victor stated, “I talked with her a couple of times about the instructional side and the behavioral system and as a result we made some adjustments to what we were doing.” Jeff, who served primarily as the behavioral dean, reported that he worked closely with the principal to “bind the staff together on the discipline side and the academic side by talking to them individually and collectively and in small groups and occasionally in the large group.”

All of the participants testified that problems resulted from an inconsistent enforcement of the school-wide behavioral management system. There was consensus that the principal needed to enforce behavioral rules more consistently. All of the participants referenced problem behavior and a lack of common behavioral objectives as a barrier to academic performance. Teachers also expressed concern about a lack of interventions to effectively manage problem behavior in the classroom.

At the principal’s suggestion a post-planning meeting with a small group of teachers was planned so that they could discuss concerns and plan for the next school year. The teachers expressed their desire to adopt a “behavioral matrix” that could be utilized to hold students accountable for discipline problems. During the meeting, teachers commented on how discipline problems and lack of enforcement at all levels created classroom environments that were not

conducive to teaching, learning and FCAT performance outcomes. Teachers reported that it was difficult to work in a climate in which negative behaviors had become the norm. For example, Gale reported that students would tell her “we run the school y’all don’t run this school we run the school.” Ann, describing the relationship between student behavior and academic performance, stated “I just feel that the behavior was a major concern...okay, we can have a lot of data but, if we don’t have a behavioral system that works the data is just run over...that’s what happened to us this year.” Participants urged that the procedures for ensuring a consistent and systematic application of consequences for negative behavior be developed.

**Research Question 4: How does the school accountability policy influence teacher and administrative practices?**

**Instructional response:** All the participants reported that the accountability policy influenced their practices in some way. In the area of collaboration, the participants reported that they held monthly staff meetings and discussed the results of progress monitoring and related student learning needs. The principal reported that she used data to highlight instructional strengths and weaknesses. All participants reported a common focus on student academic and behavioral progress. Carol, discussing the contents of the meeting, reported, “we talked about the data, but our discussions focused on the needs of our individual students.” She also acknowledged that the principal described ways to improve test scores using various strategies. All the participants reported that FCAT preparation was commonly discussed. Ann reported that they would “concentrate on data from the Kaplan, ORF, MAZE, FCAT...we had to drill down to figure out what areas the students were weak in.” As discussed earlier, all the participants also referenced behavioral problems as a primary topic of discussion during meetings.

All participants reported that accountability and FCAT performance outcomes influenced classroom instruction and the instructional materials they utilized. The principal reported, “I

looked at our school data and I realized that our kids were progressing in reading but math needed quite a bit of work so we started FCAT bell ringers in every classroom.” Explaining the influence of the policy on instruction, Ann stated, “At the start of the year that was always the focus of the faculty meetings . . . the principal implemented FCAT Wednesdays where everybody had to have an FCAT-based lesson on Wednesdays.” Carol reported that the principal “made sure we had FCAT preparation materials.” Susan commented that she used FCAT practice materials “because our school principal feels like we have to show some kind of school accountability that we are teaching them the strategies of test-taking and the skills they need to pass the test.” The participants also mentioned the remedial needs of their students. They reported that they attempted to differentiate instruction and provide opportunities for one-on-one assistance when possible. They all mentioned that they used lower grade level FCAT practice material to accommodate their student levels. Gale, who taught primarily intervention classes, reported, “I take everybody where they are and I try to move them forward as far as I can.” She also indicated that FCAT work was the primary focus rather than earning credits. Ann stated that FCAT preparation was the primary focus of teaching.

The influence of the accountability policy was also detected in school improvement goals; however, all the participants reported that overall, school improvement plan had a limited influence on their practices. The School Improvement Plan (SIP) goals and the basic components of the accountability policy were aligned. Evelyn reported that SIP goals were based on the previous year’s FCAT reading and mathematics scores that “caused the school to receive the “Declining” rating.” Ann reported, “The primary goal was to raise student scores and to bring up student achievement levels.” She reported that she assisted the principal in writing the SIP and teachers were minimally involved in the development of the plan. The SIP included one reading

goal and one mathematics goal. Additional areas such as writing, science, parental involvement, school safety, and graduation and promotion were more in alignment with the school mission. The reading goal stated, “All students in grades 6-10 will demonstrate an improvement in reading comprehension. Of the students who score at level 1 on the FCAT, at least 50% will show significant learning gains.” The mathematics goal stated, “All students in grades 6-10 will demonstrate an improvement in mathematics skills. Of the students who score at Level 1 on the 2008 FCAT at least 50% will show significant learning gains.” The participants reported that when the SIP was addressed, it was discussed primarily in the context of improving FCAT scores. All of the participants reported the primary goal of the school improvement plan was to raise FCAT scores for all students.

The strategies included in the SIP to raise reading achievement included having students participate in the progress monitoring program, scheduling struggling readers in intensive reading classes, utilizing the Great Leaps reading program, increasing the use of Florida Reading Initiative (FRI) reading instruction strategies, and increasing the use of technology in all classrooms. One professional development goal was to have bi-monthly reading coach led training on utilization of reading strategies across the curriculum. However, according to Gale, professional development in Reading was minimal. She reported that one of her goals was to have teachers complete Content Area Reading Professional Development (CARPD) training. She reported that due to scheduling conflicts and other unscheduled meetings, the training was not completed. Another SIP goal was to increase technology training for all teachers for the purpose of integrating computers and technology into the classroom. As discussed, there was limited evidence of available technology resources and utilization of technology in teachers’ classrooms.

## **Teacher Classroom Observations**

Classroom observations were conducted to provide insights into instructional methods, student and teacher roles and interactions, and to identify how instructional supports were used during classroom instruction. Prolonged engagement in teachers' classrooms resulted in a total of 1120 minutes of teacher observations. The observations revealed the influences of the accountability policy, academic programming, available resources, behavioral issues, and commonly used instructional strategies. The following section describes an overview of what was recorded during classroom observations.

Common instructional features were evident across teachers. Class sizes averaged less than 10 students. All of the teachers listed the Sunshine State Standards with their assigned work. Instruction was student-centered and organized to allow students opportunities for self-paced instruction, remedial support, and basic skills development. The beginning of each session was often delayed due to off-task behavior and students taking their time to settle into their seats and to cease socializing. Teachers used textbooks and worksheets to teach multi-grade and multi-course classes and assisted students who needed individual help. Teacher assignments were often generated from textbooks, FCAT practice materials, and worksheets. Most student work was paper and pencil. Whole group lessons often involved students reading aloud from a textbook or teacher-provided handout. Classrooms were loosely structured to allow students to work together in pairs or small groups. Assignments required seat work and the use of textbooks or worksheets. Teachers facilitated discussion and student interaction through the use of questioning and modeling. Teachers used high interest content to engage students and facilitate discussion. They attempted to motivate students to work through the use of praise and positive reinforcement. Teachers exhibited a high tolerance for behavioral problems such as profanity, talking during instruction, verbal exchanges between students, and lack of student engagement. Student who

refused to work were asked to put their head down on their desks. Teacher and student interactions demonstrated an emphasis on developing positive relationships. Teachers would greet students at the door and initiate conversations about their personal lives. They would inquire about family members, and ask how things were going at home. They would also encourage them to work through their problems. Students would request to speak to teachers about issues that were impacting them at home and school. Teachers would accommodate student requests to meet. They would also spend time with students who were in need of individualized academic interventions which would also result in rapport building.

### **Summary of Teaching Practices**

The following descriptions of observed teaching exemplify classroom instruction across the six teacher participants.

**Rob.** His students used science textbooks to complete notes, outlines, and answer questions. Rob's goal was "to equip his students with the skills that they would need to be successful back at their regular schools." Having to teach multi-grade and multi-course classes made it difficult to teach whole group lessons. The students were observed to be quietly reading and taking notes from the textbook. They were directed to find the main idea, write definitions for vocabulary words, and answer questions at the end of each section. When he taught a whole group lesson, he used standards common across courses. He also listed the standards next to each assignment. Rob also utilized word searches and current events activities that included science content. I also observed Rob beginning his classes with mathematics bell ringers, that is, instructed students to complete a posted FCAT question. The teacher would explain and model how to answer the question after students completed working on solving the problem.

During an observation on "FCAT Wednesday" in science, Rob directed the students to copy the question and the answers, underline key words in the questions, and circle the correct

answer. Students were given time to try to solve the problem at their desk, but some students complained about having to do FCAT practice. In response Rob told them, “Folks you don’t have to like it. I don’t think it’s a fair test but it’s something you have to do.” One student attempted to engage the teacher in a discussion about the difference in instruction at Riverside compared to his home school. The student stated, “We are not getting science in this school, we are getting level 1 science.” The student complained about the lack of comparable resources and teaching that was available at the regular school. Rob responded, “The school could not offer the same resources as a regular school can offer you so it is in your best interest to return to where your real opportunities are.” The student responded by asking, “What will happen if we don’t pass the FCAT science? I am going to complain to Charlie Crist.” Rob told him, “Keep your opinions to yourself. You get in trouble when you voice your opinion without being asked.” Two students in the back of the room had their heads down. Rob warned them that they would not earn credit for the assignment if they did not participate; their heads remained down. Other students worked quietly at their desks. Rob walked around the room to monitor student progress. When most students seemed finished working on a problem, he asked the students to identify the words that they underlined. They stated their answers and the words they underlined. The students completed six questions with Rob modeling test-taking strategies.

During the lesson, Rob corrected a student who was talking and agitating another student. He asked the student to stop talking and warned the student that if he did not stop disrupting the class he would be removed from the classroom. A verbal altercation ensued between the two students. Rob called for assistance on a hand-held radio. The dean arrived and escorted one of the students out of the classroom.

**Ann.** During three separate observations, Ann used high-interest reading passages that included comprehension questions to provide opportunities for discussion and FCAT practice. During one class session, students were asked to read a short story about sharks. Ann asked clarifying questions after every two or three paragraphs were read. Students were compliant but some were talking and laughing quietly. When the story was completed, Ann asked students to answer the questions on their own. However like Rob, she monitored student progress by walking around the room and also answered questions. She also encouraged two students to participate who were off task. After the majority of the students completed the questions, Ann reviewed each question individually. She also challenged one student to explain why they chose a particular answer. Students participated when called upon. Ann provided additional information or the correct answer when necessary. Ann promoted student engagement, by using “high interest stories like people getting shot, falling off a cliff, being eaten by crocodiles, because they responded more positively; however when you take it from the high interest to the real FCAT the effort level really goes down.”

**Carol.** Carol utilized mathematics FCAT practice tests, worksheets, and textbooks. Students were given their own FCAT test booklets. Eight students from grades 9-12 were in attendance during one class period. The students were asked to answer questions from a worksheet. They complained that the questions were too difficult. Carol explained that she went over the material the day before and that most of them were able to solve the problems. The students continued to complain about the difficulty level of the questions. One of the students asked if they could work together. Carol agreed to allow them to work in pairs. There were at least two students who put their heads down. Carol circulated the room and talked with the students who were off task. She sat down next to the two students. One student asked her, “Can

you show me how to do this?” She showed the student step by step how to solve the problem. She asked the student, “Can you show me how you are doing this problem here?” The other students were engaged in light conversation while they worked. One student was heard using profanity towards another student. Carol warned the student that any additional comment would result in disciplinary action. After several minutes, Carol asked for a student volunteer to go to the board to work out the problem. A student volunteered and went to the board and solved the problem. Carol praised the student’s group for their answer and effort. During the fifty-minute period, the students completed three questions with students going to the board to solve the problems.

Additional observations revealed that Carol provided students assistance when needed. Carol either used FCAT worksheets or those that she developed. She also utilized mathematics textbooks with her multi-grade and multi-course classes. Students were assigned different pages based on their scheduled courses. Carol’s students were accustomed to ask for help when they needed assistance. During one period, I also observed students making African masks as part of a Black History Month activity. Carol’s classroom was also a hub of social activity for teachers and students.

**Susan.** All of her students received exceptional student services and were on a special diploma track. Her primary instructional resources were a reading and a spelling book, and a phonics program. She also reported using “FCAT lessons on a limited basis.” Susan explained that the spelling workbook was used to “reinforce spelling, grammar, and reading comprehension.” Susan claimed that the modified curriculum met the requirements of courses. The class consisted of seven males who worked independently at a small round table. Susan sat at the table with the boys and asked questions related to the reading passage. The boys answered

the questions independently. Students who needed assistance asked for help and they also helped each other. Susan exhibited patience working with students needing remediation. All of the students completed the assignment. At the end of the class three students volunteered to participate in a timed reading. Susan informed them of their previous timed reading scores. The students appeared to be genuinely interested in what Susan described as “beating their old times.” The described teaching format was observed during three other observations. In addition, Susan utilized Great Leaps, a phonics-based intervention program. The students seemed to enjoy the one-on-one attention received during Great Leaps time. They appeared interested in going over their progress sheets that showed their fluency growth. Students who experienced problems working with the whole group were directed to work at a computer station.

Susan started another class by informing the students, “we are going to do FCAT practice today.” The students took turns reading the paragraphs from a story in an FCAT practice book. Although they struggled through the reading selections, she encouraged students to look back in the paragraph for clues to the questions. She reminded them that “the FCAT always gives you two answers that could be correct.” She told them, “Let’s turn back a page and look to see if we can find more information. Remember, we need to look at all of our choices.” She modeled this process throughout the lesson.

She asked the students, “What does the word propaganda mean?” None of the students answered. She told students to turn to page 20 for the definition. Student engagement was low. During the lesson one student stood up and walked to the drinking fountain. She asked him to sit down and to raise his hand before leaving his desk. She continued modeling the process of finding context clues in the body of the text and encouraged students to do the same as they answered questions. The students completed all the assigned questions with direct support. They

finished the lesson with a brief discussion on propaganda in the media. After the lesson she reported that the students struggle with FCAT lessons because of their low reading levels.

**Gale.** She was the part-time reading coach, who also taught intervention reading classes. Gale used reading passages from a textbook or internet to teach comprehension strategies. I also observed her teaching writing. Gale's white board was configured with sections for both high school and middle school students. Both sections included a daily writing activity, vocabulary words, and a reading assignment. She also posted assignments five days before their due dates, she explained because "students are absent or suspended so often this allows them to make up the work they miss."

She provided professional development trainings for the staff in reading. She reported that one of her goals was to train the staff "so they could all complete CARPD (content area professional development) training." She also oversaw the process for collecting and disseminating progress monitoring data. A review of student fluency data revealed that a high percentage of the students were disfluent or at high risk, which meant they needed to be placed in intensive reading classes. I observed her teaching a mixed middle and high school reading class while a resource officer sat in the classroom. The day before, I observed a physical altercation in the classroom that resulted in two students being escorted off campus by law enforcement. The students were slow to get settled. Students moved around and asked for supplies. The high school students sat on one side of the room at a small round table. The middle school students sat in desks on the other side of the room. Gale informed the students that they were going to take the MAZE and that, "some of you still need to complete your Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) assessment." She explained to the students that if they scored at level 2 on the reading FCAT and they scored well on the fluency test that they would not need intensive reading." Before starting

the test she reminded the students again that the test could “be the difference in you being placed into an intensive reading class or not.” The tests were passed out and Gale made reference to the examples on the front of the assessment. The students worked silently and later Gale informed them that their time was up. She explained, “We all have different grade levels in here so turn to the stop sign in your test booklet.” She continued, “If you are in eighth grade you should see a diamond.” Gale told students that she would review their results with them individually at a later date.

After the students completed the activity, they were assigned to groups to work on vocabulary words for the class “word wall.” Gale told the students to “take a word from the board or reading book and create a word placard for the word wall.” While they were working, Gale called students to her desk to complete the ORF assessment. A small group of students working on the “word wall” activity were off task talking about an off campus altercation. Other students worked in pairs or individually, remained on task, and completed the activity before the end of the period.

**Victor.** He taught social studies, law studies, and a building construction class. I observed him while teaching multi-grade social studies and criminal justice classes. On Victor’s board, he listed assignments by courses by date, Sunshine State Standards, assignments by page numbers, exam dates, and expected completion dates. According to Victor, this structure provided a systematic way for students to organize the completion and submission of their assignments. Students were also tested at the completion of each chapter. Victor informed me that he “worked at a slower pace than the regular school but he tried to cover the standards the best he could.” His worksheets also listed the Sunshine State Standards and included reading passages with questions that resembled the extended response questions used on the FCAT. He utilized

textbook resources such as worksheets and graphic organizers. The courses were organized so students could complete assignments at their own pace. I observed students reading aloud from the textbook, and completing fill-in-the-blank worksheets as they read and as Victor lectured.

During law studies classes, students discussed issues related to the court system. Victor used examples from his experiences as a law enforcement officer. The students asked questions regarding cases they were familiar with. Victor also talked with students about life choices and how their decisions could impact them inside and outside of school. Victor also taught a building construction class as an elective. The students appeared to enjoy working with the various tools and equipment provided. Victor reported that he would spend four weeks discussing safety regulations with the students before he allowed students to operate equipment. He also explained that it was difficult to accommodate the influx of students throughout the year due to safety concerns associated with using power equipment. He desired to teach more than one section of building construction but was unable to due to staffing needs in the area of social studies.

**Observations Summary:** Classroom instruction was influenced by academic scheduling, FCAT preparation, current practices, and student skill levels. Teachers attempted to meet the demands of multi-course and multi-grade classes by using an assignment-based schedule that allowed students to complete work at their own pace. Multiple days of assignments were posted to account for student absences and the transient nature of the school. Another common approach involved whole group instruction with an emphasis on FCAT through the use of bell ringers, workbooks, reading aloud, lecture, and practice exams. Quarterly progress monitoring using benchmark tests and diagnostics was provided. Progress monitoring was a commonplace event that required logistical organization among staff. Students and teachers seemed accustomed to standardized benchmark testing. The teachers appeared to have lesson plans that utilized the

textbook, selected readings, worksheets, and other forms of seatwork. Students were social when given an opportunity to interact. Academic and behavioral interventions occurred within the scope of the whole group. Teachers provided students individualized support when students were engaged in a specific lesson or activity. The ESE teacher provided focused reading instruction with an emphasis on fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development. There was limited evidence across the school of an intervention-based model that tailored instruction to the individual needs of students. As a result, teacher and student interactions involved teachers providing remediation within the context of a lesson or student asking for assistance. Targeted interventions that focused on a prescribed lesson, activity, or individual skill for a student or group of students was less evident.

## CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to understand how the Florida School Improvement Rating influences the beliefs and practices of alternative school teachers and administrators. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of the findings, discuss implications for policy, and suggest recommendations for further study.

**Summary of findings:** Results of the focus groups, teacher and administrator interviews, and classroom observations showed that teacher and administrator responses to the accountability policy were influenced by the participants' awareness of the policy, available resources, beliefs about students, the organizational paradigm, and perceived administrative supports. The participants' knowledge of the policy was limited to basic understanding that FCAT reading and mathematics scores were used to calculate the rating. Teachers' beliefs about legislative intent, policy design, negative beliefs about the FCAT, and concerns about student motivation and abilities influenced their efficacy in implementing the policy. A lack of available resources such as textbooks, computers, multi-media projectors, and science labs resulted in teachers and administrators feeling ill-equipped to provide a quality standards-based curriculum. Teacher beliefs about the organizational mission of the school influenced their perceptions of the accountability policy. Perceptions about instructional leadership were influenced by the principal's perceived experience level and lack of district support. Classroom observations revealed that FCAT performance outcomes, the need to remediate students, multi-grade and multi-course classes, and off-task behavior impacted time on task and drove instruction. Observations revealed limited use of explicit lessons and advanced use of differentiated instruction.

This study has shown that the accountability policy had limited influence over curriculum, instruction, and school improvement planning activities. More study is needed to determine the degree to which the accountability policy influences instructional practices beyond the scope of FCAT preparation, utilization of FCAT materials, and progress monitoring. The factors that influenced the participants' interpretations and responses to the policy will be discussed.

### **Discussion and Implications for Policy**

In a climate of educational reform, alternative schools are under scrutiny to demonstrate quality academic programming using state performance measures and standardized assessments. In the National Governors Association brief entitled *Setting High Standards in Alternative Education* discussed the need for additional oversight and accountability in alternative schools. The report also highlighted concerns related to how accountability measures would impact academic programming and student outcomes. In the context of transitioning to higher standards, it was asserted that alternative education programs would "require additional up-front and ongoing resources to improve instruction and curricular materials, and to provide instructors with necessary training" (p. 7). The Riverside case revealed several issues related to the development and implementation of an alternative school accountability policy and its impact on teachers' and administrators' practices. The study sheds light on the issues confronting alternative teachers and administrators within the context of accountability legislation. The results have implications for policy regarding how alternative school teachers and administrators interpret and respond to alternative school accountability policy.

In this study, accountability legislation was enacted without direct support or guidance to districts or schools and failed to address inadequate curriculum and instructional resources, organizational structures that historically emphasized behavioral management and transitional placements, high proportions of students with and without disabilities in need of intensive

supports, and inadequate progress monitoring. There was a limited understanding of existing levels of district support, capacity to provide local professional development, current school improvement and evaluation processes, and administrative and intervention-based staffing levels. First year results revealed that more than 50% of the schools in the state received the “Declining” rating. In the first year of the ratings implementation, Riverside also received a “Declining” rating which, according to the state technical assistance paper, is equivalent to an “F” grade. In 2008-09, the second year of policy implementation, statewide results revealed that 61% of the schools rated received a “Declining” rating; and Riverside, for the second consecutive year, received a “Declining” designation. Based on results from the first two years of implementation and the finding in this study, it is evident that well-intentioned accountability policies can have poorly manifested outcomes.

According to the school administrator, subsequent to receiving the 2007-08 declining designation, the school did not receive guidance from the state or the district regarding exemplars or alternative school model programs. When a traditional school receives an “F” based on the school grading system, direct intervention and support is provided by the state and district. In the case of Riverside, the DOE did not have any directed involvement with the school. As a result Evelyn, a first year principal, attempted to make sense of the accountability policy based on interpretations of its components as outlined in the technical assistance paper. The district did not provide additional support or resources to the school based on the rating and, as discussed, existing instructional and technology resources were grossly inadequate. It is important to point out that in the context of policy implementation, the lack of support and guidance led to negative teacher beliefs about the efficacy of the rating to evaluate the school. It also perpetuated teacher-held beliefs that the state rating system was unfair and punitive and that

the state and district lacked commitment to meet the perceived unreasonable expectations of an ill-conceived accountability policy. This may prove an important finding for future policy development, implementation planning, and up-front support when the policy is enacted.

Classroom observations revealed that teaching practices and instructional programming impacted student learning and responses to the rating. The principal, teachers, and district were culpable in the students' lack of success. There was a disconnection between the students' needs and the teachers' beliefs, the curriculum and the accountability mandate. The teachers struggled to provide direct instruction and intensive interventions. Teacher comments and classroom observations revealed that additional instructional supports and interventions were needed to meet the myriad of students' academic and behavioral needs. Student performance data and classroom observations revealed that the teachers and principal needed to develop a complex, intervention-based academic program responsive to students' foundational deficiencies in reading and mathematics, in addition to providing positive behavioral supports to motivate students. Even when individualized instruction was delivered, it appeared that the students receiving assistance required additional support beyond the scope of what was being provided during a regular class period.

If teachers are expected to teach multi-course or multi-grade classes, they need professional development in differentiated instruction, curriculum pacing, guided and independent practice, direct instruction, and the use of centers and cooperative learning. The current remediation and assignment-based model does not provide the necessary time and attention to address specific learning needs. From a policy perspective, this should be an essential component of future discussions on alternative accountability systems and assessment.

As the State of Florida moves towards end-of-course exams in Algebra I, Geometry, Biology, and Chemistry, it will become even more imperative that alternative schools develop academic programming to provide intensive individualized academic interventions to equip students with the reading and mathematics skills needed to meet new graduation requirements. In addition to meeting graduation and testing requirements, alternative schools should utilize research-based strategies to improve reading and mathematics instruction. For example, when instruction was more prescriptive and adequate resources were utilized students appeared to respond in a more positive manner. Susan, an ESE teacher, experienced success working with students with disabilities in the area of reading fluency and comprehension. Her intervention-based approach to skill-building, language acquisition, and reading comprehension led to more time-on-task and higher levels of student engagement. She recorded outcomes using data from a research based reading program and she kept progress notes on all of her students.

Future directions could involve creating an onsite diagnostic center to evaluate students upon entry into an alternative education program. Based on the students' academic and behavioral needs, prescriptive instructional plans could be developed around focused goals in areas of critical need. For students with disabilities, this process would involve reviewing current goals in a student's Individualized Education Plan and identifying specific instructional strategies and interventions that could be implemented in smaller intervention settings. With more than 50% of the students receiving special education services, additional ESE personnel are needed. The development and implementation of an effective RTI model would involve the formation of intervention groups, individualized lesson plans, and ongoing monitoring of how students are responding to interventions based on multiple forms of data.

From a policy perspective the lack of instructional materials available in alternative schools is an issue of equity, opportunity, and access to a quality education. The majority of the teachers lacked the necessary instructional materials and supports to provide student-centered instruction tailored to meet the specific learning needs of all students. The quality of resources was incongruent with resources available in traditional school settings. Classroom observation of available resources also revealed a scarcity of textbooks, computers, multi-media equipment, and engaging reading materials. Inadequate and outdated resources and an instructional delivery model designed for credit acquisition and retrieval resulted in low levels of student engagement and negative attitudes towards academic work. With similar findings reported in the Kentucky alternative school evaluations, it is imperative policy makers take account of the disparities in academic resources, educational opportunities, and quality of instructional interventions in alternative schools in the context of providing all students access to a quality education.

As reported, Riverside was designed for students who were placed for primarily behavioral reasons. Based on classroom observations and teacher comments, the organizational mission had more of an impact on instructional practices than the accountability policy. If alternative schools are to improve and evolve to meet the needs of all students, then organizational missions, academic programming and instructional delivery models need to change to meet the diverse academic and behavioral needs of all students. It is important to provide alternative schools a model or exemplar to build programs from. Academic scheduling appeared to have a negative impact on lesson planning and classroom instruction. Academic programming focused on academic controls, credit acquisition, and instruction focused on remedial education provided limited opportunities to address students' skill deficits and enrichment. As a result, students exhibited passive engagement and behavioral problems. One implication for policy is to have

state, district, and local actors develop a comprehensive plan to address current organizational paradigms considering computer-based credit retrieval options, flexible scheduling, and personnel needs to support the transition to increased rigor and instructional innovations in alternative schools.

The progress monitoring system did not meet the needs of the students in the alternative setting. Progress monitoring focused on data instead of collaboration on differentiated instruction and student-centered teaching and learning. Progress monitoring was based on a district-wide model that utilized testing materials and district-wide testing windows. Progress monitoring and FCAT data were perceived to have limited value due to student motivation, low student skill levels, and a lack of available quality data. Discussions about students were primarily focused on behavioral concerns and looking at data associated with progress monitoring and the FCAT. Little time was used to discuss instructional differentiation and the development of quality lessons and interventions that could be implemented to support struggling students. Conversations need to shift from looking at FCAT results, progress monitoring data, and student behavior problems to focused discussions about teaching, learning, and planning intensive academic and behavioral supports. Teachers need ongoing training in RTI and how to work with high concentrations of students needing Tier II and III services. All teachers in alternative schools need ongoing training in the area of reading and differentiated instruction if they are to tailor the curriculum to the needs of individual students.

### **Emerging Model of Alternative School Response**

As discussed, there is a gap between the present state of alternative education and state/federal expectations for a higher quality education and accountability. The findings in this study indicate that alternative school teachers' responses to the accountability policy were influenced by several interacting factors. Schein (2002) reported that force-field analysis is an

effective diagnostic technique for evaluating change forces within an organizational system.

Driving forces and restraining forces can counteract each other to produce norm-maintaining behavior or a state of quasi-stationary equilibrium within the context of school accountability.

A model of alternative school accountability response emerged that showed interacting factors impacted teachers' and administrators' interpretations and responses to accountability.

Figure 5-1 shows a model for interpreting the school improvement rating's impact on alternative school teachers and administrators.

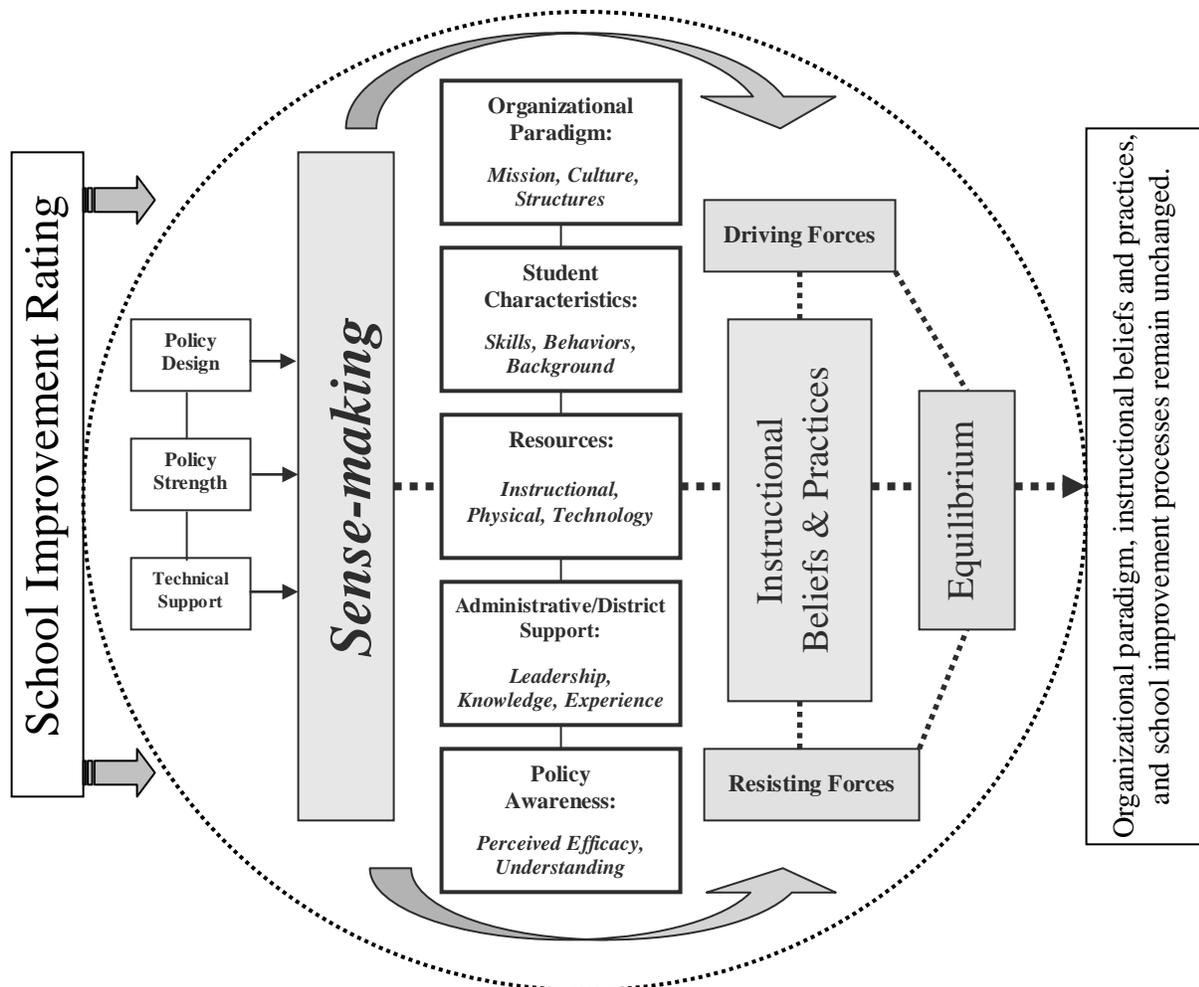


Figure 5-1. Wnek's emerging model of alternative school response to accountability

The passage and implementation of the school improvement rating resulted in local actors interpreting the strength and clarity of the policy without direct technical support. Sense-making ensued with actors interpreting the policy through local lenses (Spillane et al., 2002). Interpretations that followed were grounded in a perspective of a traditional or closed organizational paradigm. A traditional paradigm resists innovation and change and seeks balance, regularity, and stability (Behar-Horenstein & Amatea, 2007). The school mission, instructional and physical resources, and instructional beliefs and practices contributed to norm-maintaining behaviors. The accountability policy did not motivate actors to change their practices and existing academic programming. One implication of this finding is that educational leaders need to facilitate coherence-making and a deeper understanding of change processes to move beyond the basic elements of the accountability policy (Fullan, 2005). Innovations can occur that could change the current paradigm from a control-oriented model to student-centered model that provides focused academic and behavioral interventions. School-based interventions could influence state policy makers and create the conditions for policy reform at the state level. Additional funding may be necessary to provide the necessary staffing and resources to make changes sustainable.

Underlying assumptions, policy signals, the organizational culture, and district and state support also influenced the actors' interpretation and response. (Gross & Supovitz, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002). The findings revealed that teachers viewed their situation and experiences as unique when compared to traditional educators. As a result of their perceived status, they concluded that an accountability system was incapable of effectively rating their school's performance. To move the school staff beyond a state of equilibrium, instructional leaders need to provide a more comprehensive view of school evaluation and academic processes that can

unfreeze the organizational paradigm. The creation and acceptance of a vision or desired future state depends on the organization's capacity for team learning, changing mental models, helping faculty and staff acquire personal mastery, and their ability to engage in systems thinking (Senge, 1990). Under the right conditions, the emerging model of alternative school response to accountability could evolve so that positive forces of change motivate actors to change existing practices thus resulting in a transformation of alternative education. The following section will address some additional ways to transform alternative school response to accountability.

Administrators need to be adept at examining their own practices while identifying the professional needs of the school staff. The process of systemically studying one's practice by conducting an inquiry related to a school improvement initiative has proven to be an effective way for administrators and teachers to address their own professional growth (Dana, 2009). Engaging in the inquiry of their instructional practices might ultimately impact teachers' professional growth and lead to overall school improvement. School-wide reflection and participation in school improvement planning and ongoing progress monitoring would facilitate a continuous review of the congruence between teaching practices, performance goals, and student outcomes. This process could also lead teachers and administrators to create professional growth plans that are student centered and focused on teaching, learning, and students' academic and behavioral development (Nolan & Hoover, 2008).

Alternative school leaders should consider additional evaluation methods to guide school improvement planning. Undertaking an evaluation of current school improvement initiatives and systems might assist them in identifying problems, developing possible solutions, implementing changes, and creating assessment systems that make sense to local actors and that are aligned with state expectations (Cuban, 2003). For example, Stufflebeam's (2007) Context Input Process

and Product (CIPP) model which involve working with an outside expert to evaluate school systems could provide valuable insights into high performing areas and those that need improvement. Administrators could also utilize Lezotte's (1999) correlates of effective schools to determine how well the school is performing in some pre-defined areas. Central office personnel need to provide ongoing site-based progress monitoring and support, and allocate staff and resources to assist administrators and teachers in the development of comprehensive interventions systems designed to meet the diverse needs of alternative school students.

All of the participants reported a lack of community and parent involvement. Creating an active School Advisory Council (SAC) might foster greater parent and community involvement and reinforce accountability. The findings from this study shed light on the perceived difficulties of building healthy family-school connections. The principal plays an essential role in creating a welcoming environment where families feel accepted and want to become involved (Behar-Horenstein & Vandiver, 2007). Alternative schools need to continue to reach out to parents and guardians of at-risk youth to promote more involvement and deeper bonds between families, schools, and the community. The development of a mentoring program involving community members and volunteers who model appropriate behavior and positive relationships would improve bonds between students and adults and strengthen bonds between the community and the school.

Behavioral programming is prevalent in alternative schools because of their organizational design and mission. Ineffective instructional planning and poor classroom management can result in off task behavior and loss of instructional time while improved classroom management with an emphasis on classroom instruction can increase the time on task for students and teachers (Behar-Horenstein, Isaac, Seabert, & Davis, 2006). The findings indicated that student off-task

behaviors and physical assaults were problematic for teachers and students. One implication of this finding is that schools may need additional personnel to provide counseling, positive behavior support and interventions, mentoring, and coaching. Professional development in classroom behavior management may be necessary to provide teachers and administrators with focused strategies to work with at-risk youth. Dealing with students' behavior proactively is likely to enhance the quality of instruction, student engagement and purposeful learning. Implementation of a positive behavior support program that emphasizes and rewards positive student behavior should be considered.

As this study showed, the use of multi-grade and multi-course classrooms impacted the quality of lesson planning and delivery of instruction. A lack of resources and an overdependence on both textbooks and testing practice materials also contributed to teachers' negativity. Teachers' unhappiness with district and state commitment and support played a role in their dissatisfaction. Partnerships with research institutions and regional consortiums could provide instructional supports and opportunities in the area of professional learning communities, including expanding their repertoire in explicit instruction, lesson planning, lesson study, teacher inquiry, and progress monitoring. A framework for explicit instruction that emphasizes the gradual release of responsibility back to the learner could create the conditions for students to increase their skills and abilities (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

In the context of accountability legislation, it is critical that state, district, and local leaders collaborate to accurately identify quality instructional, curricular and program improvements. Effective educational leaders understand tri-level reform processes and work to provide coherence regarding state, district, and school level initiatives (Fullan, 2005). As accountability becomes more embedded, school leaders and teachers will be pressed to make changes to current

systems and instructional programs. Thus, state policy makers will need to evaluate the organizational paradigms of alternative education programs and design a rating system that includes a broader range of rating criteria. There is also a need to address design components that impede acceptance of the policy. For example, it is recommended that the membership rule that stipulates that students enrolled in either the October or February survey count towards the alternative school rating be changed to include students who were enrolled in the alternative school for both surveys. This would provide alternative school personnel the equivalent of a minimum of one full semester of enrollment to be counted towards the school rating.

As discussed, the State of Kentucky used several indicators to evaluate program performance. Mottaz (2002) identified 72 quality indicators that could be used to identify the quality of an alternative education program. The indicators were grouped in the categories of student support, governance, program structure, program organization, program support, and curriculum and instruction. Mottaz reported “the important thing is not the way each significant quality indicator is achieved, but that it is achieved, according to how people at the site interpret their world.” In 2009, The FLDOE released the *Strategies and Support for Differentiated Accountability* matrix for alternative schools. The document included specific requirements in the areas of school improvement planning, leadership, educator quality, professional development, curriculum alignment, assessment, monitoring, and outreach and specified action steps for each category. The results of this study indicate that, in addition to the differentiated accountability matrix, on-site supports are needed to create academic and behavioral systems that meet the multiple demands of these settings. The staff emphasized the need for additional social services, support personnel such as guidance counselors, exceptional education teachers and para-professionals and office support to assist in the development of academic schedules that

limit multi-grade and multi-course placements. The findings indicated that having inadequate resources perpetuates a cycle of academic disengagement and unsuccessful outcomes with at-risk students enrolled in alternative settings. State, district, and local collaboration is needed to improve the quality of services, resources, and professional development available in alternative settings. The development and implementation of a quality alternative school accountability system will require ongoing cooperation between all stakeholders.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Recommendations for future study include the studying of different organizational paradigms to ascertain the relationship between educational and behavioral programming and student achievement and behavioral outcomes. Other studies could focus on understanding how alternative schools adhere to state curriculum frameworks, availability of instructional resources, and the use of technology to deliver instruction. As accountability becomes more prevalent, investigating student perceptions might reveal insights related to instructional experiences, academic rigor, and school climate before and after the accountability mandate. A research institution and a local alternative school program could collaboratively study the change process in the context of professional development and school improvement planning designed to address accountability mandates and an increase in the quality of academic programming. An in-depth study of legislative intent and the development of the alternative school accountability policy are also recommended. Of particular interest is exploring the regional teams that work with schools in the bottom five percent to conduct comprehensive program reviews. Another suggested study is describing how teachers and administrators respond to new state-required differentiated accountability measures. In the context of differentiated accountability and the reauthorization of the elementary and secondary education act, future studies could focus on how federal accountability affects alternative school settings throughout several states.

## Summary

How school leaders and teachers respond to high stakes accountability is still yet to be determined. However, this study showed that in this first year of implementing the accountability mandate, at one alternative school teacher and administrator interpretations and responses were dependent on factors related to the strength and clarity of the policy, existing beliefs and practices, organizational contexts, access to resources, administrative leadership, and external support (Behar-Horenstein et al., 2004; Gross et al., 2004; Spillane et al., 2003). Instructional innovations related to the quality of programming, instructional delivery, and the use of technology could serve to enhance to experience of teachers and students in alternative settings. Current accountability policies and school improvement efforts should be evaluated to determine how effective they are in measuring school effectiveness. The development of processes for accurate problem identification will enable school and district personnel to uncover specific areas for school improvement and professional development. In addition to using the accountability policy, alternative schools will need to create local evaluation systems to address higher state and federal expectations. Based on the current scope and design of alternative schools, evaluation models that incorporate multidimensional analyses should be considered (Behar-Horenstein et al., 2004). If they are to offers student' additional opportunities for academic and behavioral growth, teaching and learning should evolve to include intensive academic interventions, positive behavior support, and individual counseling. Although the findings in this study showed that an alternative school accountability policy had limited impact on local actors, the issues that were uncovered hold the potential to transform the future of alternative education.

APPENDIX A  
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Age:         21-30     31-40     41-50
2. Gender     Male     Female
3. Race        White     Black     Hispanic     Asian
4. Degree      Bachelors     Masters     Specialist     Ph.D./Ed.D.
5. Number of years teaching experience:  
       0-5     6-10     11-20     >20
6. Area of Certification: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Subject teaching in alternative school:  
       Math     Science     Reading     English     Social Studies     Elective
8. Number of years teaching at current school:  
       <5     6-10     11-20     >20
9. Total years teaching of teaching experience:  
       < 5     6-10     11-20     >20

APPENDIX B  
TEACHER FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOLS

**1. Focus Group Protocol #1 Questions**

In your opinion:

1. How does the school improvement rating affect the school mission? Discuss facilitators and barriers.
2. How do student characteristics influence decisions about the school mission, instructional programming, and practices?
3. How does your school use achievement data to evaluate student performance and school effectiveness? What data is used?
4. How does your 2008 school improvement rating data help inform you about decisions related to instructional practices?
5. Do you have the academic and physical resources needed to meet the needs of your students?
6. What message do you hear when you consider the alternative school improvement rating system? Considering the implementation of the alternative rating system, what are the implications for policy?
7. What are your beliefs about alternative school evaluation considering the setting and context in which your school operates?
8. What factors at your school inhibit school improvement as defined by the school improvement rating system?

**Focus Group Protocol #2 Questions**

In your opinion:

1. Describe what occurs during staff meetings.

2. How are progress monitoring data discussed?
3. What input did you have into the writing of the School Improvement Plan? Do you discuss the plan during the year?
4. How are parents included in the educational process?
5. How do you respond to students who are disengaged in the learning process?
6. Is the behavior management system clearly defined so that students know what the expectations are?
7. What would you consider to be a measure or indicator of the school's effectiveness or success?

APPENDIX C  
TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

**Teacher Interview Protocol #1 Questions**

In your opinion:

1. How does the school improvement rating affect instructional practices?
2. How does the school improvement rating affect school evaluation and improvement processes?
3. How does the school improvement rating affect academic programming?
4. How does the school improvement rating affect district instructional support?
5. How does the school improvement rating affect the school mission?
6. How do teachers evaluate the effectiveness of their practices?
7. How should alternative schools be evaluated?

**Teacher Interview Protocol #2 Questions**

1. How do you organize your instruction?
2. What goals do you have for your instruction?
3. What influence does the accountability policy have on your instructional practices?
4. How do student characteristics influence your classroom instruction?
5. What types of supports do you use in the classroom to engage students?
6. What types of activities do you use?
7. Describe the types of collaboration you are involved in at the school that relate to teaching and learning?
8. How does the school administrator help you meet the goals of school accountability?
9. How does the district support you in meeting the goals of the accountability system?
10. Describe the value of the accountability system?

APPENDIX D  
ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

**Administrator Interview Protocol #1 Questions**

In your opinion:

1. How does the school improvement rating affect instructional leadership?
2. How does the school improvement rating affect school evaluation and improvement processes?
3. How does the school improvement rating affect academic programming?
4. How does the school improvement rating affect district instructional support?
5. How does the school improvement rating affect the school mission?
6. How do teachers evaluate the effectiveness of their practices?
7. How should alternative schools be evaluated?

**Administrator Interview Protocol #2 Questions**

In your opinion:

1. As an administrator, what is your role in helping your teachers make sense of the accountability policy?
2. Explain how the accountability policy influences your implementation of school improvement requirements.
3. How does the organizational structure and mission of the school influence how you respond to accountability policy?
4. How does the district support you in the context of school accountability?
5. What role do resources play in meeting the goals of the accountability policy?
6. How does the accountability system help you rate your effectiveness as an administrator? Teachers?

7. How do you support teachers in the context of the accountability policy?

APPENDIX E  
CLASSROOM OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

1. Sequentially describe the tasks that students are asked to do.
2. Describe student and teacher roles and their respective involvement in the lesson.
3. Describe the students' and teacher's response to students' questions and answers.
4. Identify and describe how instructional supports are used throughout the lesson.

APPENDIX F  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Patrick J. Wnek

**Informed Consent**

**Protocol Title:**

The Influence of the Alternative School Improvement Rating System on Teachers' and Administrators' Instructional Beliefs and Practices?

**Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.**

**Purpose of the research study:**

The purpose of this study is to explore alternative school teachers' and administrators' beliefs about the Florida Alternative School Improvement Rating and its influence on their practices.

**What you will be asked to do in the study:**

Participate as a teacher during classroom observations. Each classroom observation will consist of a 35-45 minute length of time. Teachers will be observed a minimum of five times. Field notes will be taken during the classroom observation using an observation tool. Attend faculty meetings which will be observed.

Participate in two interviews to explore beliefs about the school improvement rating system and its influence on teacher and administrator practices. Each individual meeting will consist of a 60-90 minute session which will be audio taped. Several open-ended questions will be explored in each session.

Participate in a focus group made up 4-6 participants. The focus group will meet two times. Each meeting will be 60-90 minutes in length and will be audio taped for transcription purposes. Several open-ended questions will be explored in each session. After each session you will be provided with a summary of the topics discuss in the previous session. You will be asked to review and provide any feedback relative to the accuracy of researcher's representation of the information shared in the focus group interviews.

**Time required:**

60-90 minutes: Interviews and Focus Groups

45-60 minutes: Classroom Observations: Five times

Approved by  
University of Florida  
Institutional Review Board 02  
Protocol # 2009-U-0081  
For Use Through 02/02/2010

**Risks and Benefits:**

There are no risks or immediate benefits to the participants.

**Compensation:**

You will not receive compensation for participating in this research.

**Confidentiality:**

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Identification of you will only be done through first and last initials.

**Voluntary participation:**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

**Right to withdraw from the study:**

You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence.

**Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:**

Patrick Wnek, Graduate Student, Department of Educational Administration and Policy,  
University of Florida, (352)317-4815, [f2ric@ufl.edu](mailto:f2ric@ufl.edu)

Dr. Linda Behar-Horenstein, Distinguished Teaching Scholar and Professor, Doctoral Committee  
Chair, Department of Educational Administration and Policy, University of Florida, (352)392-  
0731 ext. 299

**Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:**

IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 392-0433.

**Agreement:**

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved by  
University of Florida  
Institutional Review Board 02  
Protocol # 2009-U-0081  
For Use Through 02/02/2010

APPENDIX G  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

**UF** Institutional Review Board  
UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

PO Box 112250  
Gainesville, FL 32611-2250  
352-392-0433 (Phone)  
352-392-9234 (Fax)  
irb2@ufl.edu

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DATE: February 3, 2009

TO: Patrick J. Wnek

FROM: Ira S. Fischler, PhD; Chair *ISF*  
University of Florida  
Institutional Review Board 02

SUBJECT: Approval of Protocol #2009-U-0081

TITLE: The Influence of the Alternative School Improvement Rating Systems on Teachers' and Administrator Beliefs and Practices

SPONSOR: None

I am pleased to advise you that the University of Florida Institutional Review Board has recommended approval of this protocol. Based on its review, the UFIRB determined that this research presents no more than minimal risk to participants. Your protocol was approved as an expedited study under category 7: *Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.*

Given this status, it is essential that you obtain signed documentation of informed consent from each participant. Enclosed is the dated, IRB-approved informed consent to be used when recruiting participants for the research. If you wish to make any changes to this protocol, *including the need to increase the number of participants authorized*, you must disclose your plans before you implement them so that the Board can assess their impact on your protocol. In addition, you must report to the Board any unexpected complications that affect your participants.

It is essential that each of your participants sign a copy of your approved informed consent that bears the IRB approval stamp and expiration date.

If you have not completed this protocol by **February 2, 2010**, please telephone our office (392-0433), and we will discuss the renewal process with you. It is important that you keep your Department Chair informed about the status of this research protocol.

ISF:dl

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Patrick J. Wnek grew up in Carson, California. He received a bachelor's degree in psychology from California State University Dominguez Hills in 1994, a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from Biola University in 1997, and a specialist's degree in educational leadership from the University of Florida in 2007. Patrick has lived in Florida with his wife Wendy and their children, James and Megan, since 2000.

Patrick began his educational career as a teacher in Orange County's (CA) alternative, community, and correctional education program. He was involved in the implementation of a pilot program that was recognized by the state of California as an exemplar of instructional innovation. Patrick has also taught social studies in traditional middle and high school settings. In 2005, he served as assistant principal of a public high school that was ranked 4<sup>th</sup> nationally by Newsweek, based on their Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs. Patrick also served for five years as the principal of an alternative school located in north central Florida. The school received recognition from the Department of Education for its school improvement rating in 2008. He is currently the Director of Curriculum in a district serving 13 schools. His research interests include curriculum and instruction, alternative education, organizational change, teacher and principal action research, and educational administration and policy implementation.