

EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES IN A
PERSISTENTLY LOW PERFORMING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

By

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To my family, my husband Michael and my three children, Andrew, Caroline and Peter
for their love, encouragement, and support.

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LIST OF KEY TERMS

Behaviorist	Staff member who supports students' social-emotional learning and behavioral interventions needed for students. The role includes the development of interventions and functional behavioral assessments for the purpose of aiding students in their ability to access the curriculum. The Behaviorist participates in social-emotional learning team meetings.
Level 4 School	A Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education designation for the state's most struggling schools. A Level 4 school is low performing on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) over a four year period in English language arts (ELA), mathematics, and science, and has not showed signs of substantial improvement over that time (Massachusetts Executive Office of Education, n.d.). This designation is based on an analysis of four-year trends in absolute achievement, student growth, and academic improvement where students have failed to demonstrate substantial improvement. Level 4 schools are referred to as "turnaround schools" since designation as a Level 4 school requires them to undertake an accelerated process for rapid and sustainable improvement within three full school years. (Massachusetts DESE)
MCAS	Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System—The standards-based assessment used by public schools in Massachusetts from grade three through grade ten and covering English language arts, mathematics and science.
MCAS Achievement Ratings	<p>Advanced Students at this level demonstrate a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of rigorous subject matter, and provide sophisticated solutions to complex problems.</p> <p>Proficient Students at this level demonstrate a solid understanding of challenging subject matter and solve a wide variety of problems.</p> <p>Needs Improvement Students at this level demonstrate a partial understanding of subject matter and solve some simple problems.</p> <p>Warning (Grades 3-8) Students at this level demonstrate a minimal understanding of subject matter and do not solve simple problems. (MA DESE)</p>

Opt Out	<p>In Level 4 schools, state law establishes conditions by which all staff in the school may be required to reapply for positions in the school. In the case of Harrison, all teachers were required to interview with the principal by February 15, 2017. Because this call to action in a turnaround school may not be the right fit for all teachers, teachers with professional status (employed for three years or more) had the ability to “opt out” to be reemployed at another school in the district for the following school year by providing written notice between February 15, 2017 and June 1, 2017. Those teachers who were deemed by the principal not to be the right fit to carry out the turnaround work required in a Level 4 school would be “opted out” and notified in writing by March 1, 2017. Those administratively opted out would be placed on a displaced teachers list if they had professional status within the district. Those without professional status would be terminated.</p>
Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS)	<p>An approach for assisting school personnel in adopting evidence-based behavioral interventions that enhances academic and social behavior outcomes for all students. PBIS is prevention oriented to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize evidence based practices • Improve school personnel’s implementation of those practices • Maximize academic, social, and behavior outcomes for students <p>(OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2017)</p>
Social-emotional Team	<p>A team of staff members, such as principal, vice principal, school adjustment counselors and behaviorists who help to promote students’ social and emotional development.</p>
School Adjustment Counselor	<p>Staff member who supports students’ social and emotional learning needs. The role includes counseling, crisis management, facilitating social skills groups, monitoring attendance and response to intervention, as well as participating in social-emotional learning team meetings.</p>
Student Growth Percentile (SGP)	<p>A measure of student progress that compares changes in a student’s MCAS scores to changes in MCAS scores of other students with similar scores in prior years. Students with similar score histories are known as “academic peers.” (MA DESE)</p>

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The press for school reform in the United States continues to intensify. In many instances, American schools fail to provide high-level expectations and learning opportunities for all students. In fact, the most underfunded American schools are those that educate poverty-stricken students of color (Darling-Hammond, 2010). These schools and their students are disadvantaged, without resources and political clout. The adoption of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) represented the belief that by establishing high, measurable learning standards, student learning outcomes would improve. NCLB compelled states to evaluate students' learning annually, and the high stakes assessments used to measure learning then determined whether schools were deemed performing or failing. In response to these demands, public schools across the United States implemented a variety of initiatives to improve student learning.

This qualitative study, conducted in southeastern Massachusetts, examined participants' knowledge and perceptions of school reform initiatives implemented during the 2016-2017 school year. As a novice member of the administrative team at Harrison Elementary School, the study addressed the most pressing problem in my current professional life—deepening my understanding of how school reform initiatives were

implemented and how educators responded to them. Nine participants, representing teachers and administration, were interviewed about their knowledge of school improvement initiatives, their interpretation of the initiatives' impact, and their view of future school improvement at Harrison Elementary.

Data analysis showed that participants had a widely varying knowledge of reform initiatives and that their knowledge was shaped by the poor school climate as well as the relevance of the initiatives to the participant's practice or students. Participants perceived the nonacademic initiatives as having the most impact, although initiatives were not deemed as effective as they might have been due to lack of consistency, fidelity, and monitoring of implementation. Nevertheless, most participants were optimistic about the promise of school improvement.

The results of this study emphasize the importance of creating a school culture that is collaborative and collegial and fostering strong relationships between administration and teachers and among teachers. Further, communication, effective professional development, accountability, and teacher leadership must all be considered carefully in order to enact effective school improvement.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

American public schools, in existence since the 1840s and purported to be the “great equalizer” in society (Mann, 1849), remain under constant scrutiny due to the persistent under-achievement of students, particularly students of color and students from low-income families. Although public schooling has made major contributions to society for more than 250 years, the urgency of reform continues to monopolize educational circles. The necessity of school improvement and reform touches a multitude of public school districts across the United States. Harrison Elementary School in southeastern Massachusetts is no exception.

The number of failing schools¹ in the United States continues to grow. As Darling-Hammond (2010) claimed, American schools continue to fall far behind Asian and European schools in “empowering pupils to take ownership of their learning” and “pouring resources into forward looking education systems that educate all of their students to a much higher level” (pp. 6-7). In addition, American schools fail to provide high-level expectations and learning opportunities for all students. In fact, the most underfunded American schools are those that educate poverty-stricken students of color (Darling-Hammond, 2010). These schools, along with their students, are dramatically disadvantaged, without resources, political clout, or in many cases, hope.

With the adoption of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the resulting demand for accountability, the inequities have reached new heights. This is due to the influx of

¹ Throughout the dissertation, I use the deficit-based language of the school accountability movement in the United States. Although I am dismayed but this kind of language, I use it because it is the reality for me and the participants in this study.

standardized testing and the ensuing achievement gaps, particularly in low-income schools. Gorski (2013) asserted that the gaps in achievement are due to gaps in opportunity in which “children who come from families with poorer economic backgrounds, are not being given an opportunity to learn that is equal to that offered to children from the most privileged families” (p. 87). Gorski (2013) further argued that school systems tend to pursue misguided approaches by spending an exorbitant amount of money and dedicating resources to a variety of initiatives that are unsuccessful in lessening achievement gaps.

Harrison Elementary School serves families from poor economic backgrounds. The school is one of eight elementary schools in an urban setting in southeastern Massachusetts and houses 724 students in five units of grades K-5. Like all Massachusetts public schools, Harrison is rated on a scale of 1 to 5 according to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), which measures achievement and student growth over a four-year period in English language arts (ELA), math, and science. Harrison has been consistently ranked as a Level 3 School by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), and the school is among the lowest 20% of schools in this category statewide (DESE). Further, during the 2015-2016 school year, Harrison moved in ranking from the lowest 5% of Level 3 Schools to the lowest 3% of Level 3 Schools. Because of the continued low performance, Harrison was declared a Level 4 School in September 2016 based on the spring 2016 accountability data. This means that Harrison was “underperforming” on MCAS and the related accountability measures over a four-year period in ELA, math, and science and has failed to demonstrate substantial improvement (Massachusetts

DESE). Given the school's persistent underachievement and the urgency for improvement, it is imperative that school personnel seek to implement effective reform, and in order to do that, they need insight into the school change process. In particular, school leaders must understand how educators at Harrison Elementary make sense of and enact specific school reform initiatives.

As such, the study of a failing school and the subsequent changes implemented have far reaching implications. According to Fullan (2007), successful school change occurs by "one quarter having the right ideas and three quarters establishing effective processes that sort out and develop the right solutions suited to the context in question" (p. 122). That is, in order to develop the right ideas, a school must first examine itself. Indeed, Fullan asserted that planning for educational change fails when reformers do not consider "the local context and culture" (p. 122). Therefore, the first step in enacting effective change is careful study of the local particulars. Accordingly, it is important to understand what is occurring presently in the beginning stages of school reform, along with the values and philosophy of the stakeholders within a failing school.

In the 2016-2017 school year, Harrison Elementary had a predominantly new administrative team with only one returning academic administrator. It was incumbent upon the new administrative team to discern a full understanding of the school context in order to plan for improvements leading to changes, which strengthen learning outcomes for all students. As a new member of this team, my intent was to conduct an instrumental case study in order to develop a deep understanding of Harrison Elementary and the preliminary initiatives enacted during the 2016-2017 school year to help improve the poor performance on standardized tests.

The school district where Harrison is located had 18 schools and programs, and one third of these schools are designated as Level 3. Using an instrumental case study methodology to study Harrison Elementary provided a model for other schools to review and utilize in improving their own context.

Background and Significance of Problem

Children all over the United States are being failed by public schools. This idea of failing schools, documented in *A Nation at Risk* (1983), shocked the public and catalyzed a call to arms to rectify our American school system. More than 30 years later, failing schools are still prevalent. The distinction of being identified as a failing school is associated with a myriad of accountability measures assigned by federal and state governments. Unfortunately, these accountability measures have failed to repair the American public school system.

Many researchers would argue that accountability exacerbates the problems within the public schools. With the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001, what is widely known as No Child Left Behind, a host of largely unfunded accountability measures were imposed which rank public schools, teachers, and students into categories such as proficient or failing (Ravitch, 2010; Rury, 2013).

Accountability measures alone have not addressed the many factors that help to explain the widespread underachievement in public schools. For example, there are major differences in educational outcomes for different groups of students. Race, socio-economic status, and geographical location all impact the learning opportunities for students (Kena et al., 2015) and, hence, the learning outcomes. For example, in 2012-2013, 24% of all public schools were considered to be high poverty schools, and in

these schools, the numbers of Black, Hispanic, and English Language Learner (ELL) students were disproportionately higher than White and Asian students (Kena et al., 2015). In addition, the number of ELL students and Hispanic students in particular was on the rise. Factors associated with poverty, such as trauma and homelessness, are additional variables that influence student achievement. Unfortunately, there are no governmental accountability measures which consider the emotional well-being of students. As Ravitch (2010) stated, schools cannot improve when “we ignore the disadvantages associated with poverty that affect children’s ability to learn” (p. 229).

The inequities present in our country have not lessened and continue to shape children’s opportunities to learn. In 2004, 33% of Black children and 29% of Latino children lived in poverty as compared with 10% of white children (Books, 2015). This statistic, along with the fact that schools who serve these most fragile students are often underfunded and have high teacher turnover, all play a role in the reality of failing schools.

Another reason why schools fail students is the quality of the educators. Research has shown there is a direct correlation between teacher certification status, pathway into teaching, and teaching experience and teacher effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, 2010). It has been repeatedly documented that the schools with the most vulnerable student populations have the least well-prepared teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gorski, 2013; Ravitch, 2010). According to Fullan and Hargreaves (1991), how and whether students learn is directly related to how and if teachers improve their practice. Thus, a major ingredient for improving student learning is capacity building in a school. Capacity building is defined as “a policy, strategy or action

taken that increases the collective efficacy of a group to improve student learning through new knowledge, enhanced resources, and greater motivation on the part of the people working individually and together” (Fullan, 2007, p. 58). Effective capacity building is contingent upon the identification of the strengths and weaknesses within a particular school.

Significance of the Study

School reform has claimed the attention of educators, lawmakers, parents, and pundits for decades. For the vast majority of students attending failing schools that have adopted reform efforts, there is little positive movement to report. In fact, most school reform efforts have done little to positively impact student educational outcomes for the long term (Ravitch, 2010). Research shows that students who attend failing schools often never overcome the learning experiences they missed (Kozol, 1991). Only one out of every ten low-income kindergarteners actually graduates from college, and many of these low-income students become part of the prison system (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial that we study ways to convert failing schools into successful schools for all of our children.

As Fullan (2007) explained, school reform remains a complex process. Since every school is different, the particulars of a school’s context must be examined in order to determine how to proceed in enacting school change. Many confounding factors contribute to the success or failure of school reform, and as such, there is a need to study these factors. Through careful collection and analysis of data, I used an instrumental case study approach in this study of Harrison Elementary. This approach enabled me to deepen my understanding of how Harrison fell to its current Level 4 status, what changes were deemed appropriate by school leaders, how teachers

understood new initiatives, and how school personnel assessed the impact of the changes enacted in 2016-2017.

Merely enacting changes within a school environment does not alone transform a school. Rather, re-culturing a school, where teachers change through questioning their beliefs and habits, is how school change occurs (Fullan, 2007). This examination of how the change process begins at a “failing” school could add to the literature on school reform. The study also has the potential to impact other schools as they embark on their own change initiatives. For me as a practitioner scholar, this work addressed the most pressing problem in my current professional life.

Relevant Literature

The purpose of this study was to tell the story of Harrison Elementary, how its current designation as a Level 4 failing school evolved, what school personnel did to address the problem, and how school personnel understood and assessed the impact of new initiatives. Further, as a new member of the administrative team, it was important to deepen my understanding of how changes can be implemented so that effective school reform can be attained. Thus, this overview of literature provided insight for the study of a failing school and the steps necessary to affect school change. The literature review is organized into three sections. The first section explains the history of school reform and the changing views of educational reform since the Cold War era. The second section outlines theoretical perspectives of school reform scholars Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves, and Dean Fink. The third section discusses major elements of effective school reform including school culture, building capacity, teacher collaboration, and teacher leadership.

History of School Reform

School reform initiatives began prior to the Cold War era with progressive reformers, such as John Dewey, who endeavored to make education more responsive to the needs of children while integrating the school with the community (Rury, 2013). These early reformers believed that “good ideas would travel of their own volition into schools and classrooms” (Fullan, 2007, p. 5). Dewey and his contemporaries believed that through student interaction with real world experiences, students would be better able to become informed participants in society. Later, during the Space Race in the 1950s and 1960s, curriculum reform focused on science and math, with little evidence of improvement in schools (Fullan, 2007; Ravitch, 2010). Although early accountability measures began in the 1980s, innovative and lasting school reform has not been widely successful, even though there have been several efforts and initiatives.

Throughout the last forty years, it was clear that putting innovative reforms into practice was far more complex than once thought. Specifically, as Fullan (2007) and others have pointed out, effective reform requires building the capacity of an organization to engage in continuous improvement. In 2017, the global world in which we live demands that education reform be enacted so that the U.S. can not only compete in the global economy but also that equitable classrooms, those that employ high-yield engagement, curricula, and learning opportunities for all students (Gorski, 2013), are the norm rather than outliers. An understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of school reform is critical in my study of stakeholders’ perspectives of the changes enacted to improve student learning. It is crucial to recognize that effective educational change is much more than putting new policies into place. Effective school

reform is dynamic in nature, placing student learning at the forefront, with the end result focused on improving students' lives.

A Framework for School Reform

Fullan (1993, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2011), a leading researcher in the school reform field for more than forty years, maintains that effective educational change is a dynamic and multifaceted process that is interactive, unpredictable, and complex. Fullan (1993) advised, "The educational system is a learning organization ... [that] has a moral purpose to make a difference in the lives of students" (p. 4). In this way, schools are laboratories of learning for administrators, teachers, and students. As such, administration and teachers have a shared purpose: to learn and effectively change schools to give students the best opportunity to be productive and successful citizens.

For more than forty years, Fullan, his colleague Andy Hargreaves, and other scholars such as Dean Fink, have done extensive research on school reform. Fullan's (2007) refined key actions that may help to attain successful school reform are as follows:

"Define closing the achievement gap as the overarching goal" (Fullan, 2007, p. 44). A school must be cognizant about the many social consequences for not closing the achievement gap for students, such as an increasing dropout rate, lower earning potential, and high rates of incarceration, and must monitor progress and take corrective action repeatedly to improve learning for all students.

"Attend initially to the three basics" (Fullan, 2007, p. 44). Literacy, numeracy, and students' emotional health are the basics and are strongly related to cognitive achievement.

“Be driven by tapping into people’s dignity and sense of respect” (Fullan, 2007, p. 44). Schools must cultivate collaboration where all levels of staff have a voice in developing the collaborative environment necessary to initiate teachers’ motivation to work together in high functioning, professional learning communities (PLC).

“Ensure the best people are working on the problem” (Fullan, 2007, p. 44). According to Fullan (2007), “The more talented teachers and principals are needed in a failing school because the challenges are greater” (p. 51). All colleagues working within a school must be engaged in the change effort.

“Recognize that all successful strategies are based on strong relationships in a school and are action oriented” (Fullan, 2007, p. 44). Improving relationships is at the center of all successful change initiatives. Relationships lead to collaboration on a plan of action, with an emphasis on action rather than elaborate planning.

“Assume that lack of capacity within the school is the initial problem, and then work on it continuously” (Fullan, 2007, p. 44). The capacity building of educators is perhaps most important for change to be successful. Building capacity involves “everything you do that affects new knowledge, skills and competencies; enhanced resources; and stronger commitments” (Fullan, 2007, p. 252).

“Stay the course through the continuity of good direction by leveraging leadership” (Fullan, 2007, p. 44). Leadership, therefore, should be utilized to gain maximum impact and should be instituted within the teaching ranks as well. Teacher leadership needs to occur in order for change efforts to succeed.

“Build internal accountability linked to external accountability” (Fullan, 2007, p. 44). A school community must work together to align individual teacher data

with the collective expectations of the entire school team. School accountability data should tell the story of hard work occurring in the classroom.

“Establish conditions for the evolution of positive pressure” (Fullan, 2007, p. 44). All stakeholders within a school must work together. Collaboration encourages individualism, the capacity to think and work independently, and collectivism, where individuals work as a cohesive team with a shared purpose. Both are key factors for effective school change where everyone becomes a change agent with the ability to contend with the forces of change (Fullan, 1993).

“Use the previous nine strategies to build public confidence in the school” (Fullan, 2007, p. 44). By being transparent, all stakeholders will feel they are part of the positive process. This is important at both local and societal levels. At the local level, as public confidence increases and progress is evident, there is more support and investments in public education. As public confidence increases, society values public education when it improves the livelihood of students. As Kanter (2004) stated, “Public school leaders had to build credibility with elected officials, school boards, parents, neighborhood groups, and the press by showing that the stakeholders’ goals and needs would help shape plans for turning around low-performing schools” (p. 342).

Along with Fullan’s framework to enact effective school change, there are additional elements that must be scrutinized. The elements of school reform overlap with Fullan’s (2007) framework in that relationships and motivation reside in the center of all effective school reform initiatives. In the next section, these elements—school culture, school leadership and building capacity, collaboration and professional learning communities, and teacher leadership—will be discussed.

Key Elements of Effective School Reform

The four elements of effective school reform relate to the inner workings of a school. School culture emphasizes the importance of all relationships within a school and how those relationships serve the purposes of schools. The relationships between teachers is especially important for collaboration and professional learning to be effective. And the motivations and goals of teachers and administration influence teacher and school leadership, which greatly influences building capacity in faculty to support and implement change. Combined, these four elements play an essential role in school reform, and it begins with the culture of the school.

School culture

School culture “defines reality for those who work in a social organization; it also provides support and identity” (Fink, 2000, p. 111). School culture comprises the beliefs and values evident in how a school operates (Gruenert, 2008; Peterson & Deal, 1998). In fact, Deal and Peterson (1999) explained that school culture represents the school’s mission and purpose, which together “instill the intangible forces that motivate teachers to teach, school leaders to lead, children to learn and parents and community to have confidence in their school” (p. 24). A positive and solid school culture helps all school constituents to work together around their shared purpose.

In a failing school, re-culturing is typically needed (Fullan, 1993, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2011; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Changing the school culture requires school leadership to create an atmosphere where teachers question their beliefs and values about how teaching should be conducted to better meet the needs of all students, particularly those who are most struggling. In modifying the culture, the school change effort creates a new set of beliefs, values, and standards to guide the practices of

school personnel. A particular kind of school leadership is required to re-culture a school and build the capacity to cultivate student success.

School leadership and building capacity

Effective school leadership and building the capacity of a faculty are two of the most critical components of effective school reform. Becoming a change leader (Fullan, 2011) requires leaders to be learners who cause positive movement in a school. Fullan (2011) asserts that "...a successful change leader...creates conditions for people to experience pressure and support of collective learning in specific and concrete ways" (pp. 61-62). Creating positive pressure and support, or pressure that motivates everyone, involves stimulating people's intrinsic motivation to improve. As Fullan further explains, there are four core ingredients to creating intrinsic motivation in school personnel: a strong sense of purpose, autonomy, camaraderie, and increased capacity.

Building capacity involves "everything you do that affects new knowledge, skills and competencies; enhanced resources; and stronger commitments" (Fullan, 2007, p. 252). School leaders build capacity when they engage personnel in collaborative learning environments in which children's learning is at the core of every conversation. When enough of the school staff start to enact this collaborative learning in their setting, their context changes. The research revealed that when teachers focus on student learning within professional learning communities (PLC), student achievement improves (Fullan, 2007; Guskey, 2002). Moreover, when teachers were engaged in the collaborative process within PLCs, they recognize their students' strengths and weaknesses and collaborate to improve learning outcomes across the content areas.

Collaboration and professional learning communities

Professional learning communities (PLC) are groups of educators who meet consistently and who work in a collaborative environment where the group focuses on sharing problems of practice in order to improve teaching and learning for all students (Dufour, 2004; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Richard Dufour, a researcher who is committed to the effectiveness of PLCs, maintained that there are three big ideas which must be incorporated into PLCs. These are explained below.

Ensuring that students learn. This is guided through asking: What do we want each student to learn? How will we know when each student has learned it? How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

A culture of collaboration. Teachers understand that they must work together to achieve their shared purpose of improving learning for all. It is imperative that educators engage in collective inquiry in order to generate professional learning that is sustained over time.

A focus on results. Teams of teachers participate in goal setting with the intent of improving learning outcomes through working together.

While student learning outcomes are the central focus of a PLC, another important outcome is the transformation of teacher practice. Because teachers are collaborating on a recurring basis, the relationships among the teachers promote a sense of collegiality, allowing teachers to achieve a shared purpose. These relationships stimulate a sense of ease in discussing ideas and sharing knowledge with one another, which further develops a collective vision in making improvements in student learning. Through their participation in PLCs, teachers report that their teaching practice and the culture of teaching in their context are enhanced. These changes are

significant in that they represent a “fundamental shift in the habits of mind that teachers bring to the classroom” (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008, p. 84).

Fullan (2007, 2011) advocated “deep engagement with other colleagues and with mentors in exploring, refining and improving their practice as well as setting up an environment in which this not only can happen but is encouraged and rewarded and pressed to happen” (p. 55). He described this work as building collective capacity, or cultivating the working together of individuals. This helps to motivate educators to innovate and improve. Furthermore, distributed leadership is an important facet of school reform. When school leaders create environments that allow teachers to learn and grow as well as become leaders themselves, the stage is set for school improvement.

Teacher leadership

Teacher leadership has the power to affect educational change, since teachers can build connections to students, other teachers, families, and administrators. If teacher leaders work together with other stakeholders in their own contexts, rather than as individuals, they can be successful in positively impacting teaching and learning.

As Lieberman and Miller (2004) professed, teacher leaders are the “stewards for an invigorated profession” (p. 13). It is through teacher leader efforts that school reform can be realized as they can best advocate for change where change needs to happen—on the front lines with the students. Because teacher leaders are vested in their schools, they have much more at stake than policymakers in enacting change efforts. Likewise, Schmoker (2004) stated that the key to real and lasting improvement in schools is to put the power of change in the hands of practitioners because the teachers are “the scientists who continuously develop their intellectual and investigative effectiveness” (p.

429). This means that teachers on the front line, who work diligently with students managing a variety of issues, are the change agents that can impact the ways in which children are educated.

If effective change is to be realized, the administrative structure of schools needs to be flat rather than top-heavy. By instituting varied teacher leader roles, “Teacher leadership challenges the typical hierarchical structure of schools by dispersing leadership responsibility across educators” (Yendol-Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000, p.782). By eliminating the hierarchy, teachers feel as though their expertise is respected. Similarly, a school’s culture must fully include teachers in the decision making about curriculum and instruction. According to Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009), “If teachers are not part of the decision making process, they do not consider themselves leaders” (p. 4). Further, “When teachers share in decision making, they become committed to the decisions that emerge” (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 258). In this way, there is buy-in and change happens because of teacher commitment.

Summary

Children across the United States continue to be failed by public schools. Although school reform initiatives monopolize educational conversations throughout our country, failing schools have persisted, due in large part to governmental accountability measures that have failed to successfully improve public schools. Harrison Elementary is one of many schools that face this issue. Our children deserve better.

In 2017, the global world in which we live demands that education reform be enacted to provide a more hopeful future for all of our children. As such, school reform literature highlights various areas which must be considered when enacting effective reform. The school reform literature reviewed here established that cultivating

relationships within a school is central to establishing a culture of continuous improvement. In addition, effective school leadership requires leaders to be learners who cause positive movement in a school. Instead of impeding school change by rolling out numerous initiatives, we must expand efforts to build the capacity of teachers to impact student achievement. Capacity building can be accomplished through teacher leadership, as well as collaborative professional learning opportunities, such as those afforded by high functioning PLCs. In order to embrace the challenge of improving a failing school, I needed to understand how Harrison Elementary has operated in the past, the changes that were implemented in 2016-2017, and how educators perceived the changes and their impact. By understanding these things from the perspective of Harrison educators, I gained insight into the school's culture and hints as to ways to establish a culture of continuous improvement.

Research Methods

In developing an instrumental case study focused on Harrison Elementary School, it was essential to gain both a historical and a current understanding of the school. An understanding of the school and its educators sheds light on the school's status as underperforming and points to practices that could help me as a new administrator in a failing school. Therefore, my three research questions were as follows:

- What is the participants' knowledge of the new initiatives enacted during the 2016-2017 academic year at Harrison Elementary School?
- How do the participants interpret the impact of these new initiatives?
- How do participants view the future of school improvement at Harrison Elementary School?

An instrumental case study methodology was used as a theoretical point of grounding this study. This methodology makes sense for the study since it was my intent to “explore a real-life, contemporary bounded system over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). Harrison Elementary School was a prime candidate for an instrumental case study approach to examine the factors that led to its failure status. According to Creswell (2013), instrumental case study research is often used when the intent of the study is “to understand a specific issue, problem, or concern” (p. 98).). Further, Creswell outlined characteristics of instrumental case study research as including an in-depth understanding of the case, an accurate and detailed description of the case, data analysis that allows the researcher to understand themes that present themselves, and assertions or lessons learned from studying the case. The low academic achievement at Harrison was troubling. The students’ academic achievement was the catalyst that necessitated school improvement initiatives to be enacted as the school planned for the turnaround process. The perception and impact of these initiatives by school personnel required in-depth analysis in order to determine if the initiatives were effective in improving the school.

In order to understand the current status of Harrison Elementary, I interviewed key informants, specifically those individuals who were employed at Harrison over the last five years. The key informants included the math department head, the literacy coach, one school adjustment counselor, and three teachers. In addition, the remainder of the newly installed administrative team, including the principal and two vice principals, were interviewed to gain their perspective of the current situation at Harrison.

These interviews helped me to paint a picture of the school culture and the climate that resulted from that culture as well as the teaching and learning environment. The interviews were vital since I am in a new administrative intern position at this school and as such, have little understanding of the previous administrative structures, procedures, and processes, and how these systems have contributed to the current school status.

Most importantly, interviews with key informants enabled me to understand the recent history of Harrison Elementary regarding school culture and climate, curriculum and instruction, discipline, attendance, teacher retention, administrative practices and protocols, social-emotional behavior, and operational procedures. Included within my interview with the key informants was a discussion of the changes implemented during the 2016-2017 school year as well as the key informants' perceptions of the impact of these changes on the school community. Six of the key informants were interviewed individually, while the principal and two vice principals were interviewed as a focus group. With the help of the focus group, I created a list of all initiatives instituted throughout the 2016-2017 school year ([Appendix A](#)). I then shared the list with the remaining participants to determine how they viewed the initiatives and their impact.

Criteria for Participant Selection

The instrumental case study involved the bounded system of Harrison Elementary School. Harrison Elementary has never attained Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) since it was established in 2008. As such, the school has been defined as a Level 3 School by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). As of September 26, 2016, Harrison was lowered to Level 4. For the purpose of this study, the entire faculty and staff at the school were considered as participants; however, I interviewed a subset of individuals who had spent at least three

years at the school. In this way, the sample was a purposeful sample, since I selected “individuals because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). I followed a specific criteria for participant selection, considering the importance of including key informants in my study. Participants were representative of a cross-sectional group at different grade levels and roles, including both faculty and administration. Individuals who were interviewed were working in their third year at Harrison Elementary or longer except for the administrative participants. As a result, I did not have a large pool from which to select a sample since many who were employed at Harrison for 2016-2017 were new to the school and therefore, could not provide pertinent information for this study.

Administrative participants. Included within this group was the newly formed administrative team: the principal, the grade K-2 vice principal, and the grade 3-5 vice principal, all of whom were hired in August 2016. This group was interviewed as a focus group due to their ongoing, extensive collaboration. According to Creswell (2013), focus groups are “advantageous when the interaction among the interviewees will yield the best information when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other” (p.164).

Math department head. The math department head was interviewed as she was the only remaining academic administrator who worked at Harrison Elementary prior to the 2016-2017 school year. The head of the math department coached teachers in their delivery of math content, facilitated grade level Professional Learning Time (PLT)²

² Harrison Elementary School used the term Professional Learning Time (PLT) to refer to meetings held with teachers to collaborate on and improve teaching skills. While they were intended to be collaborative, they lacked the collaboration of Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Since they appear to be different, I use both terms throughout this paper.

biweekly, and delivered professional development to staff. This individual was also involved in evaluating teachers as well as assisting students with social-emotional development when necessary. It was important to glean an understanding about both previous administrative practices and math instruction in the building since students' achievement data showed no consistent growth in this academic area.

ELA/ELL Coach. The English language arts (ELA)/English language learners (ELL) coach was new to the role but had been employed at the school as a third grade teacher and ELL specialist since 2012-2013. The ELA/ELL coach educated teachers in their delivery of ELA/ELL content as well as facilitated biweekly grade level Professional Learning Time (PLT) and delivered professional development to staff. This individual was important to interview since he was both a classroom teacher and a coach in an academic area where students have consistently struggled.

School adjustment counselor. One school adjustment counselor had worked at Harrison Elementary since September 2014. This individual was important to interview since she supported students' social and emotional learning. This included counseling, crisis management, facilitating social skills groups, monitoring attendance and response to intervention, as well as participating in social-emotional learning team meetings.

Teacher participants. Three teachers were interviewed as part of the study: one from grade kindergarten/1, one from grade 2/3 and one from grade 4/5. Out of the 30 classroom teachers who worked at Harrison, I selected teachers who were in their third year or more at the school. This allowed for a representative sample of teachers within the building.

According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2010), there are distinct reasons for selecting a method of interviewing that allows a researcher to gain answers to the research questions. For this study, I primarily employed one-on-one interviews using open-ended questions since this method allowed the interviewees the opportunity to report their unrestricted views regarding Harrison Elementary. This is important since “the participants can best voice their own experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher” (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2010, p. 257). Beyond the one-on-one interviews, the principal and vice principals were interviewed in a focus group, as stated above, since this team was “similar and cooperative” (Creswell, 2013, p. 165). For both the individual and focus group interviews, I used an interview protocol as outlined in [Appendix B](#). According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2010), a protocol helps the interviewer stay focused on the questions and follow-up with probes or sub-questions that will elicit more information. Informed consent was gathered prior to the commencement of the study.

Data Collection

There were two phases of data collection for this study. Phase One was a precursory accumulation of information that allowed me to gain an understanding of the “lay of the land.” Since I was a new administrator in this school, it was vital for me to gather information prior to my study that would help me to understand the current situation at Harrison. The purpose of Phase Two was to interview the key informants about school improvement initiatives that were implemented during the 2016-2017 school year. Interviews provided the primary data for this study as I needed to understand how the key informants made sense of beginning school reform initiatives implemented at Harrison Elementary during 2016-2017. Interviews are critical in

qualitative research as they tell the story of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). This information is vital for me, as a new administrator, to be effective in my position. As a new member of the newly installed administrative team, I needed to be aware of the changes that were implemented, how they were implemented, and how participants understood and interpreted the changes and their impact. Phase One of data collection helped me deepen my knowledge and understanding of Harrison in preparation for Phase Two.

Phase One: Lay of the Land

During this initial phase of information gathering, various data were reviewed with the purpose of understanding the history of Harrison Elementary as well as its status at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year. Informed consent was not required for this first phase, which took place during my first six months in the school and helped me gain important insight into the school, staff, and students. In order to get the lay of the land, I collected four kinds of data. These included historical information about the school, school and student accountability data, academic and operational procedures and protocols, and staff data.

The historical data collected was any information related to the school itself, including the original plans for the school when it opened in 2008. This information was collected via digital files from the district website and, as in the case of MCAS data, often overlapped with current accountability data, but was essential in understanding the historical context of the school.

I also examined the current school context by collecting school and student accountability data, which included academic, systemic, and procedural information. These data included district benchmark data and student mobility rates that showed the

transience and stability of students moving into and out of Harrison Elementary. Student enrollment and record data were also studied, which comprised enrollment zone maps, attendance, and academic information. Academic data included Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) reports regarding accountability and assessment based on state tests (MCAS).

Data collected also included documentation of academic and operational procedures and protocols, such as school-wide adopted elements of Responsive Classroom, annotation during ELA blocks, and the use of the CUBES mnemonic in solving math problems. Furthermore, as I began learning walks as a function of my job, I recorded observational data using an observation protocol (see [Appendix C](#)). The observation protocol enabled me to record procedures and protocols used at both the grade level and the classroom level. By reviewing grade level data, I gained insight into which classrooms needed assistance in ELA, math, and/or science. I began my weekly learning walks in November 2016 and continued to note observations throughout the school year. In a follow-up to grade level specific thinking, I also reviewed grade level benchmark data for classroom trends. I specifically looked at the grade level groups as well as individual teachers to see the growth or lack thereof in the classrooms.

Data about school staff were probably the most prolific. Each week, I collected both classroom observational data using the observation protocol ([Appendix C](#)) as well as recording observations and notes in my researcher's journal during administrative meetings and Professional Learning Time (PLT) with teachers. In order to gain an understanding of daily teaching and learning occurring in classrooms, I attended Professional Learning Time (PLT), and the notes recorded in my researcher's journal

during PLT helped frame the pulse of what was occurring in the classroom. My attendance at PLT helped me develop an understanding of the instructional focus of each team and team dynamics. The data gathered through observation protocols and the research journal helped me gather insight into the teaching and learning that occurred at Harrison Elementary and helped to craft my interview questions prior to beginning my study.

In my researcher's journal, I made notes when I attended the professional learning time (PLT) for grade level teams at Harrison. PLT meetings were held weekly for forty eight minutes and rotated biweekly between ELA content and math content. During PLT, grade level teams discussed curriculum, instructional practices, assessment, student data, grade-level data, as well as other educational practices. These meetings were meant to be professional learning for teachers and, therefore, the work therein was best done collaboratively. Collaboration within professional learning communities is critical as "successful collaborative efforts include strategies that "open" practice in ways that encourage sharing, reflecting, and taking the risks necessary to change" (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008, p. 84). I primarily attended the ELA PLT for multiple grade levels. Although I attended these meetings on a regular basis, I did not attend the meetings every day for every team.

The intended collaboration during these PLT meetings was not observed on most grade level teams. The grade level teams were inconsistent in the areas of professional collaboration and pedagogical knowledge. While some teachers fully participated, others were verbally oppositional and still others remained silent. I observed the teachers resisting intended outcomes of the PLT, such as curriculum planning and

assessment data dives, by remaining silent. The silence primarily was indicative of complying while in the meeting; however, these teachers often closed their classroom doors and did not follow what was discussed and agreed upon during PLT.

The purpose of collecting these data was to assemble a portrait of the context in which the study was located. Sketching a portrait of the school context during the fall of the 2016 school year allowed me to understand school conditions and helped me to understand and shape the changes implemented at the school. Furthermore, these data gathered during Phase One helped build a foundation for the interviews that took place in Phase Two. Understanding the school's history and context at the beginning of the school year assisted me in making sense of the participants' views of changes made at the school in 2016-2017.

Phase Two: Interviews

The purpose of Phase Two was to interview the key informants about changes that were implemented at the school during the 2016-2017 school year. As a new member of the newly installed administrative team, I needed to be aware of the changes that were implemented, how they were implemented, and how participants understood the changes. Prior to interviewing participants, I reviewed the information gathered during Phase One in order to gain preliminary insight into the school. This information was vital in creating a portrait of the school and it helped me understand factors that might explain Harrison's current status. This was essential background work as a newcomer to this persistently underachieving school.

The interviews were developed using open-ended questions along with probing questions ([Appendix B](#)), which encouraged participants to discuss their perceptions while providing information to answer the research questions. Prior to the interview, the

key informants were provided with a consent letter to sign ([Appendix D](#) and [Appendix E](#)). The letter clearly stated that all identifiers would be removed when the interviews were transcribed, recordings would be erased following transcription, they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence, and they were not required to answer any questions they did not wish to answer.

During this phase of the study, I first interviewed a focus group that included the principal and two vice principals regarding the change initiatives enacted during the school year. This provided the perspective of the administrators as to what the changes were and why these changes were needed and put into practice during the 2016-2017 school year. Further, I also interviewed the other key informants: the math department head, the ELA/ELL coach, the school adjustment counselor, and three teachers, one from grades kindergarten/grade 1, one from grade 2/3, and one from grade 4/5. This set of interviews was important during this phase of my study as they addressed the key informants' perspectives on the school initiatives enacted in 2016-2017.

The interviews were conducted over a six-week period during April 2017 and May 2017 with each session lasting between 60-90 minutes. The discussion was recorded using a recording application on an iPhone. If the key informants seemed apprehensive to answer an interview question, I reminded them that their responses were confidential and that their identity would be protected. The transcribed data were maintained on my personal computer, which is password protected. I carefully followed these guidelines, and I have been vigilant in removing identifiers when writing the findings of this study.

Data Analysis

This instrumental case study tells the story of school reform initiatives occurring at Harrison Elementary School during 2016-2017. Key informants told their stories as they responded to various interview questions that focused on honing in on the three research questions. Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, each interview was read several times to garner an understanding of each participant's perspective on the school reform initiatives at Harrison Elementary School.

The single-spaced transcribed pages of interviews totaled 193 pages from all participants. While reading through the interviews, I highlighted partial sentences and made notes in the margins as ideas, themes, and codes began to emerge from the data. I developed a table to further dissect and consolidate the interview data. A sample page from the table is represented in [Appendix F](#).

In using the table to aid in my data analysis, I listed the interview questions in the rows and the participants (e.g., Teacher A) in the columns. While continuously reading through the data, I inserted direct responses from each participant's transcribed interview into the appropriate cells. When the tables were complete, I printed and read through the data several times again and began to code and list evidence that supported the developing themes I detected, all the while making certain that the findings aligned with my research questions. According to Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2008), "Coding is a procedure that disaggregates data, breaks it down into manageable segments and identifies or names those segments" (p. 117). As the coding was completed with the goal of answering my research questions, and I began to "describe, classify and interpret the data" (Creswell, 2013, p. 184), I started memoing, which is the process of "explaining or elaborating on coded categories" (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey,

2008, p. 117). Memoing helped make sense of the codes, determining the ways in which they intersect and form patterns. In addition to the interview data, I reviewed my observations and wonderings recorded in my researcher's journal throughout the year, hoping they would help me to analyze the interview data. The notes in my researcher's journal helped me to create a portrait of the school as well as provide insight into professional development occurring at Harrison during professional learning time (PLT). The notes on the PLT in my researcher's journal gave me a better understanding of relationships among teachers and the "lay of the land." However, they were collected prior to the signing of consent forms, so I used them as supporting data that was not related to specific participants.

Throughout the data analysis process, my research questions were revisited to ensure my focus remained on answering those questions. Following this data analysis process, the three research questions were answered in a narrative that presents and attempts to explain the perspectives of the study participants.

Researcher Positionality

As a twelve-year veteran in the public school system, I have taught every grade and academic level of English Language Arts, including multiple English electives for grades 8 through 12. As such, I have had a myriad of teaching experiences and professional development experiences, and I have participated in writing district level curriculum as a member of the Grades 6-12 Curriculum Team. While my sphere of influence with my students was important, after beginning my doctoral studies, I felt I would be better positioned to positively affect more students' futures if I pursued an administrative role. After ten years in the classroom, I assumed the role of Administrative Intern at Harrison Elementary School in August, 2016 and am currently

working as the Redesign Coach at Harrison. As the researcher for this study, it is vital that I recognize what I bring to the process, including who I am as a participant. As Creswell (2013) asserted, all qualitative researchers are “positioned” within the writing of a research study and as such, must be open to and accept how they may be influenced by biases or experiences.

I am a White, middle class woman, a career changer, beginning my teaching career at nearly 40 years of age. Because of my analytical background in auditing, I enjoy analysis. Since I have been positioned at Harrison Elementary as an Administrative Intern, and now the Redesign Coach, it is important to garner an understanding of the whole school: the processes, procedures, and most importantly, the people. It is central to who I am as an educator to advocate for what is in the best interest of students. When I began my career, it was apparent that students were much more apathetic than when I was a student, and this perplexed me greatly. I sought out anything and everything that I thought would engage them in the classroom. It was only two months into my teaching career that I was exposed to *The Freedom Writers Diary*, and within the pages of this book, I vividly saw my students and the obstacles that they faced. Unknowingly, I had started to use some of Erin Gruwell’s teaching strategies, but I wanted to know more. I ultimately was selected to participate as one of the original 150 teachers to train at The Freedom Writers Institute in 2007. This training has been at the foundation of everything I try to accomplish in the classroom and now, as an administrator, working with the most struggling students, either academically or behaviorally. Like Gruwell, I recognize that every student has a story, and it is that story which must be recognized and honored in helping students reach their success. It is

incumbent upon educators to build bridges and connections with students so that they realize that educators respect who they are and where they come from. Educators must consider a student's story unreservedly. It is only then that we can enact change for our students within our sphere of influence.

The school improvement at Harrison is the most pressing issue in my current professional life. I feel strongly that all children should have the opportunity for the best education environment in which to learn and grow. As an administrator in a school that is embarking on the school reform process, it is important to remain steadfast to this goal: creating a school where students' academic and social-emotional learning are at the forefront of all decisions and improvement efforts.

This is my passion—helping all students find success in their education and in their lives. By gaining insight into how to cultivate school improvement at Harrison Elementary, I intend to facilitate students' success and their ability to become agents of their future.

Enhancing Trustworthiness

I took several steps to bolster the trustworthiness of my findings. These included collection of historical information, member checking, and triangulation of data.

Historical information. I amassed extensive historical information during the fall of 2016 regarding the context. This provided a rich description of the context in which the data collection took place, thus enabling a reader to judge the trustworthiness of the findings as they relate to the context.

Member checking. In this step, I sought to corroborate my tentative findings through interviewing the key informants. By reviewing my findings with my participants, I received feedback about their accuracy and solidified that my findings were accurate.

Triangulation of data. I strengthened my findings through the use of a wide range of informants. This was one way of triangulating via data sources. The individual viewpoints and experiences of each informant were verified against others and, thus, a rich picture of participants' views was constructed (Merriam, 1995; Shenton, 2004).

Summary and Overview

American schools deprive poverty-stricken students of the rich learning opportunities available to their peers. In many cases, high poverty schools are underfunded as well as disadvantaged in resources, particularly effective teachers. As such, accountability measures negatively impact these schools because too often their academic performance is abysmal, leading these schools to be marked as failing. As a new member of the administrative team at a failing school, it was vital that I deepen my understanding of how changes were implemented and how educators responded to those changes. It is my hope that, through this study, I will gain insight into how to effect change at Harrison Elementary and improve the lives of the students for whom we are responsible.

CHAPTER 2 FINDINGS

The press for school reform in the United States continues to intensify. In many instances, American schools fail to provide high-level expectations and learning opportunities for all students. In fact, the most underfunded American schools are those that educate poverty-stricken students of color (Darling-Hammond, 2010). These schools, along with their students, are dramatically disadvantaged, without resources, political clout, or in many cases, hope. The adoption of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) represented the belief that by establishing high, measurable learning standards, student learning outcomes would improve. NCLB compelled states to evaluate students' learning annually, and the high stakes assessments used to measure learning then determined whether schools were deemed performing or failing. In response to these demands, public schools across the United States have implemented a variety of initiatives to improve student learning. Harrison Elementary School is no exception.

Since its opening in 2008, Harrison Elementary has exemplified many of the characteristics outlined above. The school is currently deemed a failing school by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Given the school's persistent underachievement and the urgency of improvement, it is imperative that school personnel seek to implement effective reform, and in order to do that, they need insight into the school change process. In particular, I along with other school leaders must understand how educators at Harrison Elementary make sense of and judge the impact of specific school reform initiatives.

To accomplish this goal, I conducted an instrumental case study focused on the school reform initiatives implemented at Harrison Elementary School during the 2016-2017 academic year. Three research questions guided the study:

- What is the participants' knowledge of the new initiatives enacted during the 2016-2017 academic year at Harrison Elementary School?
- How do the participants interpret the impact of these new initiatives?
- How do participants view the future of school improvement at Harrison Elementary School?

In order to gain an understanding of the context in which reforms were implemented, data were gathered to paint a historical picture of Harrison Elementary. These data are related to academic achievement [e.g., accountability data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)], instruction (e.g., elementary classroom practices), and discipline (e.g., conduct and behavioral reports). To answer the research questions, one-on-one and focus group interviews provided the main source of data. I interviewed nine participants who represented different roles and have been employed in the Harrison School over the last five years about school improvement initiatives that have been implemented at the school during the 2016-2017 academic year. All participants were interviewed once during the study. The interviews began with a focus group that included the principal and two vice principals. The other six participants were interviewed individually once during the study. These participants included administrators (the math department head and school adjustment counselor) as well as teachers. The teachers interviewed included the ELA/ELL coach and three classroom teachers, one for grades K–1, one for grades 2–3, and one for grades 4–5.

Analysis of the data revealed six themes in the nine participants' knowledge and interpretations of the school improvement initiatives at Harrison Elementary. The

participants' knowledge of the improvement initiatives will be discussed first, followed by the participants' interpretations of the impact of improvement initiatives, and then their views of the future of school improvement at Harrison. I introduce these findings with a brief portrait of Harrison Elementary School, drawn from the data I collected during Phase One of the study.

Harrison Elementary: A School In Flux

Harrison Elementary School opened in September 2008 as a Title I community elementary school housing grades kindergarten through five. In the early 2000s, the school district embarked on a capital building plan, replacing the original 31 neighborhood elementary schools with eight larger community schools. Harrison Elementary was built at this time, renamed, and combined with four existing elementary schools. The school was intended for a 650-student capacity; however, there are currently 724 students. Since the school opened in 2008, there have been five principals as well as multiple other administrators who are no longer working at the school. The faculty has turned over as well. For example, at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year, there were 14 new teachers out of 44 teaching positions, or a 31% turnover. There are currently 78 staff members at the school. Further, in 2014-2015, economically disadvantaged students comprised 73% of the student population. In addition, Harrison is one of two elementary schools that primarily serve English Language Learners, which are 20% of the total student population in the school. The school is more diverse than all of the other elementary schools in the district with nearly 56% minority students, including 9.2% African American, 5.2% Asian, 31% Hispanic, and 10.2% Multiracial. In addition, 11% of the total student population is classified as having disabilities.

Harrison Elementary School has never met its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets since the school's inception in 2008, and the school has not made any academic gains either in the aggregate or in the disaggregated groups. Figure 2-1 provides data for the percentage of students at Harrison Elementary School at each level of proficiency on the MCAS for ELA from 2013 to 2016.

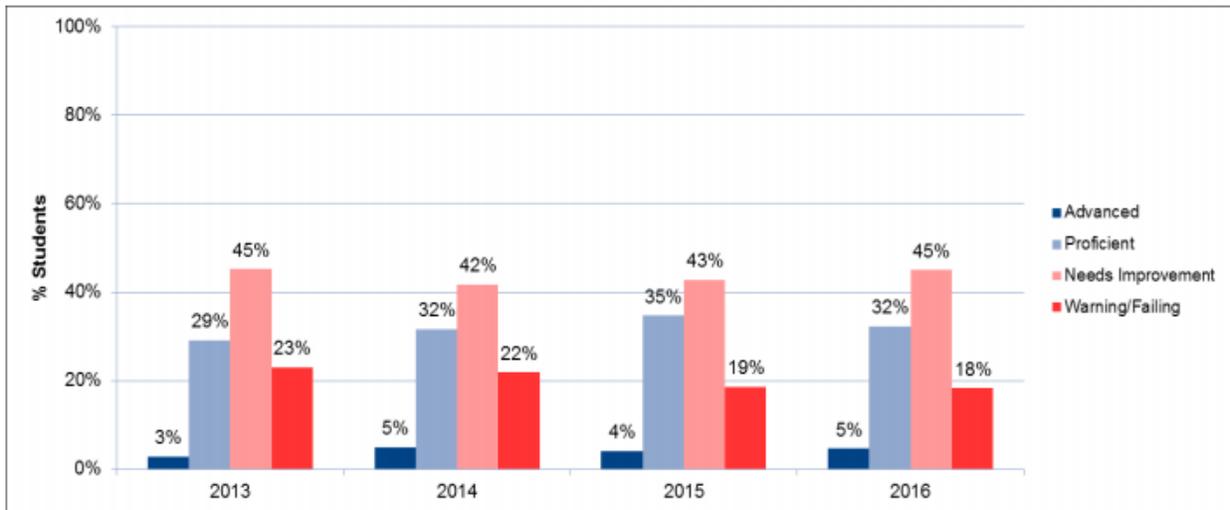


Figure 2-1. MCAS data for ELA, Harrison Elementary.

A review of MCAS accountability data in Figure 2-1 revealed no sustained student growth over a four-year period, from 2013-2016. Students in the advanced plus proficient categories, which are deemed as passing, improved slightly from a combined 32% to 37%. The percentage of students whose results indicated needs improvement remained fairly stable, while the number of students who were found Failing had a slight decline from 23% to 18%.

Slight improvements in MCAS ELA data in Figure 2-2 show an increase from a low of 32% in the proficient plus advanced categories in 2013 to 37% in 2016. District percentages for proficient plus advanced rose from 48% to 53% between 2013 and 2016, which mirrors the 5 percentage point increase (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p.110) in

the school. District scores, however, were a full 16 percentage points higher than school scores in both 2013 and 2016.

	2013			2014			2015			2016		
	School	District	State	School	District	State	School	District	State	School	District	State
Advanced	3%	9%	19%	5%	9%	18%	4%	11%		5%	11%	
Proficient	29%	39%	50%	32%	41%	51%	35%	40%		32%	42%	
Needs Improvement	45%	34%	23%	42%	32%	22%	43%	32%		45%	30%	
Warning/Failing	23%	18%	8%	22%	17%	8%	18%	17%		18%	17%	
N Students	323	5,371	496,175	348	5,548	488,744	346	5,437		329	5,408	
CPI	65.3	75.5	86.8	68.2	76.9	86.7	69.7	77.2		70.4	77.9	
Median SGP	41.0	49.0	51.0	44.0	49.0	50.0	42.0	50.0		45.0	51.0	

Figure 2-2. MCAS data for ELA, school, district, state comparison.

Likewise, the percentage of students in the warning/failing score category decreased by 5 percentage points, from 23% to 18%, in the same time period (Figure 2-2); however, the district scores did not change dramatically decreased by only 1 percentage point. It is also important to note that the proficient and advanced percentage at Harrison declined slightly from 39% in 2015 to 37% in 2016, and the Median Student Growth Percentile (SGP) remained below the state target of 50 across the four years.

Figure 2-3 provides data for the percentage of students at Harrison Elementary School at each level of proficiency on the MCAS for mathematics from 2013 to 2016.

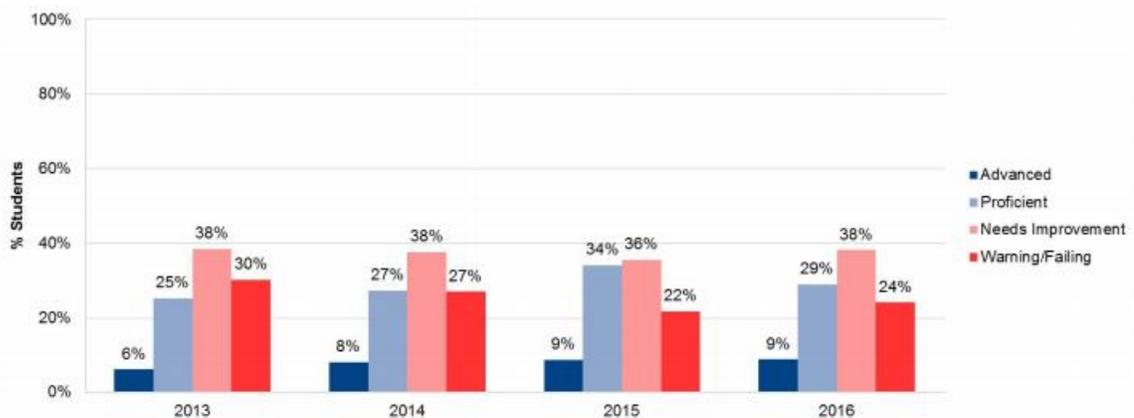


Figure 2-3. MCAS data for mathematics, Harrison Elementary.

Similar to the ELA test results, Harrison’s MCAS mathematics results for students in proficient plus advanced improved from 31% in 2013 to 38% in 2016, as shown in Figure 2-3. Test results for students in the warning/failing score category decreased from 30% to 24% over the same time (Figure 2-3). However, as was the case with ELA, the percentage declined from 2015 to 2016. Students classified as proficient plus advanced went from 43% to 38%, and students in the warning/failing score category increased from 22% to 24%. When compared to district percentages, however, the difference in mathematics scores was not as noteworthy as the differences in ELA scores (Figure 2-4).

	2013			2014			2015			2016		
	School	District	State	School	District	State	School	District	State	School	District	State
Advanced	6%	13%	28%	8%	15%	28%	9%	17%		9%	17%	
Proficient	25%	25%	33%	27%	27%	32%	34%	27%		29%	26%	
Needs Improvement	38%	34%	25%	38%	32%	25%	36%	29%		38%	30%	
Warning/Failing	30%	29%	14%	27%	27%	15%	22%	26%		24%	27%	
N Students	325	5,372	497,090	348	5,562	490,288	346	5,429		328	5,418	
CPI	60.8	66.5	80.8	63.9	68.5	80.3	69.0	70.1		68.1	69.5	
Median SGP	34.0	45.0	51.0	52.0	53.0	50.0	54.0	54.0		43.0	48.0	

Figure 2-4. MCAS data for mathematics, school, district, state comparison.

In 2013, district scores for proficient plus advanced were seven percentage points higher than school scores, and in 2016, scores for the district were only 5 percentage points higher. The differences between school and district for students in the warning/failing score category were insignificant for both the school and the district in 2013 and 2016. However, it is important to note that the median math SGP was at a low of 34 in 2013, rising to above the target of 50 in 2014 (52) and 2015 (54), and dipping again below target to 43 in 2016.

Upon observing the dynamics of instruction at Harrison, I gained insight into potential explanations for the school achievement data. It seemed that teachers lacked pedagogical content knowledge that could push students to higher order thinking skills needed to access complex texts and tasks. In fact, when the Instructional Leadership Team examined MCAS results for 2016, we noted that students seemed to guess at answering questions, suggesting that perhaps they had difficulty reading the text and perhaps understanding what the questions were asking.

In addition, the way in which colleagues who were in the same professional learning time (PLT) team worked together provided insight into the case of Harrison. It appeared that the grade level PLT teams did not effectively work together. The teams were scattered in terms of instruction, working in isolation, and did not share or develop resources that were used consistently in all grade-level classrooms.

The findings for this study are organized by research question: first, the participant's knowledge of the initiatives; next, the participant's interpretation of the initiatives' impact; and finally, the participants' view of the future of school improvement at Harrison Elementary School.

Research Question 1: Participants' Knowledge of New Initiatives at Harrison

At the outset of this study, a list of all initiatives was compiled ([Appendix A](#)) with the help of the administrative focus group, which included the principal and two vice principals. This list was used during the six participant interviews to determine their knowledge of the initiatives and their perceptions of their impact. I begin this section with a finding about participants' knowledge of new initiatives and move quickly to two findings that help to explain the widely varying nature of their knowledge. Participants' knowledge of improvement initiatives ranged from detailed to nearly nonexistent.

When the participants were asked to review the list of initiatives compiled by the administrative focus group, their knowledge varied widely. For instance, P4 stated she “knew about all of the initiatives” and commented specifically on them, whereas all of the other participants (P5, P6, P7, P8, and P9) mentioned that there were certain initiatives of which they were “not aware.” These five participants affirmed that they did have knowledge regarding some of the initiatives, but they could not comment on other initiatives. I identified three themes that helped explain the wide-ranging nature of participants’ knowledge of the new initiatives. The themes encompass the impact of the school culture and its influence on school climate, the lack of relevance of initiatives to teacher participants’ practice, and the impact of the participant’s particular role at Harrison in shaping their knowledge of the reform initiatives.

Theme 1: Participants’ Knowledge Shaped by Debilitating Culture and Climate

School culture and school climate are interrelated and synergistic concepts, and both are important forces in improving (and, too often, damaging) schools. Often, the concepts “culture” and “climate” are misconstrued to be the same, but there are distinctive differences between them. School climate is defined as the attitude of the school, whereas culture comprises the beliefs and values evident in how a school operates (Gruenert, 2008; Peterson & Deal, 1998). Climate is a manifestation of school culture since it is a collective feeling that people display as they act and react in the organization (Fullan, 2007; Gruenert, 2008; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2017). Culture is comprised of an overarching common set of beliefs and expectations that dictate actions that then cultivate a particular kind of climate (Fullan, 2007; Gruenert, 2008; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2017). For example, Gruenert (2008) illustrates the relationship between culture and climate as follows: “When the climate is negative, as is the case on

most Monday mornings, it is the culture that dictates how members of the group are supposed to feel. The culture tells us that we're supposed to feel miserable on Mondays" (p. 58). People must assimilate themselves into an organization's culture and ultimately, the culture, along with the climate, is what allows an organization to succeed or fail.

At Harrison, participants described a debilitating climate that impeded the communication and collaboration necessary to develop knowledge and action that is needed for a positive school culture. At the core of that debilitating climate affecting the overall culture were two factors: chilly relationships among the adults at the school and low teacher morale.

Relationships among adults

As part of the turnaround process in Massachusetts, the principal has the autonomy and authority to build a staff focused on improving teaching and learning. During March 2017, Harrison's principal used this autonomy to "opt out" those teachers who were not deemed ready to engage in the rigorous turnaround process. At the time of my study, these opted out teachers did not yet know what or where their jobs would be in the coming year; thus, they expressed considerable anxiety and stress, as illustrated by one teacher's comment:

My opinion is that [opt out] was done too soon. We are all human beings; once you are told you are not wanted here anymore, it affects the way you feel about yourself, your performance, and if they [administration] didn't think that was going to happen, I don't understand how they didn't. (P8)

Not surprisingly, participants described friction and a severe divide within the staff, particularly between those who were staying at Harrison for the 2017-2018 school year and those who were opted out.

The descriptions of the adult relationships by the participants at Harrison is striking. One participant described the 2016-2017 school year as “my toughest year ever” (P7). Several participants describe the poor relationships among the adults at Harrison using descriptors such as “cold” (P7, P8), “hostility” (P5), “toxic” (P6), “negativity” and “afraid of backlash” (P4). Because of the “opt out” process, participants stated that teachers “wouldn’t say hello” (P7) to one another, “are afraid they will lose their job,” and are “feeling flustered” (P8). Furthermore, P5 commented, “[People]...are not speaking to each other with respect,” and “everyone feels a sense of disrespect from each other...no community of support” (P5).

The way in which participants interpreted the relationships depended on the role of the participant. The teacher participants thought there was a divide between administrators and staff, as illustrated in the following interview excerpts:

There is hostility between admin and teachers. If we want teachers to talk about or with kids in a certain way, admin needs to be a model of that talking with kids and teachers in the same way. (P5)

People are talking about [principal], saying she’s not approachable. (P7)

Admin I see as separate [from teachers]. I would love to have a different interaction with administrators - a more comfortable feeling. I have had students that don’t even know who the principals are [this year]. (P8)

Administrative participants perceived that there were strong relationships within the administrative team and felt as though they were a cohesive unit, as expressed by this participant: “The admin team shares the same vision and built relationships with one another.” Furthermore, administrative participants hoped for united, collective action between administrators and teachers as evidenced in their responses. Some of the phrases they used were indicative of a call to action where all staff work toward student success. For instance, they stressed that all the adults need to “work together,”

“develop a mindset to find best solutions to different problems,” and “take the initiative [to do what’s best for students].” In short, administrators hoped everyone would work as a team and collaborate for the good of the students and the school. The interview data did not provide insight into how the administrators viewed their relationships with teachers or whether they understood the depth of some teachers’ hostility toward them. This point will be addressed in chapter three.

The lack of healthy, collegial relationships contributed to how the participants in this study perceived and experienced school improvement initiatives at Harrison. Participants appeared to be isolated from one another. Teachers felt isolated from other teachers, and perceived that they were isolated from the administration. With little communication and community, it was not surprising to find that Harrison educators did not share strong knowledge of the reform initiatives to be implemented. It was also not surprising to find that poor relationships among the adults contributed to the low morale of the Harrison faculty.

Stress, anxiety, and low teacher morale

The culture of poor relationships at Harrison inevitably led to a climate of low morale, stress, and anxiety for the teaching staff. When participants were asked about the culture and climate at Harrison Elementary, some of the words and phrases used to describe the climate of the school included “frustration,” “chaos,” “very negative at times,” “high levels of anxiety and stress,” and “feeling powerless.” These descriptions of the school climate were related to how participants described the culture of the school. P8 described the faculty as “falling apart” and P5 said there was a “lack of unity.” In fact, P1 described teachers as “fending for themselves” and operating in “survival mode.” P7 observed a culture of “cliques,” while P9 explained, “I keep to

myself; I don't get into the mix of things." The action of forming cliques or isolating oneself may have been due to the increased stress levels and staff members feeling powerless. In a culture where there was "no trust anymore" (P8), due in part to poor relationships among staff, it was not surprising to find that most participants' knowledge of the initiatives was sketchy at best.

Other participants agreed that there was definitely a "cool" or "cold" atmosphere present at Harrison. Some felt that there was more a divide among teachers at different levels, suggesting that "upper elementary is cold. I don't find it welcoming" (P7), whereas others felt there was a gap between the teaching corps and administration. Both Participant 5 and 8 described this gap in their individual interviews:

Communication is not great...lots of frustration [teacher-teacher, teachers-admin, student-teacher]. (P5)

This year's climate is cool - people aren't feeling good. Faculty is falling apart...people feel bad about themselves [after the "opt out"]. There is a line between administration and faculty. The administration doesn't know everyone as a person, which I feel is important. (P8)

Some participants described the teachers in "survival mode," focusing on behavioral issues rather than on academic achievement. In fact, P9 confirmed this thinking during our interview: "Faculty [are] working hard and [it's] taking a toll on morale. Students are extremely challenging. . . [this] takes a toll on staff to try to be accountable for scores and student achievement." According to the participants, the high social-emotional needs of the students caused many teachers at Harrison to feel so overwhelmed in addressing these needs that academics became secondary.

The participants' words are powerful and highlight the climate of low morale and debilitating culture at Harrison Elementary. According to some participants, the

deterioration of school climate occurred during the last five years and was directly related to a culture of excessive turnover of teaching staff and administration.

Participants described the challenges Harrison educators faced in a school where “more than half of the staff turns over every year” (P4). In 2015-2016, Harrison posted its highest teacher turnover rate of 73%. The persistent high turnover meant that new teaching teams were built every year, many times with teachers new to the profession or those who lacked experience within an urban setting. Participants explained that turnover prohibits solid relationships from being formed for the long-term benefit of the school. One participant noted that both the faculty and the administrative staff have turned over rapidly: “[We’ve] had three different principals and seven different vice principals in five years. In order for something to work, it needs to be consistent for your faculty and students. I’ve never seen that here, never” (P8). P5 reported hearing colleagues say, “I can’t wait to get out of here, and it’s sad you have to stay.”

Not only can rapid turnover lead to stress and anxiety, stress and anxiety can cause turnover of staff every year, thus preventing the needed consistency in building collegial relationships and capacity to increase student achievement. As such, the high level of turnover at Harrison sheds light on why the climate was so compromised and relationships damaged among the adults. When the adults do not know or trust one another, it is not surprising to find poor communication and collaboration. The “cool” climate, as described by participants, appeared to hinder the Harrison community from forming the stable and unified culture necessary for sharing knowledge effectively and moving forward as a unified whole.

In addition to the culture of poor relationships, which had deleterious effects on the climate within the building, a second theme surfaced with respect to the participants' perceptions of the improvement initiatives. The participants' detachment from initiatives that they did not recognize as relevant to their practice or students was a predominant theme and is highlighted below.

Theme 2: Teacher Participants Lack Knowledge of Initiatives They Perceive as Irrelevant to Teacher Practice

Using the list of initiatives that I compiled with the help of the school administrators, I asked the teacher participants to comment on their knowledge of each initiative. Several of the participants stated that they had knowledge of a particular initiative but not firsthand experience in using the initiative or participating in the initiative. For example, P9 stated, "Learning walks have come in, but I have never been part of one..." (P9). This illustrates that although P9 knew about learning walks, she did not have primary knowledge of this initiative. Likewise, P8 explained that although she did not use a particular instructional model, her knowledge was based on a colleague's experience: "ESL Model...I know only because of (another teacher) talking about it and she loves it..." (P8). P7 explained that her perception of the current math department head, who provided classroom support in 2016-2017, was one of inconsistent effort.

[You] never see the math department head or the interventionists. It's always been a band aid effect. All hands on deck, [grades] three, four and five. It's always been pull, pull, pull. Interventionists came and went, they would come in for three weeks, [then] you wouldn't see them for three months. (P7)

In each example, teachers revealed how little they knew of academic initiatives that did not directly impact their classroom. While teachers might have known about the

academic initiatives, it is clear they did not fully understand them. These examples show that since these initiatives did not change the teacher participants' practice or affect their students, the teacher participants had little knowledge of them.

Teacher participants at Harrison were detached from improvement initiatives in which they or their students did not personally participate. Moreover, the lack of consistency of implementation was also cited as an issue, as explained by three teacher participants. P8 commented, "Golden Eagles are not used as much. It is more scattered" (P8), and P9 agreed when she said, "A great initiative but not being followed through a lot" (P9). Similarly, P7 expressed concern that teachers were "not passing out as many eagles as the beginning of the year." These inconsistencies in implementation as well as teachers' unfamiliarity with the reform initiatives contributed to participants' perceptions of the improvement initiatives at Harrison Elementary. Not only was the participants' knowledge, or lack thereof, related to their inability to see the relevancy of the initiatives to their practice, but it also spoke to the lack of consistency in implementing the initiatives. Both factors appeared to be related to their role at the school.

Theme 3: Participants' Role Influenced their Interpretation of Initiatives

Data analysis revealed a relationship between an individual's role at Harrison and their interpretation of the reform initiatives. In particular, administrators and teachers appeared to understand the reforms differently. In short, administrators were generally more knowledgeable about the initiatives than teachers.

Administrative role versus teacher role

Four of the nine participants held teaching positions, while the other five participants were administrators. During data analysis, it was clear that the

participants' role influenced their individual interpretations of the initiatives. The administrative participants felt that, "In most cases, they [the initiatives] are well received at first. If teachers didn't follow through they felt frustrated [behavior management]" and "[Teachers] welcomed the idea of recess, Youth Leaders and expanding Eagle Tickets. Most [teachers] are receptive, it's just a matter of owning it and being consistent that we struggle with a bit" (P1). P4 went on to explain that there were "teachers that use [academic initiatives] faithfully and there are teachers that don't use them at all" and that "[teachers] have heard what we want to see happening but it's really a [teacher's] choice as to whether they're using it or not and as an administrative team, it's our job to hold teachers accountable and we are not there yet."

The administrative participants believed that the initiatives have had impact, but the teacher corps' lack of classroom management and lack of consistency as well as the administration's lack of accountability hindered full implementation and commitment to these initiatives. Nevertheless, the administrative participants indicated that they were "happy to see initiatives in place" and follow through "as opposed to prior years" where "there was a new initiative every week—36 forms created in previous year that are no longer used and for which there was no follow-through." These administrative participants appeared to be knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the reforms. Since the administrative team developed these improvement initiatives, it is not surprising that most of them had knowledge of and could provide commentary on them.

Lack of participation

An extensive list of initiatives was generated during the administrative focus group interview. Three of the four thematic categories generated comprised non-academic initiatives, and through the interview process, a prevailing theme was revealed. The participant's role helped determine how active they were with a particular initiative. If a participant engaged in the initiative, they gained knowledge about it because it affected how they did their job. If they did not participate, the participant was not as knowledgeable about the initiative. The participant's role seems to dictate the level of participation.

Five of the nine participants indicated that although several of the initiatives sounded familiar, they could not comment on them because they had no student participation within the initiative. Further, P7 explained, "Communication about programs has not been good, teachers are not aware. Maybe heard about it in a staff meeting but no follow-up." P5 described a general understanding that encapsulates the participants' perceptions regarding the nonacademic initiatives, "[Nonacademic initiatives]...I don't know that every teacher knows about them but most do. Like SMILES, if [teachers] don't have a student, they may not know."

Other participants gave examples clarifying P5's claim, stating that they may have "heard about" the initiatives; however, if they did not participate or have a student participate, their knowledge was vague at best. The teacher participants' comments on seven of the 30 initiatives are shown in Table 2-1. Their responses highlight the assertion that communication between administration and teachers was not effective.

Table 2-1. Participant knowledge of initiatives.

Initiative	Teacher participant knowledge
SEL Counseling	<p>“Heard about but don’t have students in groups so not too sure...” (P7).</p> <p>“Know groups were mentioned but none of my kiddos taken and could probably use it” (P8).</p>
Outside Counseling	<p>“[I] didn’t know, but in past it was not consistent“(P7).</p> <p>“Not aware” (P8).</p> <p>“None [students] participate but need it” (P9).</p>
Afterschool Programming	<p>“None of my kids participate in the Science (ELL) program so I don’t know much about that” (P8).</p> <p>“21st CCCLC uses my room but can’t speak to if it’s working or not because I only see one side [using the classroom]” (P8).</p> <p>“Not available to my grade level” (P7).</p>
Attendance (closely monitored)	<p>“Not seeing that, lots of tardiness” (P8).</p> <p>“My [class] attendance is not great, chronic absences” (P9).</p>
SMILES (mentoring program)	<p>“Don’t know much about that” (P7, P8).</p>
United Neighbors/Community Partnerships	<p>“Not sure about that” (P5, P7, P8, P9).</p>
Out of School Suspension/In School	<p>“Don’t know much about that because none of my kids have had it” (P7).</p>
Suspension/Saturday School	<p>“Not sure how it has been implemented as [I] haven’t had any students that have fallen into that category” (P8).</p> <p>“None of my kids have gone to Saturday School” (P9).</p>

Further, one administrator stated, “I don’t feel like I know enough about the academic changes to really be able to comment on them...I quite often feel out of the loop in terms of academics...I think it [academics] certainly does have an impact on behavior in SEL” (P6). As a nonacademic administrator, this participant’s perception was directly related to her role. She claimed that her awareness of academic initiatives were impeded and that there was poor communication about academic changes with those who were not deemed “academic.” Each administrative participant’s role factored into their individual perceptions.

The teacher participant interviews suggested that their perceptions of the initiatives were directly related to their roles as teachers. For example, P5 explained that

clarification needed to be provided so that teachers realized that initiatives were not additional work but rather, an improved method of accomplishing school goals. P5 explained this point, “[The administrators] really had to clarify that a lot of [academic initiatives] are not in addition to what teachers were already doing but supporting what the teacher is already doing.” Teacher participants indicated that their perception of the impact of the initiatives was directly tied to their daily experiences. For example, P7 could not provide her perception of certain initiatives because the initiatives were not available to her students: “SMILES Mentoring –I don’t know much about that. It’s not for my kids anyway.” Likewise, P8 explained that she was unaware of the community partnerships aimed at helping families with hardships, “United Neighbors, is that a food program? No, I didn’t know about that.” Further, P9 explained, “I have had learning walks come in [to my classroom], but I have never been part of a learning walk, so I am not sure [of impact].” If the named initiative was used, the teacher participant could effectively comment on the initiative and its impact. If the initiative did not personally effect the teacher participant’s instruction or their students, in each case, they could not effectively comment on the initiative’s impact as explained below.

Research Question 2: Participants’ Interpretations of the Impact of New Initiatives

The participants’ interpretations of the impact of new initiatives enacted during the 2016-2017 school year was another focus of this instrumental case study. A comprehensive list was compiled and presented during interviews for participants to review. This list was loosely categorized according to academic and nonacademic (related to social-emotional learning, behavioral expectations or wraparound services/attendance/ procedures) initiatives. Participants were provided with this list ([Appendix A](#)) in order to assess their perceptions of each individual initiative. In short,

participants tended to judge the nonacademic initiatives as more impactful than the academic reforms, while they expressed concern that none of the initiatives was likely to have the intended impact because they were neither implemented with consistency and fidelity nor were the implementations being monitored.

Theme 1: Participants Judged Nonacademic Initiatives as Most Impactful

A list of 30 school reform initiatives were drafted through interviewing the administrative focus group at the onset of the study. Twenty of the 30 (67%) were nonacademic in nature. The list of the initiatives can be found in [Appendix A](#). Examples of these nonacademic initiatives included those characterized as addressing social-emotional learning such as mentoring and counseling, while others addressed student conduct such as changes to the detention process. Further, there were initiatives that were described as wraparound services, like those that addressed attendance and community partnerships. These included initiatives such as the attendance initiative, known as the Walking School Bus. The participants overwhelmingly believed that the nonacademic initiatives were the most impactful or, at least, they expressed great enthusiasm and hope for these reforms.

When reviewing the list of initiatives, P5 noted, “It is interesting that the SEL/Behavioral/Other category is larger than the academics.” P4 explained that she believed “no academic initiative could happen without the others [SEL/Behavioral/Other]” and that “they [all initiatives] have to work side-by-side in order for the school to be successful.” Throughout the study, the front-line educators I interviewed perceived the students’ behavior to be a huge obstacle to their academic progress. They declared that it was often hard for them to teach due to student behavior

issues. Several participants noted that “they cannot get to academics because of the SEL [issues].”

Except for the focus group who compiled the initiative list, all other participants cited that afterschool programs had a major impact at Harrison. For example, several participants noted the effectiveness of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program, which created afterschool opportunities for Harrison students that supported them through exposure to academic, artistic, and cultural enrichment curricula. P5 explained why this program was impactful: “[21st CCLC] gives kids a place to go, they have a snack; it is consistency for the kids who have very little consistency [in their lives].” P6 also mentioned the 21st CCLC as having a positive impact since “[the program] is great. I’d like to keep every kid here until 5:00pm...the more opportunities they have, the more successful they can be.”

Similarly, participants named other after school programs such as the EL science program as well as the elementary basketball program. P7 stated, “I have 13 [in the science program] and they love it”. P9 explained, “All these I think are definitely positive things that these kids have for afterschool programs”. Other participants noted that they thought the afterschool programs were “great”, “positive” and that they “loved it” (P4, P6, P8) since they were “drawing on kids’ successes” and that caused students “to be excited to be [at Harrison]” (P4). Participants had a general sense of enthusiasm about afterschool programs for students. The participants seem to be saying that providing “positive” experiences for students was beneficial.

Other non-academic initiatives that were most often described as having immediate impacts during the 2016-2017 school year included role changes of the

social-emotional learning (SEL) team including school adjustment counselors and behaviorists. In addition, participants noted the significance of changing the SEL team's physical location within the building from the former music room, which is physically located apart from any classrooms, to individual offices closely located to the grade level classrooms they supported. As P6 explained on this point, "We were literally running from down there either upstairs or downstairs...to get to a crisis. Since we have divided the work [and moved to locations near the classrooms we serve]...it made the most sense [to me]."

Multiple participants described the changes as being effective. P4 stated, "This year, the kids are being supported with the behavioral piece so much better than in the past [from the SEL team]." This claim was further explained as not only the physical location of the SEL team but also the services they provided. P6 explained, "[In prior years] all I did was restrain kids...that's not what school adjustment counselors do...it interferes with the clinical relationship." P6 explained that she was now able to perform the other functions of her job such as screening students for emergency interventions, providing individual or group counseling services, and coordinating referrals for a wide range of student assistance. P6 expounded that in previous years, under a different administrative team, she was not allowed to carry out the regular functions of her job. She dealt with student behaviors and conduct regularly. From the perspective of some of the participants, the new roles and location of the SEL team had an important impact on the school.

The expansion of counseling and Youth Court services were also discussed as being positive changes at Harrison. Regarding counseling, P6, whose role

encompassed counseling, explained that prior to 2016-2017, “We weren’t even allowed to offer counseling groups.” Although participants explained the counseling provided by school personnel still needed improvement because of other demands on the SEL team during the school day, such as emergency screening and monitoring attendance, the outside counseling services had been restructured. P6 explained,

The difference this year is that we are trying to streamline and use two agencies with two counselors. That means we have a caseload here versus multiple counselors. The continuity of care [provided] is helpful when the outside counselor is based here [at Harrison] and to see how the building functions, to see the population, to be more part of the team versus outside clinicians that just come in to serve the kid, and then leave. I think this [new] model is better for our kids.

P6 was hopeful about this reform. Although she could not provide evidence that proved impact, she viewed this reform as a “good idea.”

Youth Court is a program that is based on the principles of restorative justice for students who have committed minor misdemeanor crimes. Students appear before a jury of peers who have the goal of helping them build the necessary skills that will help them to productively reconnect with the community. In years past, this program was not effectively administered at Harrison. The participants explained, “The administrative liaison went out on leave and so no one made referrals” (P6). P9 commented on how effective this program was in this school year since it was being administered on a consistent basis, “Youth Court has definitely helped my students. They [Youth Court workers] check in once a week, and I am in touch with the Youth Court person that is in charge of the student, which is great. [The program] has been very, very helpful” (P9). Other participants (P5 and P8) also mentioned that this initiative was “good” or “helpful” for students but provided no additional evidence to support a claim of impact.

A variety of other initiatives were mentioned as positive and successful in the 2016-2017 school year. Categorically, these items were all congruent with showcasing students in a positive manner. For example, a program called Youth Leaders was introduced, which emphasizes students' positive behavior and recognizes students for being role models. P8 noted that bringing this program into the school "highlights the positives of children," and P4 reiterated that the program was "[highlighting students] doing positive things in the classroom and [students were] talking about it a lot." P6 agreed that "students are highlighted in a positive way and that helps shift the culture" at Harrison. There was also a sense of accountability since P7 claimed, "[Students] take on more responsibilities" as well as a feeling of accomplishment since "[students] are happy and look forward to it." P9 explains that "[students] are very excited about [Youth Leaders]. The kids want to work toward it and have taken it very seriously."

Likewise, other social-emotional initiatives were mentioned as impactful by all participants. These included the changes in recess structures and location as well as the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support System (PBIS). P4 explained, "Kids are happier this year knowing they will have recess." Two other participants also stated, "Definitely the recess on the field [has been great]" and "Using the field [for recess]. This is the first time we've been able to do that and that is excellent" (P8 and P9). P6 succinctly described how the PBIS initiatives had impact,

The PBIS strategies are positive initiatives that shift the culture. In the past it wasn't a priority and it wasn't highlighted. Awards ceremonies were maybe once a semester or quarter. The most significant shift is the schoolwide routine ways of recognizing students that are doing the right thing.

Yet another initiative that three participants viewed as highly successful was the Walking School Bus, developed to address chronic absenteeism at Harrison. Harrison

staff volunteered to walk a 1.25 mile route around the surrounding neighborhood and picked students up at five different “stops.” P4 shared, “I know firsthand that the Walking School Bus helped two kids in particular with attendance because we have a lot of chronic absence.” P5 explained that this initiative was “great” and also stated that “we have been considering changing the route to include more kids.” P7 also added, “[Walking School Bus] is good for reaching out to the community to help [parents] get their kids to school.”

Although participants rarely cited data when they claimed that many of the nonacademic reform initiatives had been impactful at Harrison, some of their claims actually are supported by end-of-year data. For example, conduct referrals decreased over the course of the 2016-2017 school year, and physical restraints dramatically decreased as well. Conduct data indicated that referrals decreased between September and June. For instance, the total referrals for October 2016 were 372. By June 2017, those numbers dropped to 149. Restraint data trends also indicate a significant decrease. In October 2016, there were 96 total restraints for the month, but at the conclusion of the school year, as of June 26, 2017, monthly restraints totaled seven.

Participants also revealed that there was an overall feeling of consistency and follow-through in practices at the end of the school year that did not exist at the beginning. P6 explained, “[Initiatives] are implemented and ... there is follow through. Things this year are more thoughtful and less reactionary...we’ll try things then reevaluate.” From a historical perspective, P6 suggested that in the three years she had worked at Harrison, the 2016-2017 school year was the first time there was not only consistency in enacting initiatives but a proactive rather than a reactive approach. She

further explained, “In the past, there was a new initiative every week but never follow through. Thirty-six forms were created [in the previous year] and are no longer used. Crazy.”

Participants perceived that some of the school reform initiatives—particularly those that addressed nonacademic elements of school life—did indeed have an impact at Harrison. They also expressed enthusiastic hope that the reforms would bear fruit. However, there was also a general consensus that the academic and nonacademic initiatives were not as effective as they might have been.

Theme 2: Participants Perceived That Initiatives Were Not Effectively Implemented

Although participants deemed many of the improvement initiatives to be impactful, there was also dissension about their impact. This was due to implementation that participants perceived lacked consistency, fidelity, and monitoring. These concerns were mentioned by each of the participants whose role was that of an instructional leader. P4 explained that although she observed some teachers implementing academic initiatives, she observed other teachers who were not implementing them:

There are teachers that use [4W/CUBES] faithfully and there are teachers that don't use it at all. Out of the five grade level teams, I'll probably see one or two teachers [per grade level] that use it in their classroom. Some teachers are not making the connection that in order for this to work as a whole school that we need to be actively working on it together and taking it on.

P4's concern was that because all teachers were not implementing the initiative, it was unlikely to have the desired impact on students.

Some of the participants cited that consistency is critical to reach success throughout the school. For example, P5 commented, “If we are all doing [the consistent practice] in grade two, then when [students] get to grade three, they already have a

foundation in this [the concepts]. The consistency's built in and that's part of the success." The lack of follow through also was mentioned as impacting the rollout of initiatives, "I think some of the teachers, if they didn't follow through, or if they weren't consistent, they felt frustrated with that. And then kind of gave up on the process" (P1).

P4 claimed,

[We need] continued work on initiatives. It needs to be ongoing throughout the whole year in order for it to stick. You can't just introduce something and then not talk about it for a couple of months and bring it up for like ten minutes during PLT and say, Are we going to do this? I feel like it's going to have to be constantly looked again and again, with that vision of why are we doing this?

This point regarding consistency of implementation is related to some of the participants' observation that staff need to be held accountable for accurately enacting improvement initiatives. P4 makes this point in the following statement:

I know I need to go in and really hold my teachers accountable for continuing that work that we've worked so hard on because the teachers will work so hard during PLT on what they want to do on creating a plan, but not all of them are implementing it. That's on me [as an administrator].

The participants described the lack of monitoring and accountability at Harrison as another reason why the reform initiatives were not as impactful as they could have been. For example, P4 explained, "Consistency is not there, and I feel like they [teachers] know. They've heard the messages about these initiatives and what [administration] wants to see happening, but it's really their choice as to whether they're using [initiative] or not." P5 reiterated, "For the academic initiatives, the biggest piece is monitoring, and it has been difficult to monitor because of the behavior piece. The academic [initiatives] get overlooked because [we] are all tied up with behaviors." The missing accountability element has made it difficult for the improvement initiatives to achieve the effectiveness the administrative participants had hoped for in 2016-2017.

Research Question 3: Participants' View of Future School Improvement at Harrison: Optimism and Hope

Regardless of the lack of consistency, accountability, and monitoring, eight of nine participants were optimistic about school improvement at Harrison Elementary. Specifically, participants claimed that they were “excited” (P4 and P9), “optimistic” (P5), “hopeful” (P6), and “looking forward to next year” (P7). P1 used an apt metaphor to describe the school reform process underway at Harrison when she said, “It’s a marathon, not a sprint.” It is evident that this participant understood that the school reform process takes time, stamina, and consistency in order to be successful. P3, an administrator, explained the general feeling she perceived in the school:

We are positive because we are working together, but we are taking it a day at a time. We have great days, and we have other days that are not so great, but we are taking those days as experience to come back the next day stronger. We are not giving up. We are here to support the students, and we know that we are going to make this school a level one.

This feeling described by P3 was significant. In spite of the myriad issues at Harrison, participants were beginning to feel that the school reforms held promise for the students and staff.

Similarly, other participants claimed that they were optimistic. P4 affirmed that she was “excited for the change.” This sentiment was echoed by P5 who explained that although they were in “a rut, not making much of a difference,” he now felt “actually really excited and very hopeful.” P7 admitted that the 2016-2017 school year had been “very stressful,” but as the school year came to a close, she felt energized. She explained, “[Next year] is something to look forward to. We’ll turn [Harrison] around. This [year] has been a step in the right direction.” Like the other participants, P6 noted, “I’m positive and I’m optimistic and more hopeful than I have ever been.” P6 had worked

at Harrison for three years and stated, “This is the first year that there have been positive changes in terms of the culture and climate.” P6 provided an example of positive change:

At the beginning of the year, there were literally kids running around the building with multiple people chasing them all day long. That still happens but not to the extent that it did at the beginning of the year so it’s less frequent, and then the kids that do run, the duration of their runs or elopements out of the room is shorter.

Improved student conduct was only one of the reasons participants cited for their optimism for school reform. Participants explained that not only had conduct improved but school reform had been welcomed by staff as a new beginning. P7 explained, “The kids [enrolled at Harrison] aren’t changing so either get on board or get out. This is it. I just want to walk out of here [when I retire] and say, ‘We turned it.’ Just to see that improvement [happen].” P6 said that she was eager to get started with others who are determined to take part in the difficult work of school reform. P5 agreed that the initiatives marked a new beginning and a new way to think about the work that needs to be done: “If you’ve been doing this for four years, and within that four years, this has been the data, then maybe that is not working and we need to try something else.”

While most participants felt hopeful and optimistic, two of the participants were more tentative. P9 described feeling “nervous” during the time of the study. She further explained:

Change is good but can be very scary. I’m very nervous about scores not going up. I’m nervous about being held accountable for scores in my room. I’m nervous about next year. I’m nervous about the workload. I’m not saying that I don’t think I can do it. I’m just nervous about learning what that’s going to take.

The feelings that P9 exhibited are commonplace for a teacher in a failing school. The fear of the unknown with respect to accountability and workload can be paralyzing.

Fortunately, P9 was also excited and hopeful as she explained, “I’m excited because at least I hope we’re getting more help here. I hope the changes are going to be for the better, and I hope it has a positive effect.” As a teacher with professional status in the district, she had the ability to “opt out” of her position at Harrison and work at another school in the district. It is significant to note that P9 remained in her position for the 2017-2018 school year.

Similarly, P8 was unsure about the future of school reform at Harrison. She explained, “I’m curious about what it will be like next year. It’s one thing to be told this is going to happen, but actually living it is going to be challenging and demanding and it makes me unsure.” Inevitably, P8 opted herself out of her job at Harrison shortly after the study concluded and was reassigned to work at another school in the district.

Conclusion

The findings for this study revealed that participants had widely varying knowledge of the reform initiatives at Harrison Elementary. While some participants, particularly the lead school administrators, had detailed knowledge of the reform initiatives, the teachers tended to have much less knowledge. I found that the study participants’ knowledge of the improvement initiatives was shaped by the debilitating culture and climate at Harrison. This culture, in turn, was reshaped by the deteriorating relationships among staff and the low morale they experienced. The lack of healthy, collegial relationships contributed to how the participants in this study perceived and experienced school improvement initiatives at Harrison. Participants appeared to be isolated from one another: teachers felt isolated from other teachers, and teachers perceived that they were isolated from the administration. The teacher participants also

revealed that they had little knowledge of initiatives that they did not perceive as relevant to their practice or their students.

Regarding participants' views of the impact of reform initiatives, participants judged the nonacademic initiatives as having the most impact, perhaps because this category had more initiatives, but more likely because they viewed these initiatives as helpful in addressing the many social-emotional issues they observed in Harrison students. Nevertheless, participants, administrators in particular, perceived that improvement initiatives were not as effective as they might have been. This is because they believed the initiatives were neither implemented consistently and with fidelity nor was the implementation of the initiatives closely monitored. Finally, most participants were optimistic about the promise of school improvement at Harrison Elementary. In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings, consider how the findings contribute to the existing research, provide implications of the findings for school-based administrators and teachers, and describe next steps I will take given the knowledge I have generated in this study.

CHAPTER 3 DISCUSSION

School reform has claimed the attention of educators, lawmakers, parents, and pundits for decades. For the vast majority of students attending failing schools that have adopted reform efforts, there is modest positive movement to report. In fact, most school reform efforts have done little to positively impact student educational outcomes for the long term (Ravitch, 2010). Research shows that students who attend failing schools often never overcome the learning experiences they missed (Kozol, 1991). Therefore, it is crucial that we study ways to convert failing schools into successful schools for all of our children.

Successful school reform is attainable, but it is a process that takes time and can take “3-5 years of steady effort” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p.110). Common factors for attaining successful school reform include garnering an initial learning from data and reflection on improvement efforts as well as building the capacity toward new knowledge across the entire school. Successful school improvements focus on the ability of the principal to effectively manage and motivate a productive environment. This environment allows for the building of teachers’ capacity, empowering them to increase their efficacy in order to carry out necessary improvements. In turn, the collaborative organization, both administration and teachers, continually work toward implementing, reflecting on, and improving school reforms, fostering a successful school.

Since every school is different, the particulars of a school’s context must be examined in order to determine how to proceed when enacting school change. Many confounding factors contribute to the success or failure of school reform, and as such,

there is a need to study these factors. Through careful collection and analysis of data, I used an instrumental case study approach in this study of Harrison Elementary. This approach enabled me to deepen my understanding of how Harrison fell to its current Level 4 status, what changes were deemed appropriate, how participants understood these changes, how participants assessed the impact of the changes, and how participants viewed the future of school improvement at Harrison. For me as a practitioner scholar, this work addressed the most pressing problem in my current professional life.

The following three research questions guided this study:

- What is the participants' knowledge of the new initiatives enacted during the 2016-2017 academic year at Harrison Elementary School?
- How do the participants interpret the impact of these new initiatives?
- How do participants view the future of school improvement at Harrison Elementary School?

Over a six week period, interview data were collected from nine study participants. Data analysis revealed six findings, which I categorized by sub-question and outline below.

Regarding the participants' knowledge of the new initiatives, I found that three factors shaped their knowledge: (1) the culture and climate at Harrison; (2) the relevancy of the initiatives to teachers' practice and students; and (3) the participant's role at the school. First, their knowledge was shaped by the debilitating culture and climate at Harrison. The data revealed that the instability of consistent staff, both teachers and administration, negatively affected adult relationships at the school. Because of the constant influx of new staff, relationships were difficult to establish and nurture. A manifestation of the challenging relationships was low teacher morale fueled by stress and anxiety as well as high teacher turnover. This factor chiefly promoted a

cool climate, and this cool climate hindered the Harrison community from forming the stable and unified culture necessary to propel the school to success.

In addition, the teacher participants' knowledge was shaped by the relevancy of the initiatives to the teacher's practice or their students. The teachers were detached from improvement initiatives in which they themselves or their students did not personally participate. In many cases, the teachers were unaware or their understanding was cursory at best. The disjointedness between the reform initiatives and the teachers' lack of understanding contributes to participants' perceptions of the improvement initiatives at Harrison Elementary.

Further, the participants' role influenced the ways in which each participant interpreted the initiatives. The participants who worked in an administrative role felt that the initiatives were initially well received, but due to behavior management issues, teachers felt frustrated and were not consistent with the implementation of the improvement initiatives. The teacher participants' interviews suggest that their perceptions of the initiatives were directly related to their role and their daily experiences. If the named initiative was used, the teacher participants could effectively comment on the initiative and its impact. If the initiative did not personally affect the teacher participants' classroom instruction or their students, in each case, they could not effectively comment on the initiative's impact.

Regarding the participants' interpretation of the impact of school improvement initiatives, two factors influenced the participants' interpretation of impact: (1) the nature of the improvement initiative, and (2) the lack of effectiveness of the initiative.

Participants judged the nonacademic initiatives as having the most impact, although participants perceived that improvement initiatives were not as effective as they might have been. This is because the participants felt the initiatives were not implemented consistently and with fidelity, nor were the initiatives closely monitored. Most of the nonacademic initiatives that were deemed effective were those that accentuated students in a positive way or were in some way tied to social-emotional learning initiatives. At the end of the 2016-2017 academic year, conduct referrals decreased over the course of the year, and participants reported that disruptive student behaviors also diminished.

Finally, with respect to participants' views of the future of school improvement at Harrison Elementary School, most participants were optimistic about the promise of school improvement at Harrison Elementary. Although there are significant issues that face Harrison, the participants were beginning to feel that the school reforms and the turnaround process held promise for the students and staff.

The findings in this study emphasize the need to establish a healthy, collaborative culture among school personnel who wish to implement school reform in which all staff members communicate effectively across roles. This collaborative culture will ensure that all educators are working toward improving student learning outcomes. Further, when implementing school improvement initiatives, it is vital to consistently monitor the initiatives so when they are introduced, all administrators and teachers are held accountable for their effective implementation. In the following section, I describe the ways in which this study of educators' perceptions and interpretations of school improvement initiatives contributes to the existing literature on the topic.

Contributions to the Literature

As noted in the literature review, there are various components in the school reform process as the process is dynamic, multifaceted, and complex. Fullan (1993) asserts that schools “have a moral purpose to make a difference in the lives of students” (p.4). Therefore, we need to consider that schools are laboratories of learning for administration, teachers, and students. As such, administration and teachers have a shared purpose: to learn and effectively change schools to give students the best opportunity to be productive and successful citizens. This study focused on the beginning of school improvement initiatives at Harrison Elementary during their initial stages of enacting school reform. Below, I outline how the findings connect to the literature.

School Culture and Strong Relationships

School reform literature recognizes that cultivating relationships within a school is central to establishing a culture of continuous improvement. The first and most crucial aspect of school reform is improving school culture. According to Fullan (1993, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2011), re-culturing a school is typically needed and is achieved by school leadership and educators working together to cultivate student success. As stated previously, school climate and school culture are interrelated ideas. While culture comprises the beliefs and values evident in how a school operates, school climate is defined as the attitude of the school (Gruenert, 2008; Peterson & Deal, 1998). Climate is a manifestation of school culture in that it is a collective feeling that people display as they act and react in the organization. Culture is comprised of an overarching common set of beliefs and expectations that dictate actions that then cultivates a particular kind of climate (Fullan, 2007; Gruenert, 2008; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2017). The participants’

knowledge of improvement initiatives at Harrison was related to the debilitating culture and climate. As Fullan (2007) states, when teachers question and change their beliefs, that is how a school is re-cultured. School administrators and teachers must be urged to question the status quo in order to shift the culture. As Fullan (1993, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2011) claims, improving the culture at Harrison must be the first step in an effective school change process.

The participants in this study noted that, while there may be pockets of collegial relationships among grade level teams, there is no consistency across the entire staff. This evidence confirms what school reform literature supports—there is a need to build strong relationships for reforms to be effective. Fullan (2007, 2011) asserts that schools in need of reform must recognize that all successful strategies are based on strong relationships in a school and are action oriented. Improving relationships is at the center of all successful change initiatives. Supportive relationships lead to collaboration on a plan of action (Fullan, 2007).

Communication is Paramount

Fullan (2011) maintains that “communication during implementation is far more important than communication prior to implementation” (p. 73). All participants who are responsible for enacting school change efforts must be privy to the elements of the initiative as well as understanding its purpose. According to Fullan (2011), if two-way communication exists between the different levels of a school, problems can be identified and implementation of reform initiatives revised as needed. This helps in solving problems collaboratively as “...a “we” (rather than “us-them”) identity around a common vision” (p. 74). The study showed that teacher participants had little knowledge of initiatives that they did not perceive as relevant to their practice or their students. The

teacher participants' ambiguous understanding of enacted initiatives is related to ineffective communication. The lack of communication between administration and teachers and among teachers created feelings of isolation, which resulted in the "us-them," or in some cases me-them, identity at the school.

Exacerbating this problem was the perception of administrators who thought the goals and requirements of the initiatives were clearly communicated to teachers. The lone nonacademic administrator and the teachers did not agree. In this study, it was clear that the administration and teachers were not working together to create a common vision so "people come to know the implementation strategy" (Fullan, 2011, p. 74). If communication channels are effective, all members of school staff will know the purpose of the school reform initiatives, how they are to be implemented, and how they are being monitored for effectiveness. The experience at Harrison, based on this study, reinforces the idea found in the literature that communication is paramount when implementing school reform initiatives.

Professional development

It is evident from the findings that professional development must be delivered to not only build teacher capacity but also to allow reform initiatives at Harrison to be consistently implemented and monitored closely. Learning that is situated in a teacher's context and that is authentic, or that encompasses ordinary practices of a culture (Putnam & Borko, 2000), is most beneficial to educators since it mirrors what they do in their daily roles. According to Webster-Wright (2009), professional development opportunities must be authentic and match the theoretical (what an educator learns in a course) to the practical (what an educator does at work every day). The literature on professional development is clear—in order for teachers to benefit, professional learning

must be situated in the context of the teacher to be authentic and match theory to practice, which in turn transforms teacher practice (Dufour, 2004; Fullan, 2007; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009). Based on participants' observations, professional learning time (PLT), which is Harrison's professional development, was ineffective; those who led PLTs were often unable to secure teacher buy-in. The culture of disunity and lack of communication made it difficult for any successful professional development to occur.

Professional collaboration

School reform literature (Fullan, 2007; Dufour, 2004; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008) suggests that schools cultivate collaboration where all levels of staff have a voice in developing the collaborative environment necessary to initiate teachers' motivation to work together in effective professional learning communities. Collaboration is at the center of all successful professional relationships. Fullan (2007) promotes "deep engagement with their colleagues and with mentors in exploring, refining, and improving their practice as well as setting up an environment in which this not only can happen but is encouraged, rewarded, and pressed to happen" (p. 55). Fullan (2007, 2011) states that this work builds collective capacity or cultivates the working together of individuals. Gruenert and Whitaker (2017) note that "struggling schools have the greatest need for collaboration" because "in schools where the students have more challenging backgrounds, the gap in student results between the best teacher and the least effective teacher can be much wider" (p. 73). Throughout the study, the findings support that an overall collaborative environment was lacking at Harrison. This was shown through the poor relationships as well as the isolation that the teacher's felt, which was reflected in

their vague understanding of initiatives that they perceived as irrelevant to their practice or their students

While the administrative participants overwhelmingly believed that they, as the administrative team, were working together effectively, there was not the same feeling about the teaching corps or from the teacher participants. One administrative participant stated, “[All school staff] needs to come together—we have to be honest with each other and we have to take our strengths and weaknesses and work with that. I don’t see that yet.”

Teacher participants felt differently. Teachers felt alienated from administration to some degree; therefore, teachers felt there was a barrier in the collaborative environment present at Harrison. According to Fullan (2011), collaboration “involves purposeful, focused working together that gets results precisely because it motivates the masses to innovate and to commit to improvement” (p.108). It is incumbent on the administration at Harrison to be reflective about their interactions with all staff in order to build those critical, collaborative relationships necessary to improve the school.

Building Capacity and Accountability

Building capacity is a critical component of effective school reform as it “involves everything you do that effects new knowledge, skills and competencies; enhanced resources; and strong commitment” (Fullan 2007. p. 252). The literature suggests that capacity building can be accomplished through distributed leadership, including teacher leadership, as well as ongoing professional development, including collaborative professional learning opportunities such as those afforded by high functioning PLCs as enumerated above (Dufour, 2004; Fullan, 2007; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009).

The participants noted that when implementing reform initiatives, consistency and monitoring are both needed. The missing accountability element made it difficult for the improvement initiatives to achieve the effectiveness the administrative participants had hoped for in 2016-2017.

School reform literature suggests that effective school leadership requires leaders to be learners who cause positive movement in a school (Fullan, 2007, 2011). In order to cause positive movement, we must expand efforts to build the capacity of teachers to impact student achievement. Building the capacity of teachers is difficult when there is a lack of unity, communication, collaboration, and a belief among teachers that they are on their own, which was evident at Harrison.

Teacher Leadership

Fullan (2007, 2011) suggests that schools must leverage leadership, and leaders must develop other leaders within a school. Hargraves and Fink (2006) assert that “sustainable leadership spreads. It sustains as well as depends on the leadership of others” (p. 95). One way to leverage leadership is through empowering teachers through teacher leadership.

Teacher leadership has the power to effect educational change, since teachers can build connections to students, other teachers, and administrators. If teacher leaders work in a collective manner with other constituents at a school, their impact on teaching and learning can be significant. Scholars assert that, since teachers are practitioners who are vested in their schools, teacher leadership is an effective way to enact school reform. Teachers can best advocate for change where it is most impactful—on the front lines in the classroom with their students (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Schmoker, 2004). Likewise, when teacher leaders are part of the administrative structure, acquiring

responsibility and taking part in the decision making process, this creates commitment and a willingness to enact the emergent decisions (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Yendol-Silva, Gimbert & Nolan, 2000; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

The literature on teacher leadership is apparent—teacher leaders are change agents in the school reform process. There were no opportunities, however, for teacher leadership at the time of my study, and the findings in this study support that teacher leadership was lacking at Harrison. As Lieberman and Miller (2004) suggest, teacher leaders “are stewards for an invigorated profession” (p.13). The teachers at Harrison did not appear “invigorated,” but instead described the tension and hostility evident in what they called a toxic environment. Teachers felt their voices were not valued, so they did not believe they had an important role in changing Harrison Elementary. The one finding that might predict an “invigorated profession” in the future is the teachers’ optimism that the next year would be better.

Teacher leadership can have an extreme impact if employed during school reform efforts. Teacher leadership could help support the myriad of new staff and foster the feeling that Harrison is a place of support and not trial by fire. The lack of unity and the feeling among teachers that they were on their own indicates a lack of leadership from administration and among teachers. This lack of leadership helped create a culture of detachment that did not support school reform initiatives. Administrators were not empowering teachers to take on leadership roles, as the literature deems necessary for the successful implementation of reform initiatives (Fullan 2007, 2011; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). The consistently high staff turnover rate at Harrison was evidence that teachers and administrators did not feel empowered to fulfill their role at the school.

Based on the literature, teacher capacity is strengthened and excessive turnover minimized when staff feels supported and know they can rely on both teachers and administrative staff for whatever assistance they need.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study generated implications for practice for various groups of educators. In this section, I discuss the implications for school administrators, classroom teachers, and district leadership.

Implications for School Administrators

As this is my first time working in a Level 4 school, there is much I and the other administrators at Harrison need to learn. Although we have varied experiences, including some who have worked in other Level 4 schools, no two environments are precisely the same; therefore, we all must be open-minded about the important and intense work that lies ahead.

One main learning experience that I can take away from this study is that it is incumbent upon administrators to be communicative and approachable. It was disheartening for me as the researcher, and also as an administrator to realize how teachers perceived their relationship, or lack thereof, with administration. I was surprised that there was such a tremendous gap between what administration believed with respect to their communication with teachers versus what teachers' perceptions were about the administration. It was eye-opening to realize that, although administration felt their communication with teachers was effective, the teachers did not perceive communication the same way. It is essential that administrators be reflective about their practice and consistently make the effort to build effective relationships with all staff in order to motivate them and create a healthy work environment.

In addition, it is critical to proactively monitor everything that is considered to be an improvement within the confines of the school. As administrators, we need to be empathetic while at the same time holding ourselves and the entire staff accountable to enact whatever is needed to increase academic and social-emotional student learning and success. Ultimately, through holding ourselves accountable, we are raising the bar for student achievement and success.

According to Fullan (2007), we must “assume that the lack of capacity within a school is the initial problem and then work on it continuously” (p. 44). In this study, it was evident that the focus on teacher capacity was minimal. The findings indicate that the reasons for this are related to the considerable behavioral issues present at Harrison. In fact, the academic initiatives outlined by administration were not considered as having the most impact during 2016-2017, but rather those initiatives categorized as social-emotional or behavioral initiatives were considered most impactful. This was attributed to the initiatives that focus on and highlight the positive behavior of students. Therefore, in addition to the continued emphasis on the social-emotional and behavioral initiatives, Harrison must focus on building teacher capacity to improve learning outcomes for all students. As administrators support and invest in building teacher capacity, teacher efficacy will improve, impacting student outcomes.

In enacting school reform, it is also important for administrators to consistently provide job-embedded professional development (JEPD) opportunities for teachers. JEPD is based on day-to-day teaching practice and is designed to enhance teachers’ instructional practices with the intent of improving student learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hirsh, 2009). Teachers can benefit from this ongoing and

collaborative learning since it requires the consistency and reevaluation necessary to increase capacity. If professional development focuses on the daily workings of educators, pushing them to recognize their role in establishing the change needed in their practice will help them understand the purpose for this learning.

As a result of this study, I also came to understand that the number of school change initiatives enacted at any one time must be small enough so they can be managed well through the implementation process. As Harrison began the school change process with a new administration team in place, the data showed that 30 initiatives were enacted, implemented, and monitored, which was a valiant effort in beginning this process but nearly impossible to effectively manage. As we move into 2017-2018, it will be important to redefine roles on the administrative team so that each administrator is responsible for monitoring different aspects of school change happening at Harrison. In this way, each is holding themselves accountable for their piece of the collective reforms, while being aware of what is working or not working so adjustments may be made.

Administrators also need to build collegial relationships with teaching staff. The data showed that teachers did not feel connected to administration and, in fact, felt hostility toward administration. It is important that administrators attend closely their relationships with teachers. If teachers do not feel valued or respected by administration, they will continue to feel alienated from the school institution and the culture will continue to suffer as a result.

To build relationships with teachers, administrators need to employ what Fullan (2011) calls the change leader framework. This framework indicates six attributes that

are needed to be a successful change leader: (1) It is necessary to know that you are doing this work for the long haul, and you must “be resolute” (Fullan, 2011, pp. 153-154), working patiently and persistently even when things are not going well; (2) Creating conditions for others to develop ownership through doing helps “motivate the masses” and creates opportunities for shared commitment (pp. 153-154). (3) Using pressure and support to “collaborate to compete” strengthens collective commitment and the push for greater performance (pp. 153-154); (4) Being a confident learner and always knowing that you will not be successful every time means you will “learn confidently” even through challenges (pp. 153-154); You must “know your impact” by getting specific in the use of data and not allowing yourself to be misled by the massive amount of information available (pp. 153-154); and (6) The best way to change leadership is to learn in your context and improve upon it. It is much more effective to improve what we practice rather than improve a theoretical principle. Successful change is both simple and complex, what Fullan calls “simplexity.” “Practice drives theory and sustains simplexity,” which means change can be simple to describe and difficult to execute (pp. 153-154)

Knowing that the change process is difficult but rewarding work, it will be important for the principal and the administrative team to keep this framework in mind to successfully accomplish school reform at Harrison.

Finally, it is incumbent upon administration to facilitate the turnaround of Harrison Elementary School through improved student achievement. It was clear from the data in this study that Harrison students suffer from a myriad of trauma due to their social-emotional needs, which was highlighted by the participants. Through the continued

effort of educating the whole child, meeting both their academic and social-emotional needs will improve the learning outcomes for students. Engaging students in their education will allow them to thrive and improve their educational opportunities, allowing them to become agents of their future.

Implications for Classroom Teachers

The findings show that better communication, collegiality, and teacher leadership are all aspects that need to be infused into the teaching corps. In order for school reform to be impactful, teachers need to know the purpose of school reform initiatives and consistently implement and be accountable for enacting these initiatives.

Throughout this study, it was apparent that teachers felt disconnected from the improvement initiatives that did not affect their teaching practice or their students. This can be attributed to ineffective communication on the part of administration and on the part of teachers. Although administration cited that teachers were aware of initiatives, the data say otherwise.

Collegiality also must play an important part in the working conditions at Harrison. According to Fullan (1991), “there is plenty of evidence to show that collegiality and collaboration among teachers is indeed part and parcel of sustained improvement” (p. 6). Teachers must create a symbiotic work environment where continuous improvement is a focus for teachers and for students. The data from this study emphasizes the need for a collegial environment where individuals are professional but also kind. The relationships described by the participants denote a toxic working environment overrun by “cliques” and teachers “feeling powerless” and “fending for themselves.” Teachers must strive to create a positive environment where all feel respected. This will help combat the toxicity that was present during the study.

In addition, teachers should seek out teacher leadership roles at Harrison. These roles may be formal, such as working as a new teacher leader as provided for in the Harrison turnaround plan or as a member of the Instructional Leadership Team. These roles also may be informal: a team member who assists and mentors new staff, who voluntarily provides professional development for staff, or who advocates for students or staff to administration. The inclusion of teacher leadership at Harrison will help in the improvement efforts, since more teachers will have a voice in the decision making process as they move into these roles. As an administrator, it will be important to encourage and support teachers to assume active leadership roles at Harrison. By providing mentorship to the teacher leaders, this will bolster their ability to carry out their new role in supporting teachers.

Implications for District Leadership

As Harrison moves into year one of the turnaround process, it is important for district leadership to provide ongoing support for the school. My study points to three actions for district leaders who intend to support school improvement.

First, district leadership should support Harrison's efforts to improve instruction and student achievement. This can be done through providing district professional development opportunities for staff as well as securing additional grant money for the purpose of building the capacity of Harrison staff.

Second, district leadership should support the distributed leadership model at Harrison. Through flattening the administrative structure, teacher leaders can be an integral part in the turnaround process at Harrison. Giving teachers a voice in Harrison's reform efforts will not only create buy-in among all teaching staff, but it will also show teachers that the district is investing in them as instructional leaders.

Finally, district leaders must monitor the progress of Harrison's turnaround plan through utilizing regular check-ins and meetings between Harrison staff and members of the district leadership team. It is important to note that district leadership will also be held accountable by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for this purpose.

Implications for School Improvement

When participants were asked how they were feeling going into the 2017-2018 school year, overwhelmingly, participants were full of hope. While some evidence pointed to improvement in student conduct as the 2016-2017 school year came to a close, the data pointed toward a general feeling of "we can do this," as explained by all participants except for one. This can be attributed to the sense of optimism along with the belief that it was important for school reform to happen at Harrison. Some of the reforms were deemed "helpful" if participants saw a change in student behavior as a result of the initiative. As stated previously, the non-academic initiatives were considered most impactful. Moving forward, there will be more accountability data that will indicate if school improvements are indeed moving the needle toward increasing student achievement.

Next Steps

As a practitioner researcher who, at the time of this study, was an administrative intern at Harrison, the results of this study have encouraged me to take on an active administrative role to assist all staff in the turnaround effort at Harrison. As such, I have taken on a new position at Harrison as Redesign Coach. In this role, I can support all staff members as they embark on school improvement, including monitoring the turnaround plan to ensure that it is carried out with fidelity and that all staff are

accountable to its goals. In this role, I will work toward being the type of administrator who communicates effectively and supports every level of staff in the challenging but rewarding work ahead. As an educator, I have always given my whole self to my work—collaborating with others, both formally and informally, mentoring other teachers, being open to new ideas and enacting them for improvement in my own classroom and across my department, and advocating for what is best for students. This will not change, but I expect that in this new role, my sphere of influence expands.

It is clear from the findings in this study that the school culture needs to be revamped. Although this will take time, the first steps in doing so have already begun. Celebrations of successes, team building, and focusing on student achievement have already started but need to be consistently applied. Professional development was delivered for two weeks over the summer of 2017 to help all staff build connections to one another and prepare for the first year of turnaround work. The feeling of wanting to be part of a staff who care for and support one another, come what may, must be the goal if the culture is going to shift. This culture shift must occur for the school reform process to be successful. It is my intention to work with both administration and staff to ensure that this happens. To improve the culture at Harrison, we need to instill open and honest communication between and among administration and teachers as well as consistently cultivating a culture of acceptance so all staff feel that there is not a division between staff or between administration and teachers.

While I recognize that I am an administrator at Harrison, I wish also to remain close to what happens daily in the classroom. I intend to support teachers through instructional coaching as well as strengthen professional learning communities (PLC) at

Harrison. This will be realized through coaching cycles and helping teachers to be reflective in order to establish goals for their practice. In addition, I will deliver professional development through PLC meetings, helping teachers craft purposeful curricula that is engaging and that will meet the needs of our students to improve their academic and social-emotional achievement. In doing this, it is my objective to build teacher capacity and also impart a willingness for teacher leadership to ensue.

Since this study only focused on the perceptions of the beginning of school improvement initiatives at Harrison, further studies should focus on the entire cycle of school reform in turnaround schools and what can be learned throughout the process. This will be important as we continue through a time of increasing accountability measures where schools will continue to seek ways to improve.

Further, there are implications from this study that point to future research in establishing an analytical approach to school reform and possibly developing a metric for schools in the beginning stages of school improvement. This may be helpful as a framework to determine what is working, what is not working, and ways to ensure the beginning stages of school reform improve.

Conclusion

This study revealed that to effectively enact school reform, the school environment must be one where strong relationships are promoted among all staff so a healthy school culture is in place where school reform can be successful. Administration must not only work to build these relationships but also communicate clearly so that all staff know the purpose of school reform, support school reform, consistently implement it, and be accountable for enacting school reform initiatives. Further, instructional leaders must encourage and implement effective professional development and

collaboration focused on building teacher capacity, implementing school change consistently, and monitoring both closely. Finally, effective teacher leadership where teachers are empowered to use their voices in making a successful reform process materialize must be realized at Harrison. Working in unison, this will help the impending school turnaround to be successful at Harrison.

While this study centered mainly on the beginning of school improvement initiatives at Harrison, it is imperative we remember that effective school change is a long process. We must stay the course toward continued progress, persisting to improve the school culture while building the capacity of all staff to best meet the needs of our children. In the end, our primary job as educators is to reach students where they are and help them to best learn all they can to become their best selves. We will turn this school around because our children deserve the best school environment in which to learn.

APPENDIX A
INITIATIVES ENACTED AT HARRISON ELEMENTARY 2016-2017 SCHOOL YEAR

Academic (10)

Math Coach - Now pushing into classrooms rather than used for behavioral calls
New ELA Coach - started 9/16
Added one new ELL teacher
Close Reading/Annotation/Racer Graphic Organizer
Math 4W Chart using CUBES
Differentiation within math groups
ESL Model - Push in with small group instruction
Teachers participate in learning walks in other buildings (specifically the ELL/SPED teachers)
ELA/ELL Coach trained and can train Lively Letters and the Six Key Components of SEI Instruction
Math DH trained in ADDVantage and can train others

Social-Emotional (11)

Counseling Groups
Monthly Award Ceremony
Recess - Using the field as well as playground so all students can be outside
After School programming

- 21st CCLC
- Science Program (ELL)
- Basketball - included a girls team this year

Outside Counseling Services - More this year than in previous years

- Family Services and Child and Family Services—Doing more individual counseling

SMILES Mentoring - expanded
Attendance - Closely monitored and tied to readiness
Youth Leaders - highlights positives of children
Golden Eagle Ticket Monthly Raffle - Used as a school wide PBIS rather than only individual class.
United Neighbors - Helping parents with hardships
Physical location of the SEL Team - Spread out among the building in closer proximity to the children they serve.

Behavioral (6)

Youth Court - expanded to reach more students
Classroom Discipline System

- K-2 Clip up/Clip down
- 3-5 Infraction Sign In/Consequence Sheet
- Detention process - at end of week based on classroom discipline system

Detention Process - Started on Fridays/now every day
OSS
ISS
Saturday School began 3/25/17

Other (3)

Community Partnerships - SAVERS for spirit wear
Walking School Bus
Dismissal Procedures - Late pick-up is no longer in the main office.

APPENDIX B INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Protocol:

Research Questions:

- What is the participants' knowledge of the new initiatives enacted during the 2016-2017 academic year at Harrison Elementary School?
- How do the participants interpret the impact of these new initiatives?
- How do the participants view the future of school improvement at Harrison Elementary School?

Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about your professional background/history.
What is your educational background?
Where else have you worked and in what role?
What prompted you to become an educator/counselor/administrator?
How long have you worked at Harrison Elementary School?
2. Suppose that it is my first day at your school. What would I observe about Harrison Elementary and the school culture and climate (define if needed)?
3. Tell me about the community your school serves.
4. Tell me about the students in your school.
How would you describe them?
What do the students need from you/their teachers?
Are there things that inhibit their learning? Tell me about this.
What do you learn from the students?
5. Tell me about the faculty/administration/staff at your school.
How would you describe them?
What do you think the faculty/administration/staff need?
How do colleagues interact here?

Are there things you'd like to change about faculty/administration/staff here? Tell me about this.

6. What was it like for you when Harrison was declared Level 4 in September, 2016?

7. What are some of the changes that have been implemented at Harrison during this school year?

Are there particular programs and procedures that have been implemented? Tell me about this.

8. Administration has listed various changes as part of the regular business at Harrison, but I am curious as to what your perspective is about the changes that have been implemented. (Hand them the compiled list.)

Tell me about these initiatives. What do you know about them? Why have they been implemented (don't ask if the participant doesn't perceive that they have been implemented!)? How have they been introduced and implemented? Were particular steps taken to facilitate the implementation of changes?

9. How have the initiatives been received by the school community? Please comment on specific initiatives. (Probe for comments about individual initiatives rather than general comments about "all the initiatives.")

10. How do YOU feel about these initiatives? (Ask only if the question has not yet been answered.)

11. Are there additional changes that you think should have been implemented? If so, please tell me about them.

12. Do you see that these initiatives have had an impact at Harrison this year?

Are there particular changes that you perceive have had an impact? If so, which ones?

Tell me why you think this/these particular changes have had an impact?

13. Are you aware of any outcomes of these changes? Tell me about this.

Can you provide specific examples of outcomes?

14. How are you feeling at this time as a (n) (administrator/teacher/counselor etc.) at this school?

15. At this point, what would you like to see change at your school? Are there other changes that you feel need to be implemented? Please explain.

16. Are there ways that these initiatives could have been implemented to make them more impactful? Tell me about this.
17. Do some of these initiatives impact you more than others? Tell me about this.
18. Are there factors that you think might inhibit the school from moving forward? Tell me about this.
19. What might help the school move forward?

Thank you so much for your time! I'm really grateful.

APPENDIX C
HARRISON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEARNING WALK
OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Observer: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ Subject: _____
 Time In: _____ Time Out: _____ Total Time: _____ Part of lesson: Beg Mid End
 #Teachers: #Assistants: #Total Students: #Girls: #Boys: If applicable: SPED ELL

Organization of the Classroom					
None 1	Mixed 2	Partial 3	Solid 4	Indicator	Comments
				1. Classroom climate is characterized by respectful behaviors, routines, tone and discourse.	
				2. A learning objective (not simply an agenda or an activity description) for the day's lesson is evident. Applicable language objectives are evident and aligned to CCSS.	
				3. Available class time is maximized for learning	
Instructional Design and Delivery					
				4. Instruction links academic concepts to students' prior knowledge and experience.	
				5. Supplemental materials are aligned with students' developmental level and level of English proficiency.	
				6. Presentation of content is within the students' English proficiency and developmental level .	
				7. Depth of content knowledge is evident throughout the presentation of the lesson.	
				8. Instruction includes a range of techniques such as direct instruction, facilitating, and modeling	

None 1	Mixed 2	Partial 3	Solid 4	Indicator	Comments
				9. Questions require students to engage in a process of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.	
				10. The teacher paces the lesson to ensure that all students are actively engaged.	
				11. Students articulate their thinking and reasoning	
				12. Students are inquiring, exploring, or problem solving together , in pairs, or in small groups.	
				13. Opportunities for students to apply new knowledge and content are embedded in the lesson.	
				14. On the spot formative assessments check for understanding to inform instruction.	
				15. Formative written feedback to students is frequent, timely, and informs revision.	

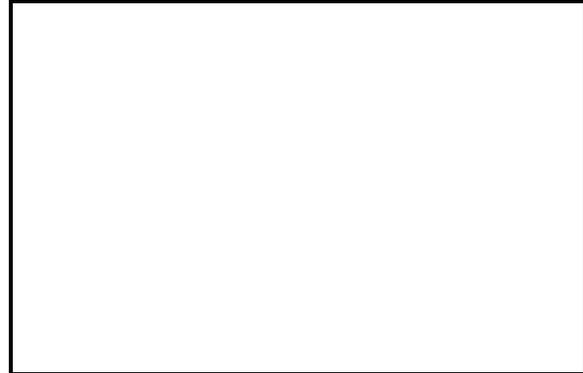
Classroom Instructional Inventory

Not Observed	Observed	Instructional Technique	Comments
		Direct, Whole Group Instruction	
		Guided Practice	
		Small Group/Pairing	
		Independent Practice	
		Other (Please specify)	

APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT FORM, INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW



***INFORMED CONSENT FORM
to Participate in Research***



Title of this study: Perceptions of Improvement Initiatives in a Persistently Low Performing Elementary School

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

Purpose of the research study

The purpose of this instrumental case study is to tell the story of beginning school improvement initiatives at Harrison Elementary, currently designated as a failing school. Given the school's persistent underachievement and the urgency for improvement, it is imperative that school personnel seek to implement effective reform. In order to do that, school leaders need insight into the school change process. In particular, school leaders must understand how educators at Harrison Elementary make sense of and enact specific school reform initiatives and how school personnel assessed the impact of changes they implemented. Further, as a new member of the newly installed administrative team, it is important to deepen my understanding of how changes can be implemented in order for effective school reform to be attained

What you will be asked to do in the study

Participants will be interviewed about their perceptions about school improvement initiatives enacted at their place of employment, Harrison Elementary School.

Time required

One hour or until interview is completed.

Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks or benefits from participation in this study.

Compensation

There will be no compensation to you for participating in the study.

Confidentiality

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Only the PI will have access to records on a secure computer which is password protected. All interview data will be recorded and the audio recording will be destroyed once transcribed.

Transcribed data will be stored securely on PI computer. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the information will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

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 any time without consequence.

Who to contact if you have questions about the study

Elizabeth Dunn, Doctoral Student, College of Education [REDACTED].

Elizabeth Bondy, PhD, College of Education, [REDACTED].

Who to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study

IRB02 Office
Box 112250
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL 32611-2250
Phone 352-392-0433.

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: _____

APPENDIX E
INFORMED CONSENT FORM, FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW



INFORMED CONSENT FORM
to Participate in Research

Title of this study: Perceptions of Improvement Initiatives in a Persistently Low Performing Elementary School

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

Purpose of the research study

The purpose of this instrumental case study is to tell the story of beginning school improvement initiatives at Harrison Elementary, currently designated as a failing school. Given the school's persistent underachievement and the urgency for improvement, it is imperative that school personnel seek to implement effective reform. In order to do that, school leaders need insight into the school change process. In particular, school leaders must understand how educators at Harrison Elementary make sense of and enact specific school reform initiatives and how school personnel assessed the impact of changes they implemented. Further, as a new member of the newly installed administrative team, it is important to deepen my understanding of how changes can be implemented in order for effective school reform to be attained

What you will be asked to do in the study

Participants will be interviewed about their perceptions about school improvement initiatives enacted at their place of employment, Harrison Elementary School. In this focus group interview, you, along with two others will be taking part in the discussion. It is my intention to treat the discussion as confidential, but I cannot guarantee that all focus group participants will do the same.

Time required

One hour or until interview is completed.

Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks or benefits from participation in this study.

Compensation

There will be no compensation to you for participating in the study.

Confidentiality

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Only the PI will have access to records on a secure computer which is password protected. All interview data will be recorded and the audio recording will be destroyed once transcribed.

Transcribed data will be stored securely on PI computer. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the information will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

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 any time without consequence.

Who to contact if you have questions about the study

Elizabeth Dunn, Doctoral Student, College of Education [REDACTED].

Elizabeth Bondy, PhD, College of Education, [REDACTED].

Who to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study

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Box 112250
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL 32611-2250
Phone 352-392-0433.

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: _____

APPENDIX F
DATA ANALYSIS TABLE SAMPLE

Question/ Description	Participant 7	Participant 8	Participant 9
<p>Question 8 "changes for 2016-2017"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There have only been a couple of years that we have had a math coach (central admin kicked us to the curb) (31) -always used for behavior calls - never saw them -interventionists wouldn't see them for 3 months (33) • ELA Coach - it's wonderful - I go to him because (ELL) is new to me. (340) • Annotation /CUBES/4W- we put in one whole day a week (Thursday)(35) -I think it has helped - now when we ask, why are we reading these 6 stories, what do they all have in common - now it clicks (36) • Math groups - helped to have kids grasp 5s and 10s(37) • ESL model - yes, it's choppy and noise level high • Learning walks - I went and when they(other teachers) are good at it, tell us what they did (share across schools) - but they don't it's like a hidden secret (38) Teaching from the test (Letourneau teachers) (39) • SEL counseling - heard about but don't have students in groups (40) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awesome - Math coach should do that (pushing into classrooms) • ELA coach - agree w/ that • ELL teacher - suppose it was needed because of the population • CUBES - we helped redesign that one • RACER is good - saying that we need something implemented k-5 so happy we went through with that • Differentiate math groups - we've always done that • ESL Model - know because of other teacher; she loves it I think great • Walkthroughs - done that previously; does help getting different ideas(13) • SEL - know groups were mentioned but none of my kiddos taken and could probably use it • awards ceremony - not new but done differently -4 (now)instead of 2 awards(past) - in past it happened during school not after (now)(14) • Recess on field - that is great afterschool programming - Science program - no kids participate except ELL kids so don't know much about that; 21st CCLC use my room - I see chaos; misbehaving; say "I don't have homework" - don't know what happens after they leave classroom; there's a lot of behaviors - can't speak if it's working or not because I am seeing only one portion.(15) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I agree w/ academic • knows about all of them • ELL teacher comes in and pushes in and takes small groups that has helped; helpful (8) • RACER/GO/ 4W/ been helpful - need those visuals used all year long • CUBES - not new but something we've carried on • Learning walks have come in but I have never been part of one (not in previous years either at Harrison) • SEL - counseling groups, award ceremonies (3 students/month); YL kids get excited about that - been positive; field for recess has definitely been a positive • 21st CCLC - several kids go • ELL Science - several students participate • Basketball - had one student - all are definitely positive(9) • Afterschool programs - had kids participate in all • outside counseling - none participate but need it • smiles - one student • attendance - my (class) attendance is not great - chronic absences

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elizabeth A. Dunn graduated in 1988 from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth with a Bachelor of Science in business management. She is a career changer, beginning her career as an educator in 2006. She completed a Master of Arts in Teaching at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth in 2011. Elizabeth taught secondary English for ten years before switching roles after beginning her doctoral studies. She has worked as an elementary administrator while completing her doctorate degree in curriculum and instruction. She earned her Doctor of Education from the University of Florida in 2017.