A CASE STUDY OF A SUCCESSFUL, AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract

There are local and national cries for high school reform, especially in our at-risk high schools; however, close examination of our at-risk high schools shows some are succeeding despite the odds against them. This is a case study of such a successful, at-risk high school. The National Association of Secondary Schools defines an at-risk school as one having a student population of at least 50% minority students, 50% free and reduced lunch students, and 90% or better graduating and being accepted into college. Bright Star High School was chosen because it fits these criteria and it was recognized by school officials inside and outside of the school district for its high student performance on a variety of other student achievement indicators. The collection of data took place over a twelve month period between June 2006 and June 2007. This case study answers two questions: (1) What makes Bright Star High School so successful? (2) How did it become this way? In response to the first question, the findings show that there is not one factor that makes the difference but multiple factors that interact with each other. These factors include: (1) common vision and mission; (2) a safe and secure, small, personalized environment; (3) strong, instructional leadership; (4) a faculty that functions as a learning community; (5) rigorous academic programs and intervention and support strategies; (6) parent involvement. The factors identified in this case study are similar to those identified in other successful, at-risk schools and to those reported in related literature and research studies. In response to the second question, the findings show: (1) the Bright Star faculty nurtured a culture that supports and encourages the establishment
and maintenance of a collaborative learning community; (2) changes at the district, state, and national levels in graduation requirements, accreditation requirements, and the No Child Left Behind Act had a powerful impact; (3) real change takes time, persistence, patience and an understanding that it is messy and not easy.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: The Problem...................................................................................................... 1
  Context............................................................................................................................ 1
  Background of the Problem............................................................................................ 3
  Why the Problem Needs to Be Studied .......................................................................... 4
  Purpose of this Study...................................................................................................... 6
  Methods for the Study..................................................................................................... 6
  Definitions ...................................................................................................................... 6
  Significance of the Study................................................................................................ 7

Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature and Research Studies......................................... 8
  Historical Context........................................................................................................... 8
  A Review of the Literature ........................................................................................... 11
    Effective Schools ........................................................................................................ 12
    Learning Communities and School Success ............................................................. 14
    Factors Affecting Student Achievement .................................................................... 17
  Analyzing Research Studies ......................................................................................... 19
    Research Study # 1 Comprehensive school reform demonstration program (CSRD) 19
    Research Study # 2 An educators’ guide to school wide reform............................. 21
    Research Study # 3 Dispelling the myth: High poverty schools exceeding 22
    expectations.................................................................................................................. 22
    Research Study # 4 From the inside out: Learning from the positive deviance in 24
    your organization ........................................................................................................ 24
Research Study # 5  Reaching higher standards for all students: Case studies of four high schools improving student achievement by voluntarily raising student learning standards ................................................................................................................... 26
Research Study #6  High schools that work: The effectiveness of selected variables at two sites................................................................................................................. 27
Research Study #7  Leadership and school success: The behaviors and practices of principals in successful at-risk schools ................................................................. 28
Research Study #8  The 90/90/90 schools: A case study.......................................... 30
A Summary of Common Themes ................................................................................. 31
Connection between the Reviews and the Proposed Research Study .................. 34

Chapter 3: Methodology ................................................................................................... 35

Research Methodology ................................................................................................. 35
Purpose of the Study ..................................................................................................... 35
Rationale for Research Design .................................................................................. 36
Framework ................................................................................................................... 38
Role of the Researcher .............................................................................................. 39
Procedures ..................................................................................................................... 41
Selection of the Setting ................................................................................................ 41
Selection of the Participants and Assurances of Confidentiality .............................. 42
Issues of Entry, Reciprocity, and Ethics ................................................................... 42
Data Collection ............................................................................................................ 44
Data Analysis ............................................................................................................... 48
The Qualitative Narrative ............................................................................................. 53
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Further Study</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Profile of Bright Star High School</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Commonwealth of Virginia Requirements for Meeting AYP under NCLB</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Commonwealth of Virginia Requirements for Accreditation</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Commonwealth of Virginia Requirements for Graduation</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Bolman and Deal’s Framework for Leadership</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Baldrige Criteria for Educational Excellence</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G: Major Educational Reform Reports</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H: Letter and Consent Form for Adult Participants</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix I: Letter and Consent Form for Student Participants</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix J: Introductory Letter to Bright Star Principal</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix K: Background Information Collected on Participants</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix L: Long Set of Questions for Participants</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix M: Revised, Shorter Set of Questions</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLES

Table 2.1: Building a Professional Learning Community ..........................16
Table 2.2: Factors Affecting Student Achievement .................................18
Table 2.3: Common Themes in Literature Review .................................32
Table 2.4: Common Themes in Research Studies .................................33
Table 3.1: A Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Research ......36
Table 4.1: Findings Related to Success Factors and How They Came to Be ...58
Table 4.2: SOL Results ........................................................................135
Table 5.1: Success Factors at Bright Star High School .......................171
Table 5.2: Bright Star Findings .............................................................173
Chapter 1: The Problem

Context

On January 12, 2005, President and Mrs. Bush visited Bright Star High School. The president came to Bright Star to promote his proposed education budget for FY 2006 which contained a little over $2 million for high school reform. He delivered his message to a carefully assembled group of invited guests that included Bright Star parents, students, and staff, school district personnel, and local, state, and national politicians. Margaret Spellings, the newly appointed Secretary of the Department of Education, was also present. The event was held in the school gym. It was covered by all of the major television networks. As a school district, central office employee, I attended the event.

The President spoke about the state of America’s high schools. He painted a bleak picture. He spoke of students leaving high school without having received appropriate preparation for post-secondary education or the job market. He talked of students reading below grade level, high drop-out rates, and low high school graduation rates, especially among students from low-income families, minority groups, and those for whom English is a second language. He indicated the need for higher academic expectations and more rigorous courses for all students.

President Bush also gave a message of hope that morning. He described high schools with student populations that, for the most part, lived in poverty or near-poverty, contained minority groups that are underrepresented in postsecondary educational programs including four year colleges, and whose first language was other than English, that were being very successful. He said Bright Star High School was one of those
schools and that was why he had chosen to deliver his message there. See Appendix A for a profile of Bright Star High School.

The President said that before coming to the stage to deliver his speech, he and Mrs. Bush had an opportunity to talk with the principal of Bright Star High School. He asked the principal what he thought was the key to Bright Star High School’s success. The principal responded, “At Bright Star, we spell hope, R-E-A-D. Everyone on the staff helps to teach reading.” The President indicated there was much to be learned from schools like Bright Star High School. He concluded his remarks with this positive message of hope and reiterated the critical need for high school reform.

Soon after the President’s visit to Bright Star High School, Gerald Terozzi, Executive Director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), released a statement saying, “This new emphasis on improving high schools is long overdue and greatly needed. There is no question that our high schools need to improve” (Carr, 2005, p. 1). Terozzi outlined legislative recommendations from NASSP needed to help high schools improve the academic achievement of their students and called for $4.8 billion a year to implement their recommendations. On February 22, 2005, a coalition of governors, education experts, and business leaders called for high school reform indicating the need to “raise the academic bar to meet the increasing demands of college and the workforce” (Kelderman, 2005, p. 1).

With these individuals, groups, and organizations among a host of others (the Bill Gates Foundation, 2005, the Urban Institute, 2005, and Zmuda, Kukilis, & Kline, 2004, to name a few) calling for high school reform and developing plans to implement reform, it is vital that educators, particularly practitioners, reflect on their experiences,
familiarize themselves with literature and research on high school reform and successful high schools, and add their voices to the discussions on these issues. Practitioners can learn much from each other, especially from those in our successful, at-risk high schools, about what can be done to improve student achievement. Bright Star High School is a successful, at-risk high school and that is why it was chosen for this case study.

For the purposes of this case study, successful, at-risk schools were defined as those “having a student population of at least 50% minority students and 50% of students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals. In addition, at least 90% of their students graduate and are accepted into college” (National Association of Secondary Schools, 2004, p.v).

Background of the Problem

In Virginia, a designated percent of students (67% of the students in math and 70% of the students in English in 2006-2007) in each school must pass the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) tests for the school to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. No school wants to be labeled a “failing” school under NCLB and that is what happens if a school does not meet AYP. Bright Star has met and continues to meet AYP under the NCLB legislation. See Appendix A for a profile of the school that includes Bright Star NCLB percent pass rates in English and mathematics, 2004-2007. See Appendix B for the Commonwealth of Virginia’s requirements for meeting AYP. Bright Star is fully accredited by the Commonwealth of Virginia. See Appendix C for the requirements for meeting accreditation.
The demographics of the Bright Star High School have changed over time and so has the school as it responded to the needs of its changing student body and school community. Bright Star is a school that appears to be well on its way in garnering success working with students from poverty, underrepresented minority groups, and families where the first language is other than English (English Language Learners – ELL). It is a school that needs to be studied further to determine what makes it so successful and how it became that way.

*Why the Problem Needs to Be Studied*

There are local and national cries for high school improvement. Research studies focusing on “measurable achievement outcomes – test scores, grades, graduation rates – (for which) students and their schools are held accountable” (Herman, 1999, p.1) are reporting dismal results, especially from schools where there are a high number of students from poverty, underrepresented minority groups, and families where the first language is other than English.

The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results show high school students do not read and write well. Only thirty-six percent of graduating seniors are considered proficient in reading (U.S. Department of Education, NAEP, 2000, p. 1). The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) results showed that while fourth grade students performed fairly well when compared to students of similar ages in other countries, eighth graders did less so, and twelfth graders did not do well at all in comparison to students of similar ages in other countries. TIMSS involves a comparison of math and science knowledge among students of similar ages in about 50 countries.
Findings from a study done by Swanson for the Urban Institute (2001) show that thirty-eight percent of all *public* high school students fail to graduate from high school. Racial, gender, and socio-economic gaps are highlighted in the report.

Students from historically disadvantaged minority groups (American Indian, Hispanic, and Black) have little more than a fifty-fifty chance of finishing high school with a diploma. By comparison, graduation rates for Whites and Asians are 75 and 77 percent nationally. Males graduate from high school at a rate 8 percent lower than female students. Graduation rates for students who attend school in poverty, racially segregated, and urban school districts lag from 15 to 18 percent behind their peers.

(Swanson, 2001, p.1)

In December 2004, Achieve Incorporated surveyed recent high school graduates, employers, and college instructors. The results show that 40 percent of public high school graduates are not prepared for higher education or an entry-level job. “More than 80 percent of graduates surveyed said they would have worked harder and taken tougher courses if their high school had demanded more of them” (Peterson, 2005, p. 2).

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation awards grants to large, under-performing high schools for the purpose of transforming them into small, high performing learning communities. The goals for these smaller schools include increased student achievement and higher graduation rates. The Gates Foundation has worked with a number of agencies and organizations including the National Association for Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) to support high school reform and showcase successful schools. In a study commissioned by the Bill
and Melinda Gates Foundation and NASSP, Bright Star High School was recognized as “one of the ten best high schools in the nation serving underserved students” (School District Press Release, October 12, 2005). It has also been recognized as a Breakthrough High School by the NASSP. The Breakthrough High School project features schools with high minority and high poverty populations that demonstrate significant student achievement and high graduation and college admissions rates.

**Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this case study was to examine what makes Bright Star High School, a high poverty, high minority high school, as successful as it is and how it became that way. The participants in the study included selected school and district level personnel, parents, and students.

**Methods for the Study**

The case study methodology was used for the study of Bright Star High School. Case study methodology helps the reader to understand “the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 2001, p. 30) which in this case was Bright Star High School. Interviews of selected school district personnel, school staff, parents, and students along with observations and reviews of documents were conducted during the study.

**Definitions**

The following definitions of key phrases will be used for the purposes of this study:

1. **Successful, at-risk high schools** – those “having a student population of at least 50% minority students and 50% of students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals. In addition, at least 90% of their students graduate and are accepted into college” (National Association of Secondary Schools, 2004, p.v).
2. School reform/improvement – For the purposes of this study, the phrases *school improvement* and *school reform* will refer to the processes or programs implemented to improve student achievement. *Improvement* and *reform* are used interchangeably in this study as they are frequently used interchangeably in the literature and in research studies. The word *improvement* is a synonym for the word *reform* (Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary, 1974, p. 586).

3. Effective schools - “are those in which all students master priority objectives” (Butler & Druian, 1987, p. 1).

*Significance of the Study*

The findings in this study (1) add to the general body of literature on successful, at-risk schools and on school reform, (2) increase the reader’s knowledge and understanding of the characteristics of successful schools and how they became that way, (3) provide insights into what other high schools in the district and elsewhere might do to improve their school and sustain improvement, and (4) add to Bright Star High School’s understanding of itself.
Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature and Research Studies

In this study, two questions are examined: (1) what makes Bright Star High School, a high poverty, high minority high school, as successful as it is; (2) how did it become that way. Bright Star has a 97 percent graduation rate and a 93 percent college admissions rate. Forty percent of Bright Star’s students are enrolled in International Baccalaureate (IB) courses and their Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) results rose more than 100 points in five years. The school’s graduation rate is 97 percent (see Appendix D for graduation requirements). Bright Star’s college admission rate is 93 percent. What steps did Bright Star take that resulted in such high achievement for its students? What makes Bright Star so unique? How did it become that way? To help shape and inform this study, a review of the literature and research studies related to school success and school improvement/reform was conducted. These reviews are part of this chapter.

Chapter 2 is divided into five parts: (1) historical context; (2) review of literature; (3) a review of research studies; (4) a summary of the common themes found in these reviews; (5) connection between proposed study and how it is supported by the literature and research studies.

Historical Context

Throughout the first five decades of the twentieth century, “criticisms of public education and their accompanying reform efforts flourished; however, it is the criticisms of the second half of the century that most profoundly affects us today” (Marzano, 2003, p. 1). These criticisms began in 1957 when the Russians launched the Sputnik satellite. This event led the public to question the rigor of public education.
During the sixties, seventies, and eighties, the United States experienced major social and political upheavals as a result of Viet Nam, the Civil Rights and women’s movements, the war on poverty, drug abuse, the Watergate investigation, and the assassination of major political leaders. These upheavals had a strong impact on schools. Educator and student focus on learning and achievement was compromised. To focus student attention back on learning, educators tried to make their curricula, especially at the high school level, more relevant to the student’s everyday life. Electives and mini-courses grew in number. The curriculum became more fragmented. Educational institutions at all levels experienced an intense period of turmoil. At the same time, the American economy was running into trouble.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the decline of the U.S. workplace productivity, rising unemployment, losses in market share to Japan and Germany, and swift changes in technologies led corporate leaders and public officials to try to determine the reasons for poor performance of the American economy. Within a few years, a crescendo of criticism over high school graduates unprepared for the workplace, poor scores on national tests, violence in urban schools, and the flight of white middle class families from cities to suburbs fixed blame on American public schools. (Mondale & Patton, 2001, pp. 176-177)

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education, composed of corporate and public officials, and educators published their assessment of public schools in a report titled, *A Nation at Risk*. This report “had an impact similar to that of Sputnik in 1957” (Pulliam & Patton, 1999, p. 242). The report “crystallized the growing sense of unease with public schooling in the business community by tightly coupling mediocre
student performance on national and international tests to mediocre economic performance in the global marketplace” (Mondale & Patton, 2001, p. 177).

Reform reports and studies were numerous throughout the eighties and nineties. “More than thirty examinations of public education in the United States followed closely on the publication of A Nation at Risk” (Pulliam & Patton, 1999, p. 242). Collectively, these reports and studies (see Appendix G for a listing of major educational reports between 1982 and 2000) called for a more rigorous curricula, increased requirements for graduation from high school, the passing of selected tests prior to promotion and graduation, the establishment of standards and a core curriculum, and programs and intervention for accelerated, gifted, and struggling students.

Despite numerous reports and studies about schools during the latter part of the twentieth century describing what was wrong with America’s schools and what needed to be done to fix them, there were communities across the nation that recognized that their neighborhood public schools were excellent. Students in these schools were learning and showing high achievement gains as measured by a number of varied, indicators of achievement. As early as 1984, educators were already well on their way to “identifying characteristics of effective schools that could be used as tools of evaluation and for ascertaining which schools could serve as models of superiority” (Pulliam & Patton, 1999, p. 252). These studies continued throughout the eighties and nineties and into the 21st century.

Descriptions of schools that are thriving and making it even though their demographics say they should not be successful can be found in research literature (Schmoker, 1999 & 2001; Richardson, 2004; Marzano, 2003; DuFour, 1998); studies of
successful schools (Giordano for Education Alliance for Brown University, 2003; Richardson for the National Staff Development Council; Faddis, Beam, et al for North Central Regional Educational Laboratory); and, in the general literature on schools recognized by national organizations for their success (The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, the Blue Ribbon Schools Program out of the U. S. Department of Education, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation). Bright Star High School is one of these schools.

**A Review of the Literature**

The literature review is divided into three topics: effective schools research; learning communities and school success; and, factors affecting student achievement. There is a rationale for each of these literature topics being included in this review. The effective schools research, begun in the late seventies was the first significant research that identified schools that could serve as models of excellence and identified characteristics of effective schools. Under the topic of learning communities and school success, the tenets of professional learning communities that guide student achievement in high performing schools are examined. These tenets are based on the research on effective schools, the criteria for excellent schools from the U. S. Department of Education, and work done by Peter Senge in 1990 and others throughout the last decade of the twentieth century. Under the topic of factors affecting student achievement, Marzano’s findings of a meta-analysis of thirty-five years of research are discussed. This research “provides remarkably clear guidance as to the steps schools can take to be highly effective in enhancing student achievement” (Marzano, 2003, p.11).
Effective Schools

In 1966, James Coleman and his team published a report funded by the U. S. Office of Education that became known as the Coleman Report. The purpose of this report was to examine the “extent of racial segregation; characteristics of differing schools; student learning as measured on standardized tests; and the connections between achievement and the types of schools students attend (Johnston, 2000, p. 24).” The findings included the following: schools were still segregated to a great degree; the characteristics of schools and quality of teachers were different between rich and poor neighborhoods; and, achievement was related to family background and home environment. School really did not matter. While the latter finding was later disproved by many who either found fault with the methodology used in the Coleman Report (Alexander & Salmon, 1995; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Marzano, 2003) or by those who studied schools that were successful despite the backgrounds of their students and families (Purkey & Smith, 1982; Marzano, 2003; National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Education Alliance of Brown University, 2004), the damage to public education was done.

At the time the Coleman Report was published, Ron Edmonds was Director of the Center for Urban Studies at Harvard University. He, along with others, acknowledged family background made a difference but questioned Coleman’s report on the extent of that difference. Edmonds and other researchers went looking for schools where poor kids were achieving academically. They found examples of such schools but they were left with the question as to why some schools made a difference and others did not (Association for Effective Schools, 1996). They compared both types of schools and found the following: (a) public schools do make a difference; (b) poor children can learn
at high levels; (c) there are unique characteristics and processes that are common to
schools where children are learning; and (d) the characteristics are correlated to student
success. This body of information began what is now referred to as the “Effective
Schools Research” (Association for Effective Schools, 1996). The original research that
was done by Edmonds, Brookover, Lezotte, and others has been replicated and
reaffirmed in all types of schools. There are seven correlates of effective schools:

1. Clear school mission - there is a clearly articulated school mission through which
   the staff shares an understanding of and commitment to instructional goals,
   priorities, assessment procedures and accountability.

2. High expectations for success - there is a climate of expectation in which the staff
   believe and demonstrate that all students can attain mastery of the essential
   content and school skills, and the staff also believe that they have the capability to
   help all students achieve that mastery.

3. Instructional leadership - the principal acts as an instructional leader and
   effectively and persistently communicates that mission to the staff, parents, and
   students.

4. Frequent monitoring of student progress - student academic progress is measured
   frequently. A variety of assessment procedures are used. The results of the
   assessments are used to improve individual student performance and also to
   improve the instructional program.

5. Opportunity to learn and student time on task - teachers allocate a significant
   amount of classroom time to instruction in the essential content and skills.
6. Safe and orderly environment - there is an orderly, purposeful, businesslike atmosphere which is free from the threat of physical harm. The school climate is not oppressive and is conducive to teaching and learning.

7. Home - school relations - parents understand and support the school's basic mission and are given the opportunity to play an important role in helping the school to achieve that mission. (Association for Effective Schools, 1996)

In 1991, Lezotte published a paper in which he introduced the concept of second generation correlates. These second generation correlates incorporated more recent research and school improvement findings. They offer “an even more challenging developmental stage to which schools committed to the Learning for All mission ought to aspire” (Lezotte, 1991, p.1). The themes found in effective schools research are strikingly similar to the themes found in the literature on learning communities and Marzano’s factors affecting student achievement.

Learning Communities and School Success

The concept of a learning organization was first used by Peter Senge in his book, The Fifth Discipline (1990). In 1992, Thomas Sergiovanni spoke about schools as learning communities. The term professional learning community was put forth by Shirley Hord in 1997. Hord described professional learning communities as having the following characteristics: supportive and shared leadership; shared values and vision; collective learning and application; shared personal practice; and, supportive conditions. In 1998, DuFour and Eaker applied the concept of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) to schools. Throughout the nineties, the body of research on schools as learning communities and the importance of this concept to school reform and school success
continued to grow. Table 2.1 provides a brief summary of this growth between 1990 and 2000.

In 2004, after reviewing and analyzing the research related to successful schools, and the Hope Foundation’s practice in the field, Blankstein (2004), a school reform scholar and researcher, concluded, “…we have distilled the essence of professional learning communities into six principles: (1) common mission, vision, values, and goals; (2) ensuring achievement for all students; creating systems for prevention and intervention; (3) collaborative teaming focused on teaching and learning; (4) using data to guide decision making and continuous improvement; (5) gaining active engagement from family and community; (6) building sustainable leadership capacity” (p. 56). This type of school community is held together by relationships and trust and is strengthened by the leadership of the principal, teachers, and other staff members.

Most of the literature on professional learning communities, successful school reform, educational change, and school improvement speaks to the vital role played by the school principal. But the principal can not do the job alone. It is too big and too complex (Blankstein, 2004). Lambert (1998) agrees stating, “Teachers must take the major responsibility for building leadership capacity in schools and ultimately for the work of school improvement” (p. 24). “…if the principal, a vast majority of the teachers, and large numbers of parents and students are all involved in the work of leadership, then the school will most likely have a high leadership capacity that achieves high student performance” (Lambert, p. 4).
### Table 2.1: Building a Professional Learning Community

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<th>Date</th>
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<th>Terminology</th>
<th>Guiding Principles</th>
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| 1990   | Peter M. Senge                | Five Disciplines                   | 1. Systems Thinking  
2. Personal Mastery  
3. Mental Models  
4. Team Learning  
5. Shared Vision |
2. De-privatization of practice  
3. Collective focus on student learning  
4. Collaboration  
5. Shared norms and values |
| 1995   | Fred M. Newman & Gary G. Wehlage | Circles of Support                 | 1. Student learning  
2. Authentic Pedagogy  
3. School Organizational Capacity  
4. External support |
| 1997   | Shirley Hord                  | Professional Learning Community     | 1. Supportive and shared leadership  
2. Shared values and vision  
3. Collective learning and application  
4. Shared personal practice  
5. Supportive conditions |
| 1998   | Richard DuFour & Robert Eaker | Professional Learning Community     | 1. Shared, mission, vision, values, and goals  
2. Collective inquiry  
3. Collaborative teams  
4. Action orientation and experimentation  
5. Continuous improvement  
6. Results-oriented |
| 2000   | Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Murphy, Jost, Shipman | Standards for Educational Administration | Promotes the success of all students by:  
1. Facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.  
2. Advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.  
3. Ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.  
4. Collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.  
5. Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.  
6. Understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. |

(Blankstein, 2004, p. 55)
Marzano (2003) wrote “…if we follow the guidance offered from 35 years of research, we can enter an era of unprecedented effectiveness for the public practice of education – one in which the vast majority of schools can be highly effective in promoting student learning.” Marzano’s works on factors affecting student achievement translate research and theory into classroom practice. Reeves (2004) who studied the 90/90/90 schools which are reviewed later in this chapter states, “Marzano has assembled the most impressive evidence, using meta-analytic techniques that indicate the importance of teaching, curriculum, and leadership relative to poverty and ethnic identity. Demographic characteristics are relevant, but the preponderance of evidence indicates that these characteristics are not destiny when it comes to academic achievement” (Reeves, 2004, p. 185).

Marzano focuses his attention on the school, not the district, as the “proper focus for reform” (p. 10). His conclusions from a meta-analysis of the research associated with successful schools, effective schools, and school reform are organized into three categories of factors that influence student academic achievement: school factors; teacher factors; and student factors.

These factors and examples of what would be included under them are shown in Table 2.2. The categories of factors influencing student achievement are not listed in priority order. If they were, teacher factors would be listed first. “…all researchers agree that the impact of decisions made by individual teachers is far greater than the impact of decisions made at the school level” (Marzano, 2003, p. 71).
Table 2.2: Factors Affecting Student Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Factors</th>
<th>Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>• Guaranteed and viable curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Challenging goals and effective feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Parent and community involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Safe and orderly environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Collegiality and professionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>• Instructional strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Classroom management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Classroom curriculum design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>• Home atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Learned intelligence and background knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Motivation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Marzano, 2003, p. 10)

Therefore, any school reform that is undertaken must incorporate a strong focus on what is happening in the classroom and staff development for teachers.

This new era of school reform, as Marzano refers to it, is based on the realization that reform in different schools may look different even as school communities work to implement similar research strategies, that schools that are producing notable gains in student achievement have a strong emphasis on the use of data, and that lasting change is likely to occur incrementally (Marzano, 2003, pp. 158-159).
Analyzing Research Studies

Eight studies related to school reform and school success are reviewed and analyzed in this section of the paper. These studies were chosen because: (1) they include high schools in their study; (2) they highlight schools that have been successful; (3) they represent studies that are focused on the implementation of research-based strategies and programs, process for improvement, and/or structural reform and they have measurable goals and benchmarks; (4) they include studies carried out in high poverty, high minority schools; (5) the studies represent different approaches to qualitative research and offered insights into the methodology to be used for this case study; (6) the studies are in-depth studies that contain detailed descriptions of how the studies were carried out; (7) the studies are recent studies, i.e. all of them were conducted after 1999.

Research Study #1 Comprehensive school reform demonstration program (CSRD)

In 2000, Faddis, Beam, Hahn, Willardson, Sipe, & Ahrens-Gray conducted a study, *The implementation of the comprehensive school reform demonstration program (CSRD): The work of 40 schools in seven midwest states*. The CSRD program was established in 1998 to provide “financial assistance to underachieving schools implementing comprehensive school reform programs based on reliable research and effective practice” (p. 7). The funding for the CSRD program comes from the U. S. Department of Education. It represents the first time that Congress and other educational policy makers made funding available “to schools that implement educational reforms with high-quality evidence of effectiveness” (Borman, Overman, & Brown, 2003, p. 125).
The intent of the CSRD program is to encourage school wide reform through the use or implementation of the following strategies and processes: (1) a comprehensive reform design that aligns the school’s curriculum, technology, and professional development to enable all students to meet challenging state content and performance standards; (2) support within the school from teachers, administrators, and other staff; (3) measurable goals for student performance and benchmarks for meeting goals; (4) effective research methods and strategies for teaching and school management; (5) professional development; (6) external technical support and assistance from an entity with expertise in school wide reform and improvement; (7) parental and community involvement in planning and implementing school improvement activities; (8) coordination of resources (federal, state, and local) to support and sustain the school reform effort; (9) evaluation strategies for evaluating the implementation of school reforms and the students results achieved. (Faddis, Beam, Hahn, Willardson, Sipe, & Ahrens-Gray, 2000, p. 7)

A written survey distributed to principals and selected teachers and in-depth case studies of a sampling of 40 schools from CSRD schools in the region were used. The schools selected represented urban, suburban, and rural schools, and elementary, middle, and high schools. They represented underachieving schools that were implementing school reform programs based on reliable research and effective practices. Additionally, the researchers strove for geographical diversity within the area served by North Central Regional Educational Lab (NCREL) through whom the study was conducted. For this study, a series of three site visits to the 40 schools was done in January and February 2000 (two days), April and May 2000 (one day), September and October 2000
(two days). In most instances, the same site visitor conducted all three visits to a given school (Faddis, Beam, Hahn, Willardson, Sipe, & Ahrens-Gray, 2000, p.8).

Among the findings were the following: (a) school staffs generally supported the reform efforts; (b) there were 26 different reform models among the 40 schools; (c) most of the schools had program goals and benchmarks for measuring progress toward achieving the goals; (d) 80% of the schools made changes in their instructional strategies, 77% in their governance or management structures, 74% in their approach to instruction, and 54% in their curricula; (e) changes were made in their practices and/or organizational structures; (f) professional development activities focused on using assessment to guide instruction, helping staff collaborate on planning or delivering instruction, developing and implementing new curriculum, teaching new theories about learning, developing new instructional skills and strategies; and, (g) an increase in parent involvement was a goal in the reform efforts of three-fourths of the sample schools (Faddis, Beam, Hahn, Willardson, Sipe, & Ahrens-Gray, 2000, p.61).

A critical question not addressed in this study is whether or not the school reform methods implemented resulted in improved student achievement as measured by any standardized indicators or tests. As a result, comparisons among all of the schools involved in the study based on academic achievement could not be made.

Research Study #2 An educators’ guide to school wide reform

The purpose of this research study, An educators’ guide to school wide reform by Herman (1999) differs from the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Project (CSRD) described in the immediately preceding section. In fact, what spurred the formation of an unusual group of sponsors (American Association of School
Administrators, American Federation of Teachers, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, and National Education Association), for this study was “the need for [their] collective memberships to determine what works, and what just holds promise, among the variety of externally developed, school wide approaches now available for adoption” (Herman, p. 1).

In this study, the effectiveness, in terms of positive effects on student achievement of twenty-four, comprehensive, school reform approaches is examined. Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown (2003) mentioned this study in a meta-analysis of studies on the achievement effects of school reform as one of only two studies on school reform that met their criteria of using student achievement data and benchmarks as measures of success.

The findings from this study were numerous and quite complex. Evidence of positive effects on student achievement – arguably the most important feature of any reform approach – is limited. Even though many of the approaches have been in the schools for years, only three (Direct Instruction, High Schools that Work, and Success for All) provide strong evidence of positive effects on student achievement. As a result, educators often are considering school wide reform without vital information on which to make decisions. More rigorous evaluations are needed, with broad dissemination of findings. (Herman, 1999, Overview, p. 3)

Research Study # 3 Dispelling the myth: High poverty schools exceeding expectations

This study, Dispelling the myth: High poverty schools exceeding expectations by Barth, Haycock, Jackson, Mora, Ruiz, Robinson, & Wilkins (1999) is about “mining the experiences of those who dispel the myth that poor kids can’t learn and are proving it
everyday through their work in top performing, high poverty schools” (p. 1). The
Education Trust, an organization that was created to promote high academic achievement
for all children, and the Council of Chief State School Officers are the sponsors of this
project. For this study, 366 schools from 21 states agreed to participate. This study was
done by a survey.

In the spring of 1998, the chief state school officer of every state was asked to
participate in a project to identify high poverty, high performing schools. Twenty-one
states agreed. Each of these states submitted a list of their top schools based on reading
and mathematics assessment results and a 50 to 75% poverty range or 75 to 100%
poverty range, i.e. schools that were beating the odds. Once the schools were identified,
they were further categorized into most improved or high achievement. If they fell into
the most improved category it meant they had made the most gains on the state
assessments in reading and math over a two-year period. If they were in the high
achievement category, it meant they were in the top ten scoring high poverty schools in
terms of state assessments for their state. This yielded 1,200 schools. The survey was sent
to all of them and 366 responded.

In general, the findings show that the schools that participated:

1. Use state standards to design curriculum and instruction, evaluate teachers, and
   assess student work. (reported by 80% of participating schools)
2. Increase instruction in reading and math to help students meet standards. (reported
   by 80% of participating schools)
3. Allocate more of their funds to support staff development focused on changing
   instructional practice.
4. Monitor individual student progress and provide extra support as soon as it is needed. Four out of five schools reported they had a systematic way of doing this.

5. Involve parents in helping student meet standards.

6. Hold adults accountable if students do not show measurable improvement.

The authors of the study noted that each state determines its own type of assessment and sets different levels of proficiency; hence, comparison between states should not be made. They also noted that it was difficult to make a judgment about what the students know when the state did not report cut off scores for proficiency (p. 17).

Research Study # 4 From the inside out: Learning from the positive deviance in your organization

The purpose of this study, From the inside out: Learning from the positive deviance in your organization by Richardson (2004), was to look at four schools and two school systems that have experienced more success than schools and school systems similar to them. The schools and systems included in the study “stand apart from their peer schools and districts through their performance in widely accepted tests and in their ability to improve themselves from within by identifying and sharing successful practices that enable all teachers to perform at higher levels. These schools and districts are in a constant state of inquiry” (Richardson, 2004, p. 11-12).

The study was conducted through the National Staff Development Council (NSDC). It was supported by a grant from the Kellogg Foundation. The study focused on descriptions of how each of the schools and school systems implemented their reforms. Descriptions of conversations, steps taken to implement reform, and practices established are contained in the report.
The common findings from studying the four schools and the two school systems include the following:

1. A clear and unifying vision infiltrates the system.
2. Teachers and administrators share a passion and a willingness to achieve their vision.
3. Leaders in these schools and districts are both servants and champions.
4. Teachers are organized into learning teams focused on improving student achievement.
5. Time is restructured to enable teams to meet regularly.
6. Using data to drive instruction is regular practice in these schools and districts.
7. Lead learners spread learning throughout the teaching staff.
8. Schools ensure that instruction aligns with local, state, and national standards.
9. Schools and school districts draw new teachers into their cultures with deliberate processes that both recognize their newness and honor their contributions.
10. Teachers encourage parental support, yet are not dependent on it.
11. These schools and districts see possibilities instead of problems.


The limitations of this study included the fact that no common standardized test data were used to compare student achievement; however, it was noted that “the student achievement in each of the sites studied was compared with similar near-by schools and
school districts and these schools were higher in their performance in widely accepted
tests and their ability to improve themselves …” (Richardson, 2004, p.11).

*Research Study # 5  Reaching higher standards for all students: Case studies of four high
schools improving student achievement by voluntarily raising student learning standards*

The purpose of this dissertation study, *Reaching higher standards for all students: Case studies of four high schools improving student achievement by voluntarily raising student learning standards* by Johnston, (2000) was “to discover, through case study methodology, how and why four high schools in upstate New York gained a notable increase in the percentage of their students achieving a Regents diploma” (p. 110). Each of the high schools studied was located in a different New York county but in similar geographic and economic regions. All had a 20 % increase in their Regents diploma rate in a five year period of time compared to an average 6 % increase across the state.

The research questions were: (1) How did these high schools increase student participation in Regents-level curriculum? What processes were employed? (2) Why did these high schools decide to make these changes? (3) What role did leadership, at both the central office and the building level play in the process? (4) What other factors or constructs were involved?

The researcher used multiple data collection methods including taped interviews supplemented with brief surveys, questionnaires, and written statements; informal student interviews; tours of the school and district; and a collection of general information about each school, school records and documents, official reports and test data. The data for each of the four sites were analyzed and organized and placed into a large binder. The analysis of the data was extensive as the researcher searched the data for “overarching
themes or constructs that offered an emerging interpretation of the study” (Johnston, 2000, p. 104).

The findings included the following six themes:

1. A belief and expectation that all students can achieve at higher levels coupled with an action-orientation to improve results
2. Timing and conditions right for change
3. Leadership for implementing change
4. A collaborative planning process for improvement
5. A heightened focus on accountability for improving student achievement
6. An understanding of the community context and school culture

This study was of particular interest because of the rich, in-depth description of how the study was conducted and the data analyzed.

Limitations of this study include: (1) high schools selected were rural or suburban but did not include an urban site; (2) the sites included only schools that chose to implement changes based on standards before such changes were mandated; (3) replication of findings may be limited since this was a qualitative study.

*Research Study #6 High schools that work: The effectiveness of selected variables at two sites*

The purpose of this dissertation study, *High schools that work: The effectiveness of selected variables at two sites* by Johnson (2003) was “to examine the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) High Schools That Work (HSTW) approaches to school wide reform. The case study method was used to enable the researcher to identify
the key points of planning and implementation of these particular approaches in school systems.” (p.45).

This descriptive case study used Stufflebeam’s theory of evaluation as the framework around which the data were obtained and organized. Stufflebeam’s process uses four components: context, input, process, product (CIPP). Through Stufflebeam’s process, the questions of what we did, how we did it, whether or not we did it right, and whether or not it worked were examined.

The two sites studied were located in two different states. The sites were chosen because they had programs that “were identified in 1995 by SREB as most improved in the 10 key practices developed for HSTW (Johnson, 2003, p. 103).”

Findings included higher attendance rates, decreased drop-out rates and improved student achievement as measured by a variety of indicators including improving SAT scores and overall positive trend in the American College Test (ACT) scores over the past ten years.

Limitations of this study are it included only two sites and the sites were located in two different states. The variables were examined at the time of the implementation of the HSTW program and then examined ten years later. Case study methodology was used; hence, the results may not be generalizable to other school districts.

Research Study #7 Leadership and school success: The behaviors and practices of principals in successful at-risk schools

In this dissertation study, Leadership and school success: The behaviors and practices of principals in successful at-risk schools by Powell (2004), two questions were examined (a) What are the leadership behaviors of principals in highly successful schools
with high concentrations of minority students? and (b) How do principals in these schools influence the learning outcomes to close the achievement gap? (p. 4). Qualitative and quantitative methods were used. A case study of one successful, diverse elementary school was conducted and surveys of the teachers in the school where the case study was done and in two other schools were conducted. In all three schools the rates of free and reduced lunch students and minority students were at or above 50%, the number of students who were English Language Learners (ELL) was over 25%, they were K-6 schools, and the principal had been there for at least three years.

The study was organized and shaped around five domains derived from recent studies focusing on “specifics of leadership” (p.5): (a) vision, mission, and culture; (b) curriculum and classroom instruction; (c) collaboration and shared leadership; (d) family and community involvement; and (e) effective management. The findings included the following that were deemed important to school success:

1. common vision, mission, and culture
2. teaching the identified curriculum and having uninterrupted blocks of instruction particularly for language arts and math
3. time for common planning and developing and sharing leadership
4. community and family involvement are valued and promoted
5. in terms of management, everything related to teaching and learning, including teaching assignments and schedules, the school budget, and the social, discipline, and medical needs of the students must be handled in a timely, efficient, and effective manner
The main limitations of this study are that only one school was studied in depth and surveyed along with two other schools of similar demographics; however, care was taken to address the validity and reliability of the study and many of the findings are supported in literature reviews and related research studies.

Research Study #8  The 90/90/90 schools: A case study

The 90/90/90 in the study, The 90/90/90 schools: A case study by Reeves (2004), refers to the fact that for all of the schools in the study, the rate of free and reduced lunch students was 90%, ethnic minority students was 90%, and students who “met or achieved high academic standards, according to independently conducted tests of academic achievement” (p. 186) was 90%. The data were collected over four years in 228 urban, suburban, and rural schools. The methodology included both a qualitative approach in the form of site visits and a quantitative approach in the form of analyses of accountability data.

The “five characteristics that were common to all 90/90/90 schools” (Reeves, 2004, p. 187) were: “(1) a focus on academic achievement; (2) clear curriculum choices (choosing to spend more time on reading, writing, and mathematics and less time on other subjects); (3) frequent assessment of student progress and multiple opportunities for improvement; (4) an emphasis on nonfiction writing; (5) a collaborative scoring of student work” (p. 187). The “ultimate test of the 90/90/90 research is whether it is sustainable and replicable” (p. 194). Reeves believes it is and gives examples from school systems across the nation. He believes and shows via results over a period of time that the 90/90/90 schools are in a constant state of improvement. Good enough is never enough.
There are those who challenge the research done on the 90/90/90 schools and Reeves deals with those challenges. For example, in response to the challenge made by some, “The only measure of success in this study is test scores, and there are better ways to assess student achievement” (p. 206), Reeves states, “From a research and policy perspective, it is necessary to have some consistent data in order to understand student achievement” (p. 206). Therefore, in reporting data on the 90/90/90 schools, Reeves chose to use state, district, and school-based measures as well as a “narrative report form each school, providing a balance of observation and quantitative data” (p. 205). One of the findings Reeves emphasizes is that it was not specific programs that made the 90/90/90 schools successful but rather the “replicable professional practices” (p. 207).

A Summary of Common Themes

Within the literature and the research studies, some overarching, common themes were noted. Table 2.3 shows common themes found as I reviewed the literature on school reform, and successful, at-risk schools. Table 2.4 shows common themes found among the research studies reviewed. Two research studies, Study # 2 by Herman (1999) and Study # 6 by Johnson (2003) are omitted from Table 2.4. The findings in these two research studies were included in my initial reviews because of the methodologies used; however, their findings focused more on individual programs implemented as part of school reform and themes were not readily identifiable.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Effective Schools (Edmonds, Lezotte, and others)</th>
<th>Learning Communities (Blankstein, DuFour, Eaker, and others)</th>
<th>Factors Affecting Student Achievement (Marzano)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mission, vision, goals</td>
<td>Clear mission</td>
<td>Common mission, vision, values, goals</td>
<td>*Guaranteed and viable curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High expectations</td>
<td>High expectations for success</td>
<td>Achievement for all students and system for prevention and intervention</td>
<td>Challenging goals and effective feedback (pressure to achieve)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional leadership</td>
<td>Instructional leadership, mostly administrative</td>
<td>Building sustainable leadership capacity (principal, teacher, etc.)</td>
<td>Leadership and cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent assessments</td>
<td>Frequent assessments</td>
<td>Use of data for instructional decisions and ongoing improvement</td>
<td>Monitoring – feedback that is specific and timely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to learn</td>
<td>Opportunity to learn essential content and skills and time on task</td>
<td>*Contained in the development of a common mission, vision, values and</td>
<td>*Opportunity to learn and time on task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe and orderly environment</td>
<td>Safe and orderly environment</td>
<td>Contained in sustaining continuous improvement and a positive, supportive school culture</td>
<td>Safe and orderly environment, school climate; classroom management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-school connections</td>
<td>Home-school relations</td>
<td>School/family/community involvement</td>
<td>Parent and community involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Collaborative teaming for teaching and learning</td>
<td>Collegiality and professionalism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*In discussing the development of a common mission, DuFour (1998) describes three questions that need to be addressed:
1. If we expect all students to learn, what is it we expect them to learn?
2. How will we know if they are learning it?
3. What will we do when they don’t*

While common mission does not show up under Factors Affecting Student Achievement, it is contained in Marzano’s number one and five ranked factors; however, Marzano breaks it into a guaranteed and viable curriculum and an opportunity to learn.
Table 2.4: Common Themes in Research Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>CSRD Study ('99)</th>
<th>Barth Study ('99)</th>
<th>Richardson Study ('04)</th>
<th>Johnston Study ('03)</th>
<th>Powell Study ('04)</th>
<th>Reeves Study ('04)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mission, vision, goals</td>
<td>Yes. Measurable goals</td>
<td>Yes. Instruction aligned with standards</td>
<td>Yes. Instruction aligned with standards</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High expectations for academic achievement</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Included in continuous improvement</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional leadership</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes - leadership makes a difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent assessments for instructional purposes and continuous improvement</td>
<td>Yes Curriculum tied to state standards</td>
<td>Yes Curriculum tied to standards</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes – multiple opportunities for improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to learn – curriculum specified and time on task</td>
<td>Yes Curriculum aligned with state standards</td>
<td>Yes Curriculum aligned with standards</td>
<td>Instruction aligned with standards and assessments</td>
<td>Curriculum aligned with standards</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Safe and orderly environment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-school connections</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration focused on teaching and learning</td>
<td>Professional development activities focused on helping staff collaborate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes with emphasis on collaborative scoring of student work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Not mentioned as a theme in all studies but assumed since all schools participating in the studies except CSRD had been identified as highly successful schools. Other spaces are blank because those themes were not specifically mentioned in the studies specified.
Connection between the Reviews and the Proposed Research Study

The characteristics of successful schools, as indicated in the analyses of research studies and the review of literature presented in this paper, are similar from school to school even though the language of the school wide reforms or programs implemented may not be the same. As Reeves noted it is not programs that make the difference but rather “replicable professional practices” (Reeves, 2004, p. 207). In their meta-analysis on comprehensive school reform (CSR) Borman, Hughes, Overman, and Brown (2003) concluded that CSR is “still an evolving field, and there are clear limitations on the overall quantity and quality of studies supporting its achievement effects” (p. 163). They searched for school wide reforms that had rigorous evaluations of their student achievement effects and that had been successfully replicated in other schools. They found only a handful, and of those only a few had sufficient detail to allow for replication.

What makes some schools successful and others not? How did they become that way? Some answers can be found as we have seen in the literature and the research studies. Some can be found in the brief descriptions of individual schools or school systems that have been recognized and studied because of their outstanding, student achievement gains. These brief descriptions of the characteristics of successful schools provide educators with a glimpse of what is needed to help with their school improvement/reform work. But, more in-depth case studies, particularly of high schools, would be beneficial. This is one of the reasons for doing an in-depth research study, a case study, of Bright Star High School.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, an overview of the research methods, the procedures for conducting this study, and the presentation of the results are discussed. Research Methodology includes: the purpose of the study; a rationale for the type of research design used and the specific methodology chosen; a discussion of a framework that helped guide the collection and analysis of data; and, a description of the role of the researcher. Procedures includes: how the site was selected; who the participants in the study were and how their confidentiality was assured; a discussion of the issues of entry, reciprocity, and ethics; a description of data collection techniques; and, an explanation of the data analysis process. The structure for the presentation of results is in The Qualitative Narrative.

Research Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine what makes Bright Star High School, a high poverty, high minority high school, as successful as it is and how it became that way. This study involved interviewing selected school and district personnel, doing on-site observations, and collecting and reviewing documents, achievement data, and artifacts. The study was conducted in the natural setting. It was not in a controlled setting where variables were manipulated. No hypothesis was established prior to the study. The information gathered from the literature and research study reviews helped shape and inform the study and guided me in the collection and analysis of data.
Rationale for Research Design

“Qualitative research is an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (Merriam, 1998, p. 5). In qualitative research, the focus is on understanding a phenomenon as it exists whereas in quantitative research the focus is on explaining and control. “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, p. 6). See Table 3.1 for a description of some of the other differences between qualitative and quantitative research.

Table 3.1 A Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Qualitative Research</th>
<th>Quantitative Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal of investigation</strong> (Merriam, 1998, p. 9)</td>
<td>Understanding, description, discovery, meaning, hypothesis generating</td>
<td>Prediction, control, description, confirmation, hypothesis testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Design characteristics</strong> (Merriam, 1998, p. 9)</td>
<td>Flexible, evolving, emergent</td>
<td>Predetermined, structured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus</strong> (Johnson &amp; Christensen, 2004, p. 31)</td>
<td>Wide-angle</td>
<td>Narrow-angle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature of observation</strong> (Johnson &amp; Christensen, 2004, p. 31)</td>
<td>Study in the natural environment</td>
<td>Study under controlled conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data collection</strong> (Merriam, 1998, p. 9)</td>
<td>Researcher as primary instrument, interviews, observations, documents</td>
<td>Inanimate instruments (scales, tests, surveys, questionnaires, computers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature of data</strong> (Johnson &amp; Christensen, 2004, p. 31)</td>
<td>Words, images, angles</td>
<td>Variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mode of analysis</strong> (Merriam, 1998, p. 9)</td>
<td>Inductive (by researcher)</td>
<td>Deductive (by statistical methods)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Findings</strong> (Merriam, 1998, p. 9)</td>
<td>Comprehensive, holistic, expansive, richly descriptive</td>
<td>Precise, numerical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Results</strong> (Johnson &amp; Christensen, 2004, p. 31)</td>
<td>Particularistic findings</td>
<td>Generalizable findings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This research study explored what makes Bright Star so successful and how it became that way. Data collection involved interviews, observations, and the collection and review of documents and artifacts. It was a study during which I searched for what conclusions could be drawn from the data (induction) rather than looking to see what data could serve as evidence to prove or disprove a specific theory (deduction). Based on these descriptors of research studies, this study was a qualitative study.

There is a lack of agreement among qualitative researchers as to the number and types of qualitative methods of research; however, there are four types of qualitative research that some researchers (Trochim, 2001; Merriam, 1998; Johnson & Christensen, 2004) agree are common to educational research: ethnography; phenomenology; grounded theory; and, case study. Ethnographers are interested in “describing the culture of a group of people and learning what it is like to be a member of a group from the perspectives of the members of that group” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 46). With phenomenological research, the researcher is trying to find out how people experience a specific phenomenon from their own perspective. Grounded theory is focused on developing an explanatory theory from the data that is collected. Case study research is broader and more varied. It focuses on “each case as a whole unit … as it exists in real-life context” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 47).

For this research study, a study of Bright Star High School, I used the case study methodology focusing on a single case with the school as the unit of study. This study involved how and what questions. “In general, case studies are the preferred strategy when how or why questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life
context” (Yin, 2003, p. 1). A case study is an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single unit or bounded system” (Merriam, 1998, p. 12). It is used when one is more interested in process than results, context than variables, and discovery than confirmation. (Merriam, 1998).

Framework

As I thought about a framework for this study, four ideas kept running through my mind:

1. Definition of a framework - “A conceptual framework explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied – the key factors, constructs, or variables – and the presumed relationships among them. Frameworks can be rudimentary or elaborate, theory-driven, or commonsensical, descriptive or causal” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 18). The conceptual framework leads to the development of the research questions to be used in the study and that leads to the method of collecting the data.

2. Need for a framework - The reason for developing a framework or preliminary concepts is to “place the case study in an appropriate research literature” (Yin, 2003, p. 3). Other reasons are to assist in defining a unit of analysis, identifying criteria for selecting and screening potential candidates for the case study, and suggesting areas of interest and possible variables, hence, leading to the data to be collected.

3. Broad or narrow focus – cases studies are qualitative studies “...because qualitative researchers depend on the field to help them ask questions, it is not a good idea to enter the field with questions that are too specific or too tight or
too slanted. A narrow focus from the beginning may well limit what and how we see” (Ely, p. 56).

4. Relationship between the framework and this case study - a case study is an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single unit or bounded system” (Merriam, 1998, p. 12). Case study researchers study how the unit or bounded system operates. They seek to understand how the parts of a system work together so that they can better understand the system, i.e. the case. (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 377)

Prior to designing and implementing this study, a review of the literature and associated research studies related to successful, at-risk schools, school reform, and the sustainability of school improvement was conducted. This review led to the identification and consideration the following frameworks: Bolman and Deal’s framework for principal leadership (see Appendix E); Baldrige’s Education Criteria for Performance Excellence (see Appendix F); the effective schools’ correlates; the components of a Professional Learning Community; and, Marzano’s factors that affect student achievement. While all of these influenced to some degree the design of my study, the development of questions, the choice of the participants, and the presentation of findings, none, by themselves, provided a framework for the study.

Role of the Researcher

“In qualitative study the investigator is the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data (Merriam, 1998, p. 20).” Because of this it is essential that the “biases of our careers, our personalities, and our situations (Wolcott, 1994, p.408) be given attention.
My expectations of successful schools and what I will find when I visit them have been shaped by my own personal and professional experiences. I grew up in a family of six children. All of us had chores and many times we had to work together to get them done. All of us were expected to go to school and to do well. Excuses were not accepted. An educator for thirty plus years, I have worked as a biology and chemistry teacher, science curriculum coordinator, assistant principal, principal of a high school, and director of high school programs. Currently, I am an assistant superintendent working with twenty-four schools in a large, mid-Atlantic suburban school district. My beliefs about teaching and learning were formed early in my career. As a beginning teacher in a high poverty, high minority urban secondary school I had the chance to observe the differences that occurred in every aspect of the school when the principal and teachers had high expectations compared to when the principal and teachers accepted excuses and did not expect high academic achievement. From early on in my career, I worked with and for educators who truly believed all children could learn and that it was up to us to do whatever it took to help them learn and achieve academically.

The combination of a science background and school-based administrative experiences fuel my view of schools as complex organizations made up of many facets that are interrelated and that have an impact on each other, somewhat like an ecosystem. It is my belief that in successful schools, like in balanced ecosystems, the different facets of the school work well together and are in balance with each other. My experiences and beliefs represent strong feelings and biases that I had to monitor as I conducted this study. I constantly asked myself if I was reporting what I was seeing, hearing, and learning or what I expected to see, hear, and learn based on my personal values and beliefs.
Selection of the Setting

In selecting a site for a qualitative study, Merriam (1998) suggests there are two basic approaches: use probability or random sampling or use non-probability or purposeful sampling. Probability or random sampling allows for generalizability of results. It is frequently associated with quantitative research. In qualitative research, generalizability is not the goal; hence, nonprobability or purposeful sampling is used. “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, p. 61).

In case study, the qualitative methodology being used for this study, “our first obligation is to understand this one case. … The first criterion should be to maximize what we can learn” (Stake, 1995, p. 4). Merriam (1998) suggests developing criteria that guide the selection of a site and then selecting the site based on those criteria. In this case, the site selection criteria included the following: that the site be a high school that was fully accredited and meeting AYP; that the school’s demographics showed high numbers of students on free and reduced lunch, high numbers of minority students, and high numbers of students whose first language was other than English; and, that the school was accessible and the principal and school district were open to the school being studied. Bright Star was selected for all of these reasons. It is a successful, at-risk high school. See Appendix A for a profile of Bright Star.

For the purposes of this case study, a successful, at-risk school was defined as one “having a student population of at least 50% minority students and 50% of students
qualifying for free and reduced-price meals. In addition, at least 90% of their students graduate and are accepted into college” (National Association of Secondary Schools, 2004, p.v). Bright Star High School met all of these criteria. In addition, it was fully accredited and had made Adequate Yearly Process (AYP) under No child Left Behind (NCLB) for the last three years. It sustained its high performance over an extended period of time. Also, it was easy to get to and open to study. “The ideal research setting is one in which the observer obtains easy access, establishes immediate rapport with informants, and gathers data directly related to research interests” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 27).

Selection of the Participants and Assurances of Confidentiality

The participants included the assistant superintendent who oversaw Bright Star High School, two past principals and the current principal, and, two school-based administrators; seven teachers; four parents; and, eleven students. Each formal participant was asked to sign an informed consent form. The form included an explanation of the research study, assurances that neither they nor their school would be identified by name in the final report, a statement that their participation in the study is voluntary and that they may withdraw without fear of retribution at any time. See Appendix H for my letter and consent form for adult participants and Appendix I for my letter and consent form for student participants.

Issues of Entry, Reciprocity, and Ethics

Before beginning the collection of data at the school site, approval to conduct the study was sought and received from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University International Review Board and the school district in which Bright Star is located. I sent a letter (Appendix J) to the principal describing my study and followed up with a meeting
with the principal during which the following assurances were given: the goals of the school had been reviewed; activities associated with the study would not disrupt the school’s work to achieve their goals or carry out their daily routines; the identities of the research participants and the school would be protected; and, a copy of the completed study would be sent to the principal.

Getting to know the people, putting people at ease, introducing myself, explaining why I was there, and establishing rapport were the main areas of focus in gaining entry to the school. While the principal was accepting of this study of Bright Star, I knew there might be some among the faculty who were not as accepting of my presence. It was important for the people in the school to see me as “the type of person to whom they could express themselves without fear of disclosure or negative evaluation” (Taylor & Bodgan, 1998, p. 50). To help in this regard, some questions to break the ice, “Can you tell me a little about Bright Star? What do you teach?” were used.

Getting into the selected site was an ongoing process as it was imperative that trust and cooperation be established and maintained throughout the process. (Ely, 1991). The need to “respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of the informants” (Cresswell, 2003, p. 201) had to be kept in mind.

To protect the study participants/informants, the following safeguards suggested by Cresswell were followed:

1. Articulate the research objectives verbally and in writing before the study gets underway.

2. Get written permission from the school district and from the assistant superintendent and principal to proceed with the study.
3. File a research exemption form with the Institutional Review Board.

4. Tell the district, assistant superintendent, and the principal about the data collection techniques and activities associated with the study.

5. Make transcripts, written interpretations, and reports available to the principal.

6. When decisions are to be made about reporting the data, consider the rights, wishes, and interests of the informant first. Let the informant make the final decision regarding his/her anonymity. (Cresswell, 2003, p. 202)

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from June 2006 through June 2007. Typical qualitative data collection techniques such as interviews, focus groups, observations, and document reviews were used. Generally, only one of these techniques is used during a qualitative study but in case studies all three are frequently used (Merriam, 1998, p. 134).

For the interviews and focus groups, two small tape recorders, with back-up tapes and batteries readily available, were used. I took notes as the participants spoke and, if I was conducting a focus group, jotted down who was speaking and in what order. The tapes were transcribed as soon as possible after conducting the interviews and focus groups. One other person assisted me in doing the transcribing.

There is disagreement among qualitative researchers as to the benefits of using a tape recorder. Stake says that a tape recorder is really of little value unless there is a plan to have an audio recording as part of the presentation of findings (Stake, 1995). Taylor and Bogdan (1998) agree with Stake and suggest not using a tape recorder at all or at least not until the impact of the tape recorder on the interviewee can be determined. Johnston (2000) disagrees with both of these qualitative researchers. She found a tape
recorder quite useful in her case studies of four high schools in New York. Having completed this study, I have to say I agree with Johnston. The use of a tape recorder enabled me to get the quotes I needed for a rich, thick description of the responses to my research questions.

During the study I made observations, collected and analyzed documents, school demographics, and school performance data, and talked formally and informally with faculty and staff. “Data collection in a case study is a recursive, interactive process in which engaging in one strategy incorporates or may lead to subsequent sources of data” (p. 134). The use of different sources of information were very helpful in validating the data collected. As pointed out by Patton (1990) and cited by Merriam (1998) “…no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective …. By using a combination of observations, interviewing, and document analysis, the fieldworker is able to use different sources of data to validate and cross-check findings” (Merriam, 1998, p. 137). These techniques were used during my case study of Bright Star.

*Interview procedures and protocols.*

Interviews and focus groups were conducted on the following dates:

- Interviews on June 30, August 4, and October 4, 2006; and on February 4 and June 10, 2007
- Teacher focus group on October 30 and another on November 1, 2006
- Parent focus group on November 1, 2006
- Student focus group and student led tour on October 30, 2006
- Second student focus group on January 18, 2007
The interviews and focus groups took place in locations and at times that were approved by the principal and convenient for the participants. Completed consent forms were collected and participants were asked to complete background information forms (Appendix K) before participating in interviews or focus groups.

My first set of questions (Appendix L) for the interviews and focus groups were long and detailed. After the first two interviews, I determined I should probably revise my questions to a much shorter version. I wrote a shorter set of questions (Appendix M) and sent both the long and the short versions to two colleagues for their comments. Both advised me to use the shorter set of questions because it provided a more focused but yet open structure for conversations related to my research questions.

All of the interviews and focus groups were conducted at the school. As the collection of data progressed, constantly comparisons what I was hearing with each of the participant groups were made. If reading was mentioned by one of the focus groups, I listened carefully to see if other participant groups agreed. Each of the factors identified in the findings as important to the success of Bright Star High School are supported by three or more sources. This triangulation of data is evident in the presentation of findings and increases the reliability of my findings.

*Direct observation procedures.*

Selected activities and events pertinent to the research questions were observed: hallways, the cafeteria, an instructional council meeting, and the attendance operation. The recorded data from the interviews, documents, data, and observations were reviewed frequently to determine whether there were events or interactions occurring that would help validate findings that had already come to light. A chronology of activities - “a
good record of events to provide a relatively incontestable description for further analysis and ultimate reporting” (Stake, 1995, p. 62) was kept. Observations were written in a timely manner. The data was loosely organized and categorized as it was recorded. I constantly searched for confirmation of data already collected, asking myself questions about how one piece of information might relate to another. “Each good observation period is expected to aggregate with others” (Stake, 1995, p. 62).

Document data collection and review.

“Quite often, documents serve as substitutes for records of activity that the researcher could not observe directly” (Stake, 1995, p. 68). For example, as I spoke with students I had a sense I could learn much more about the culture and how they felt about their school and some of the programs that had been implemented from their student newspapers and yearbooks; hence, I went to those documents for additional information. Much of what had already been gleaned from interviews and focus groups was supported in the student newspapers and yearbooks. Reviews of the documents involved the same recursive, iterative process mentioned for interviews and observations. Whenever discrepancies between the documents being reviewed and what had been observed or heard in interviews or focus groups were found, they were noted and attempts were made to get clarification and confirmation the next time I was at Bright Star.

As the amount of data collected grew, I found myself spending more and more time just searching through it for specific pieces of information. Keeping it all in my mind and attempting to organize it was becoming impossible. The data needed to be in a much more useful form, one that would allow me to search for patterns and broad
themes. It was at this point that the decision was made to look into a qualitative software package that would help with the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data management.

Most of observations, interview notes, reviews of documents, interpretations, and reflections were recorded on the computer using Microsoft Word. Some hand-written notes were kept in a notebook. Ely (1991) refers to the place where the data are stored as logs. The log is where all data is gathered whether it comes from interviews or observations. “Detail is everything. Only that which is recorded in the log is available for research” (Ely, p. 70). My log was mostly written in Microsoft Word on the computer.

After I word-processed the data, I printed it out and made notations about possible ways of organizing it. Merriam (1998) refers to this as the first level of coding data. The second level of coding involves looking for patterns, developing themes, and placing the data in categories. “Categories and subcategories (or properties) are most commonly constructed through the constant comparative methods of data analysis” (Merriam, p. 179). This constant comparative method of analysis was used; however, as mentioned earlier, the amount of data was overwhelming. As a result, I made the decision to use a qualitative software program.

The search for a useful qualitative software package began on the internet looking under “computer assisted qualitative research.” Guidelines were found on a Colorado State University web site that gave insight as to what a qualitative software program should help with:

- Making notes in the field
• Editing
• Coding or categorizing
• Storage that can be queried
• Search for key words or phrases
• Data linking – connecting categories of information
• Adding reflections or memos about certain aspects of the data
• Content analysis – counting the number of times a word or phrase or concept is mentioned
• Data display capabilities
• Graphic mapping or creating diagrams
• Preparing interim and final reports

(Colorado State University, 2006)

Using these guidelines, I examined a number of qualitative software packages online, eventually settling on NVivo 7 because it had an extensive tutorial with it, all documents in Microsoft Word could be easily imported, and because of the support it could provide: “coding and editing of textual data, retrieval and flexible recoding, automated processing, search of text or coding and building new searches on old” (QSR, 2006). The student version of the software was purchased as it was less costly than the regular version.

I began by doing the tutorials and then importing the data into the “Sources” part of NVivo. I set up the “Sources” section in the software as follows:

I. Documents

A. Articles about
2. Inspiration

3. Math course sequence

B. Doc’s docs
C. PTSA Newsletters
D. School Plans
E. Student Newspapers
F. Yearbooks

II. Focus Groups

A. Parents
B. Student group #1
C. Student group #2
D. Teacher group #1
E. Teacher group #2

III. Interviews

A. District Administrator
B. Principal 1
C. Principal 2
D. Principal 3
E. Current school-based administrators
   1. School-based administrator #1
   2. School-based administrator #2

Once all of the data were imported into the software under “sources,” categories or “free nodes” such as IB, attendance, reading, renovation, and leadership were created,
and data coding began. “Free nodes” were eventually transformed into “tree nodes” for the second level of coding. “Tree nodes” provide a way to subdivide the larger “free node” categories into smaller categories as connections, relationships, and patterns in the data become evident. The tree nodes eventually led to the development of the six domains around which all the data were organized.

In coding the data, it became obvious it would be helpful to know not just how the data could be categorized and organized but also the source (administrator, teacher, student, or parent) of specific bits of data and basic information about the source. To accomplish this task, a greater understanding of the functions of the software was needed; hence, I attended a two-day NVivo class in Baltimore on March 8 and 9, 2007. As a result of the instruction received in the class, I was able to refine the tree nodes, set-up a case for each participant, and connect it with each participant’s individual attributes.

Quality assurance.

Trochim (2001) states that “qualitative validity cannot be established with the same rules that apply to validity of quantitative data” (p. 167). Rather we might want to take a look at the criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability for judging the validity of qualitative data.

Credibility has to do with whether or not the findings are believable from the perspective of the participants in the research. To insure the credibility of my findings, transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups were sent to each of the participants, except the students, and asked them to give me feedback. Of the seven teacher participants, four responded. Of the four parent participants, one responded. Of the six administrator participants, three responded. It was obvious that those who did respond
had reviewed the transcriptions carefully. Their recommendations for changes in the data were helpful. They included changes that were editorial in nature and ones that were more substantial and clarified meaning.

Transferability refers to the degree to which the findings can be transferred to other cases or settings. “The qualitative researcher can enhance transferability by doing a thorough job of describing the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research. The person who wishes to transfer the results to a different context is then responsible for making the judgment of how sensible the transfer is” (Trochim, 2001, p. 162). Design of the case study of Bright Star High School is based on the research associated with successful, at-risk schools. I assumed that many of the factors that were described in the research as common to successful, at-risk schools would be found at Bright Star, factors such as common vision and mission, high expectations, instructional leadership, standards and benchmarks with frequent assessments, safe and orderly environment, opportunity to learn with supports and interventions for those who are struggling, home-school connections, and collaboration. At Bright Star, I found these and much more.

Dependability, or reliability, is tied to replicability. In qualitative analysis this is a challenge because human behavior is constantly changing; hence, Merriam (1998) suggests not asking whether or not the study is replicable but rather whether or not “the results are consistent with the data collected (p. 206).” She also suggests that there are some steps to ensure that results are dependable. These include: explaining the investigator’s position in the study; putting an audit trail in the final report, that is explaining how the data was collected and analyzed; and conducting triangulation as part
of the data analysis. Merriam’s steps were followed to insure the reliability of the findings. Data were collected, analyzed, and triangulated.

Triangulation means “…the convergence of data gathered by different methods, such as observations and interviews” (Ely, 1991, p. 97).” Yin (2003) agrees with Ely. He states, “The most robust fact may be considered to have been established if three sources all coincide” (p. 83). I have three or more sources for all of the findings presented. As the body of evidence supporting common practices found in successful, at-risk schools grows, the case for the transferability of findings from case studies and other types of qualitative studies done on successful schools is strengthened.

The Qualitative Narrative

This is a naturalistic study. As such, the findings are presented in words, in a rich, descriptive, narrative form rather than in numbers and charts. Through the presentation of the findings in Chapter 4, the voices of the district and school-based administrators, teachers, students, and parents are heard as they describe what makes Bright Star High School successful and how it came to be that way.
Chapter 4: Findings

Bright Star High School is a successful, at-risk high school. It is identified as successful because: it is fully accredited by the Commonwealth of Virginia; it has met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) for the past three years; 40 percent of their students are enrolled in International Baccalaureate (IB) courses; the school’s Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) results have risen more than 100 points over the past five years; the graduation rate is 97 percent; the college admissions rate is 93 percent; and, it has received numerous awards from various organizations (the International Center for Leadership in Education, NASSP, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation). All of this has been achieved despite the fact that Bright Star has a student body that is 70 percent minority, 37 percent Limited English Proficient (LEP), and 50 percent on free or reduced lunch. In addition its population has a 22 percent mobility rate.

The purpose of this case study was to examine what makes Bright Star so successful and how it became that way. There is a lot of overlap in the responses to these two questions; however, there are also some data that apply more directly to the first question than to the second question and vice versa. As a result, I have chosen to report my findings in this chapter in two separate parts: Part I: What Makes Bright Star High School So Successful and Part II: How Did Bright Star Become As Successful As It Is? Having said this, I want to emphasize that it is very important the reader carefully examines both parts of Chapter 4 to gain a full understanding of the responses given to the two research questions.
My study includes data gathered from interactions and conversations with the current principal of Bright Star and the two immediate past principals, two school-based administrators, seven teachers, eleven students, and four parents. It also includes reviews of documents and observations during my visits.

**Part I: What Makes Bright Star High School So Successful?**

When I first asked the question of selected study participants, *What Makes Bright Star High School So Successful?* What I heard was this:

- **Principal 2,** “There is no failure, only feedback. In 1998, we failed ten SOL exams and passed only one. At that point, we could have said, ‘What do you expect? We have the highest rate of poverty, mobility and second language students (in the district).’ Instead of using our ‘wild cards,’ we decided to identify those factors that were blocking our success. We looked at potential bottlenecks—things that were slowing us down. We decided to focus on three general areas—time, setting and methods. To that end, we changed our school year calendar and added a mandatory after-school program. Our belief that given time, all students could learn, led us to offer both semester and double-block courses in a number of core courses. Finally, we used the last four years to sharpen our methods adding a number of instructional tools to our tools box. We refused to look for excuses for failure. Instead, we looked for reasons to succeed. Our relentless effort proved to all of us that ‘there is always a way’” (Principal 2 Newsletter, April 12, 2004).

- **Principal 1,** “Implementation of the literacy program, implementation of the ASAP program (an after-school academic program for students), the change in how we perceive the department chairs in that we gave them more of a leadership
role, the common assessments, and the remediation that we provide to the
students” are the critical factors that help us become and continue to be successful
(Principal 1 Interview, February 4, 2007).

- A school-based administrator, “I can name 5 critical factors that have helped
make Bright Star successful: The first one I think is our after-school academic
program, ASAP.” He then went on to name four other factors: the building of
relationships among students, staff, and faculty; the literacy program; the
attendance system; the willingness of every one to do whatever was “beneficial”
for the students (School-based Administrator 1 Interview, October7, 2006).

- A student, a senior at Bright Star who took me on a tour of the school, “Good
teachers. For example the math teachers – they use what they have. They want
you to learn something every day. And the physics teacher – they are a classic
example of crazy (but good) teachers who love what they do. And help is
available through ASAP. If students feel they need help, like I did in calculus, the
teacher took the time to help me” (Student Tour, October 30, 2006). This student
also talked about the teachers using Blackboard to post homework assignments
and notes.

- Another student, a junior, “I do believe it is a good school because the teachers
know what they are doing and they care about education” (Student 8 in Student
Focus Group 2, January 18, 2007).

- Another junior, “I believe Bright Star High School is a good high school because
it is very small and you are able to get to know all staff members” (Student 4 in
Student Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006).
A parent who has been associated with the school for 12 years summed up the responses to this question, “It is the whole picture – the kids, the teachers, and I personally thank the county for funding the reading programs. Those are the things that make it successful” (Parent 4, Parent Focus Group, November 1, 2006).

You will see the themes mentioned in the above responses over and over again as you become familiar with the findings from this case study. These themes include but are not limited to the following: a common vision and mission (failure is not an option and we will do what ever it takes); high expectations; support and intervention programs such as an After School Academic Program (ASAP), classes in reading, and reading strategies incorporated into every class; the importance of building leadership capacity; an excellent, dedicated teaching faculty who share a common vision and mission; and, a safe and secure, small, personalized environment.

The rest of Chapter 4, Part I, is devoted to an in-depth reporting of the data collected in response to the question, What Makes Bright Star High School So Successful? The data are organized into six major domains with various success factors under each. Within each domain and under each success factor, the voices of the students, teachers, administrators, and parents are heard. Furthermore, data collected from observations, reviews of student newspapers, yearbooks, the principal’s newsletters, and the Parent, Teacher, Student, Association (PTSA) newsletters, and from reviews of awards and articles about Bright Star are reported. The domains and success factors are not reported in any order of priority. Table 4.1 shows the success factors under each domain and whether there is additional data related to them in Part II of this chapter. Not
### Table 4.1 Findings Related to Success Factors and How They Came to Be

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains and Success Factors</th>
<th>Part I: Information about the success factors – page #</th>
<th>Part II: Additional information on how particular success factors were implemented – page #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Common vision and mission</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Collaboratively develop a vision and mission</td>
<td>p. 59</td>
<td>p. 133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Culture, time, and space</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Culture – General comments</td>
<td>p. 66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Culture – Diversity</td>
<td>p. 67</td>
<td>p. 140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Culture - Safe and secure, small, personalized environment</td>
<td>p. 69</td>
<td>p. 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Time – Attendance</td>
<td>p. 71</td>
<td>p. 145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Time - Modified calendar</td>
<td>p. 73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Time – Block scheduling</td>
<td>p. 75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Space – Building</td>
<td>p. 76</td>
<td>p. 145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Administrative leadership</td>
<td>p. 78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Shared leadership</td>
<td>p. 81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Teacher leadership</td>
<td>p. 85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Teachers and instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Skilled, dedicated faculty that functions as a learning community</td>
<td>p. 86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Instructional delivery system</td>
<td>p. 92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Staff development</td>
<td>p. 96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Guaranteed and viable curriculum</td>
<td>p. 98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Data driven instructional decisions</td>
<td>p. 101</td>
<td>p. 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Accountability</td>
<td>p. 103</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Classroom and student learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Reading</td>
<td>p. 106</td>
<td>p. 148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. IB Program</td>
<td>p. 109</td>
<td>p. 152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. High expectations</td>
<td>p. 112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Support and intervention</td>
<td>p. 116</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Double-blocked classes</td>
<td>p. 122</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Emphasis on SOLs</td>
<td>p. 123</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. 9th grade transition</td>
<td>p. 126</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Parent involvement</td>
<td>p. 128</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
all of the topics under each of the domains are addressed in Part II. Only those where the additional data are important to the reader’s understanding of how a particular success factor came to be at Bright Star are included in Part II.

Common Vision and Mission

Collaboratively develop a vision and mission

At the time of this study, the vision and mission statements in School Improvement Plans (SIP) were combined. They were not separated from each other. A listing of core beliefs and values was not required.

The vision and mission statement for Bright Star High School as affirmed in their School Improvement Plans remained constant from 2000 through 2006:

“The Bright Star High School Community - staff, parents, and students - is committed to providing our students with an education that prepares them for the global economy and life in the 21st century. Our mission is to provide educational programs and resources for our diverse population in order to ensure: academic success; social, emotional and physical growth; and, the development of productive and responsible citizens. In order to achieve this mission, we will focus on and encourage: academic success; the use of effective teaching strategies; and, the creation of a positive school climate that celebrates diversity and promotes tolerance, understanding, and cooperation” (2000 – 2006 Bright Star School Plans).

However, a number of other factors associated with Bright Star School Improvement Plans (SIPs) did change during that period of time. These factors included:
• who participated in developing the plan; the laser-like focus on the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) tests; the increased collaboration within the whole Bright Star faculty;

• the continuous improvement in the academic achievement of the students as evidenced in the measures or indicators of achievement from one school improvement plan to the next;

• the availability and use of formative and summative data;

• the specificity and refinement of the work plans that faculty and staff implemented to bring their vision and mission alive.

These changes in Bright Star’s SIPs are described more specifically in Part II: How Did Bright Star Become As Successful As It Is?

Between 2000 and 2006, the Bright Star faculty and staff refined and improved their vision and mission, communicated it over and over again, increased their collaborated, became better at what they were doing, and came to believe in the importance of all school personnel knowing the roles they played in making that vision and mission come alive. This was reflected in their comments in interviews with administrators, teachers, students, and parents.

Principal 2 may have expressed this best in one of his newsletter articles, “We can only be who we are, but what we are, both individually and collectively is what makes us a TEAM and the school that we are. We can always grow and improve, but WE can only be what we are. Together Each of us Asserts our Mission, because the only thing that we can be is a school—a school that seeks not to be the best in our world, but to be the best for our world” (Principal 2 Newsletter, March 29, 2004).
When teachers were asked about the school’s vision and mission, they responded without hesitation. They knew their role and what was expected of them. One teacher, a ten year veteran stated, “The teachers are expected to get the most out of the students and I think that the teachers work really hard in this school. There are no free days; there’s no ‘oh it’s a holiday so let’s have a party’ day” (Teacher 5, Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006). Another teacher said, “One year we had the motto, Whatever it Takes. That meant we do whatever it takes to get the kids where they need to be in order to pass. And then another year we had the motto, It’s About Time. That was when they changed the calendar so that instead of starting after Labor Day we started two weeks ahead of time. You would think two weeks should not make that much of a difference But it does because the SOLs are given the first or the second week in May, whatever it is, and these kids get two weeks additional instruction before their tests” (Teacher 3, Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006). Teacher 5 supplied, “Everybody realizes that the mission of the school is to get as many students to graduate from high school with as good an education as possible” (Teacher 5, Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006). One teacher with fewer than three years experience stated, “I’d say it’s definitely a school that’s focused on student engagement and the learning focused on …instruction” (Teacher 1, Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006).

A school-based administrator said, “I think the reason we have been able to have that achievement in our students even though we may have a high rate of free and reduced lunch or the language issues is because our staff really set the high bar even though they work very hard and they meet the students where they are at in terms of their knowledge and their skills I think collectively the staff has a philosophy that they are not
going to let our students fail” (Administrator 2 Interview, October 2, 2006). A central office administrator who worked directly with the school described the Bright Star’s mission as, “Learning. And they take it seriously” (District Administrator Interview, June 30, 2006). All who work at Bright Star appear to know their role and they work hard at making the Bright Star vision and mission come alive.

*Communicate! Communicate! Communicate!*

At Bright Star, the school’s vision and mission are communicated in a multitude of ways:

- the principals’ memos and letters to faculty;
- the PTSA newsletters and the student newspapers;
- and, most importantly, the decisions and actions taken by the faculty and staff.

The person who communicated these messages most frequently and most clearly over the last ten years was Principal 2. Between 2003 and 2005, he wrote eleven articles (5/8/06; 3/6/06; 9/19/05; 9/6/05; 3/7/05; 8/30/04; 8/23/04; 5/24/04; 5/10/04; 3/1/04; 4/4/03) for his weekly newsletter directly related to the school’s vision and mission. He also wrote similar articles for the student newspaper and for the PTSA newsletter. Several of these articles can be found in Part II of this chapter. Throughout his articles, he remained focused on getting his message out to all of the stakeholders: teachers, parents, and students. Below is one of the more powerful messages about the school’s vision and mission that he communicated via one of his weekly newsletters:

“What would schools that really believed in their students look like?
• The master schedule would be constructed, not for the convenience of the staff, but to ensure that all students had an opportunity to succeed.

• Teachers would have high expectations for all students and would describe how they “push” students to take more demanding courses.

• Every student would have an individual learning plan.

• The school would send a strong message that “failure is not an option.”

• The staff would understand that some students need more time to learn specific subjects.

• Teachers would understand that building a solid foundation in earlier courses would enable students to take on much more difficult work later in their schooling.

• The staff would be committed to making certain that each student had the very best opportunity to succeed.

• There would be more than one course sequence. Students would be placed in courses based upon their readiness levels not upon what grade they were in or their age.

• Every student’s program would be customized to that individual student.

• Visitors would feel welcome.

• Students would be polite, respectful, and well-behaved.

• Students and staff would feel safe at all times.

• Students would feel comfortable approaching any adult to ask for help.

• Teachers would do everything in their power to ensure that all of their students remained “on the bus.”
• Subject-area teams would use common assessments to adjust instruction.

• Teachers would teach bell-to-bell and make the most of every minute of class time sending the message to their students that their success will never be compromised.

• Bell work (work to be done as soon as the student enters the room) would be used universally by teachers.

• Teachers would understand that, if students could read at or above grade level, their learning options were virtually endless.

• The staff rejects the notion of the bell curve, that only some will succeed and embraces the philosophy underlying the J Curve—continuous progress.

• The staff is harder on themselves than anyone else would ever be.

• The staff is concerned about doing right not being right.

• This is not about the minimum. It is about doing whatever it takes.”

(Principal 2 Newsletter, September 6, 2005).

During nine visits to the school between July 19, 2006 and February 21, 2007, it was obvious teachers knew what the vision and mission of the school was. They felt they were a part of the over-all decision-making process and they believed they had a vital and valued role to play in the academic achievement of their Bright Star students. They spoke about the opportunities for teachers to be leaders, how the department chairs worked with them, especially concerning decisions related to classroom instruction, and how the administration supported and enabled them to do what they were hired to do: teach their students.
At Bright Star, the administration and security personnel take care of supervising the hallways, the cafeteria, and after-school detentions. The administration takes care of the follow-up on student absentees and tardies. New teachers receive additional support, not just from the administration and their mentor teacher but also from the other teachers in their department. “When new teachers come in, we don’t let them flounder, we are there to help them. They become part of the group” (Teacher 1, Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006). In the first teacher focus group, there was discussion about new teachers becoming believers in doing whatever it takes to help students be successful. Teachers said that those who do not adopt this philosophy tend to move on to a different school. The teachers know their work is challenging. They offer help outside the classroom. They take pride in seeing their students becoming successful. This constant communication of what is important at Bright Star keeps everyone alert to student learning.

Parents showed their familiarity with the focus on academics and their need to participate in helping their students realize success. Parent 4 who has been associated with the school for twelve years said, “Our school totally turned around. I mean I don’t know if you have heard that whole presentation principal 2 loved to give …” And she began to list some of the same items cited in Principal 2’s statements above about what a school that really believed in its students would look like and most of the other parents chimed right in. It was obvious they were familiar with his mantra and had heard it many times.
Culture, Time, and Space

Culture – General comments

The culture at Bright Star is unique. After spending the better part of two years at Bright Star High School researching her new book, author Patricia Hersch described Bright Star’s culture this way, “I am not given to superlatives, but I have visited scores of secondary schools in the country and have never experienced one with such an environment of civility, hospitality, mutual respect and personal dignity” Principal 2 Newsletter, May 23, 2005). The International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) called Bright Star’s school climate “inviting” and concluded the culture reflects the motto that, “There is always a way” (ICLE, June 2005).

When recounting what has helped make Bright Star as successful as it is, Principal 2 concentrated on relationships: “What we have come to take for granted at Bright Star, others around the country view as miraculous. Think about it. National Geographic spent two years with us looking at the culture of our school. The article, which appeared in the September 2001 issue, was confirmation to us that the climate in our school is a model for others to emulate. The foundation of relationships that we have built in our school enabled us to thrive despite the 9-11 tragedy, two wars, the Beltway snipers, and the calamitous weather ” (Principal 2 Newsletter, September, 2003).

A school-based administrator, when asked about the culture of the building, stated, “… I hope, that they (the students) feel like it is a place of a lot of opportunities for them and not just academically. We have all of the different clubs and organizations and sports so we really try to make sure it’s reflective of what the kids want. At
Back-to-School night and at their class meetings, they’ve been told if there’s something that you’re interested in that isn’t here, you need to see our athletic director, about instituting something. We’re pretty open to that. We try to make it academically and socially a place of opportunity for them where they still have to toe the line” (Administrator 1 interview, October 4, 2006).

Students discussed the opportunities open to them in a “small” school like Bright Star. They spoke about their school spirit and the way teachers help them and never give up on them. Additionally, as previously indicated, they recognize their purpose at Bright Star is to learn (Student Focus Groups, October 30, 2006 and January 18, 2007).

The teachers understand their main mission is to insure students learn. However, they also feel supported and as though they are making a difference. Here is how one teacher describes the culture at Bright Star: “I really respect a lot of people that I work with here. I’ve had opportunities to leave and I haven’t taken them because I like the people here. Even though people change and come and go, the culture of the school stays because there is enough left over from before. We only lose what 25 or fewer teachers a year. The work of those remaining at the school continues. They know their mission.” (Teacher Interview, November 1, 2006).

Culture - Diversity

To some, it might seem odd to mention diversity at Bright Star as one of the factors that helped make it successful, but that is not the thinking of the Bright Start school community members. Parents interviewed addressed the diversity: “… my kids liked the diversity of the school because they found it representative of the world better than what is found at some of the other schools” (Parent 4, Focus Group, November 1,
“Well I graduated from this high school. And (in my time) there was nothing but privileged. And there was segregation. We saw integration. I graduated in ’72. 1968 was the first year I ever went to public school with another race other than myself. And that caused problems. There was white and there was Black. Blacks were the minority. What I like here is there is no minority and no majority. It’s Heinz 57 and a melting pot. And they hang out together or they hang out based on a club or sport or interest” (Parent 1, Focus Group, November 1, 2006). A school-based administrator said, “I would take a line from National Geographic; I would say Bright Star is one of the most diverse schools in all the country and I don’t mean diversity just as in race, I also mean in class. We have students who are congressmen’s kids and then you have kids who literally just got off the boat and are A-1 level ESOL students (know no English). So we not only range in ethnicity. We also range in class, to both ends of the spectrum. So when I say most diverse, I really mean most diverse” (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).

“The diversity of this school is a part of what makes Bright Star a unique school. Even though it is a diverse school, we have a population of students who get along with each other and overlook the fact that students are from different countries and speak different languages. It is not an issue here at Bright Star. Bright Star is a friendly place. It’s a place where students respect their teachers, their custodians, cafeteria workers, and those people in turn respect the students. Students open doors for teachers and teachers open doors for kids. The custodians can be in the cafeteria telling the students to throw their trash away and they do. Everybody works together, no matter what their position” (Principal 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).
Students had similar thoughts. “I feel it’s our surrounding because we have a lot of, it’s a very diverse school and many students come from homes where their parents are not from this country so they have to succeed in order to make it out. I think they are like forced to do good” (Student 4, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006). “There are so many different kinds of people here that affect us in different ways. We all have different views. So I guess that kind of helps out. So, like it is all just not focused on one type of belief but like a mixture of beliefs” (Student 3, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006).

Culture - Safe and secure, small, personalized environment

A safe and secure environment is a top priority at Bright Star. Everyone, students, faculty, and staff, wears an identification badge. Entrance to the building is through the main doors in front of the office. Other doors are kept locked during the school day. School security personnel monitor hallways, cafeteria, and other favorite, student gathering places. The student who took me on a tour of the building said students know the rules and know they will have consequences if they do not follow them: “Our principal and security folks are nice but do NOT mess with them. Students don’t like the strictness. But I think that is ridiculous. The school is really laid back. You just don’t break the rules and you’ll be fine” (Student 11, October 30, 2006)

A safe and secure, small, personalized environment is supported and strengthened by the relationships among and between the students and the faculty and staff. The teachers and staff are focused on this as is evidenced by the following statements, “Remember, the most important factor in student achievement is the relationship between the teacher and the student. The students that we are most concerned about reaching (the at-risk, at-promise, average and below) don’t care how much you know until they know
how much you care. I have never been in a school in which the teachers and staff put so much effort into encouraging students and developing positive relationships” (Principal 2 Newsletter, May 9, 2005). “Our nationally recognized, mandatory after-school tutoring program, which is required for students receiving a failing or near failing grade in a course, has been the most surprising way of personalizing our school. Many of our students want to know how much the teacher cares before they care how much the teacher knows. We believe that the teacher-student relationship is the most important factor in student achievement” (Principal 2 Newsletter, May 23, 2005).

This attention to relationships has worked at Bright Star. When I ask the students whether or not they thought Bright Star was a good high school and what they liked best about it, six of the seven students described the small, personalized environment and the opportunities available to them:

- “I believe Bright Star is a good high school because it is very small and you are able to get to know all staff members. I like that it is small” (Student 4, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006).

- “I like the fact that our school is small. Because if it was a bigger school - kids who are outgoing and smart get a chance but not others. Here you can play any sport” (Student 6, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006).

- “I’d have to say the environment is most important to me” (Student 3, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006).

- “I think the relationships we have formed like with teachers and friends and staff. It’s like you almost know everyone here. It’s like a second family” (Student 5, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006).
• “I agree just being able to come to a place where you feel like you are at home and you are accepted. And you make all these new relationships with those around you – teachers and students alike. You have to just get out there and put yourself out there” (Student 1, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006).

• “The opportunities that you have at the school. You can take IB classes, honors classes, any sport, any club. It’s just nice. The school is like if you want to take this class, it may be a little too hard for you but we’re going to let you do it and see how it works out. The staff is very supportive” (Student 6, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006).

Parents also appreciate the small, personalized environment. “At a small school like this, any kid can participate and feel successful and join almost any sports team and feel as though they belong which I know is not true at some of the larger schools” (Parent 1, Parent focus Group, November 1, 2006). “I like the smallness of the school. But I know my daughter is looking at big colleges because she feels Bright Star is almost too small but at the same time she would agree that in terms of making it on sports teams or joining a club you have more of a chance to stand out and make a difference in a small school” (Parent 2, Parent Focus Group, November 1, 2006). “I went to a large high school but a small college and I’ll take small any day” (Parent 1, Parent Focus Group, November 1, 2006).

*Time-Attendance*

A major part of Bright Star’s culture that is very visible is their attendance system. No other school in the district has it. Each morning four computers are set up near the main entrance to the building. A teacher is at each computer. The teachers who
do not have a class assigned to them for the first class period of the day volunteer for this duty. All students entering the building swipe a bar-coded identification card through a barcode reader. The system quickly checks the validity of the card and flashes the student’s name and picture on the screen. Students are required to wear their ID badge in plain view at all times while on school grounds.

During my observation, one of the teachers, the one closest to the attendance office, had a longer line than the others. She was taking care of the students who had forgotten their ID badges or did not have one. The students gave her their names. She looked them up, and determined what the problem was. Then, if they needed a new card or had one that was not working, they were directed to the attendance office.

The teachers working the machines were friendly but firm and consistent in their directions to the students. As students scanned their cards, the machines “talked” to them. “Happy Birthday” was one message and I heard the following noises: broken glass; ding, ding, ding; and a siren. I later learned that broken glass meant the student had not gone to detention as assigned and needed to see the Dean of Students who was located in an office just to the left of where the attendance system was set up. The attendance office was located to the right of the computers. “Ding, ding, ding” meant the student to whom this card belonged had a class cut. A siren meant the student had not turned in a required completed form such as an emergency care card or federal survey form. The attendance system was in operation from 6:50 to 7:20 am. A warning bell rang at 7:15 am.

(Attendance Observation, October 30, 2006).

Every person with whom I spoke while conducting my study mentioned the attendance system as one of the reasons Bright Star was so successful. All of the parents
discussed the benefits of the attendance system and those “wake-up” calls. One of the students, a senior, said, “Scanning in is really strict. At other schools my friends will tell me they leave and teachers won’t even know. They won’t get marked absent. It isn’t that way here” (Student 5, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006). Another senior said, “They’ll (automated attendance machine) call at like 7 in the evening when everyone is home or if you are late (to school) they call in morning” (Student 4, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006). Another student depicted it this way, “We’re the only school that has to do that. We have to scan in. And that has its down side. Like, if you arrive during the peak of the buses, you have to stand in line. And sometimes waiting, you know it makes you late for your class but I guess it’s just assurance that you are in school” (Student 1, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006).

The teachers and administrators are also positive about the attendance system: “I am really impressed by what they do with the SCAN-IN system” (Teacher 1, focus Group 1, November 1, 2006) adding he had never seen anything like it. The attendance rate has gone “from something like 89% ten years ago to 96% now. The students know that if they skip class, the next morning they are going to be punished for that. There will be immediate consequences” (Administrator 1, October 4, 2006).

*Time - Modified calendar*

The Modified Calendar is a 242-day calendar that has a fall and spring semester and two summer sessions. With the modified calendar, the school year begins in mid-August and ends in late May or early June, two weeks earlier than the start and end dates on the traditional calendar followed by most of the schools in the district. The first summer session generally ends around July 4. The second summer session runs about the
same time as summer school does throughout the district. When Principal 2 introduced the modified calendar to the Bright Start school community, he described a number of benefits for the students stating they could: “take additional courses and earn up to two credits; spend more time preparing for the SOL, advanced placement, or international baccalaureate tests; pass courses begun during the usual school year but not successfully completed; take advantage of internships or specialized courses” (Principal 2 PTSA Newsletter, April 2000).

Bright Star was one of four high schools that applied for the modified calendar back in 2000. The proposal went to the Board and then to the state. In Virginia, there is a law prohibiting schools from starting school before Labor Day; hence, a waiver was requested and approved for the earlier start date (Student Newspaper, November 3, 2000).

Those with whom I spoke favored the Modified Calendar and saw it as playing a big part in helping Bright star to be as successful as it is. Parents detailed their feelings about it as follows: “I love the calendar also. I think modified calendar is great. Kids are so bored by mid-August. They are ready to go to school. And they are so excited” (Parent 3, Focus Group, November 1, 2006). “Students take the SOLs in May. (With the Modified Calendar), they get more time, before they have to take the tests” (Parent 1, focus Group, November 1, 2006). “I like two weeks before Labor Day. We get all that beginning stuff under our belts then get a two day break… students are not stressing about going back to school” (Parent 4, focus Group, November 1, 2006).

I was somewhat surprised at the strength of the support for the Modified Calendar that I heard from the teachers and administrators. They really saw it as a strong plus for
the students. As one teacher explained, “...another year we had the motto, *It’s About Time*. That was when they changed the calendar so that instead of starting after Labor Day we started two weeks ahead of time. You would think two weeks should not make that much of a difference.” (Teacher 3, Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006). The teacher agreed with the parents that the extra time had an impact on the number of students who passed the SOLS A school-based administrator said, “I think the other thing that helped us was our calendar which started the year I came here. That’s huge because it allowed us to give special ed and language students the opportunity to benefit from two sessions of summer school. We have a community-based summer school; we start it the day after school ends. The ESOL students may not become more proficient by taking two sessions of summer school, but I feel that at the very least they are maintaining the proficiency they gained throughout the school year so that when real school starts in August they haven’t lost ground” (Administrator 2 Interview, October 4, 2006).

*Time - Block scheduling*

Block scheduling was implemented at Bright Star in the 1995-1996 school year. Student Newspaper. (1996, October 4). Raider’s Digest. (37)1, p. At the time, it was a major shift in student and teacher scheduling. Previous to the implementation of block scheduling, students went to seven classes each day for fifty to fifty-five minutes. With block scheduling, students go to four classes each day, three of them meet every other day and one is an everyday, embedded class. Classes run ninety minutes, allowing more time for instruction and student learning. The frenetic pace that existed with meeting seven classes each day was significantly reduced. There are fewer times when students
were in the halls and could become distracted and become involved in less-than-desirable activities.

To help teachers implement engaging lesson during longer class periods, the district and the school offered extensive staff development for teachers prior to the implementation of block scheduling – focusing on the development of lessons that engaged students in the learning process, lessons that were developed with the Backward Design process (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) in mind, and lessons that incorporated the use of technology. Without block scheduling, it would have been challenging if not near impossible for Bright Star to have instituted some of the other changes they made that are recognized by many as having helped craft Bright Star’s success. Included in these are their attendance system, instructional delivery model, and increased use of technology.

This is the eleventh year for block scheduling Bright Star. Few students, teachers, or parents even mention it anymore. It is now common place in all schools in the district now. As I was conducting this study only one parent mentioned it as she recalled what her schedule was like when she attended Bright Star as a student herself and had seven classes every day. Today at Bright Star, block scheduling is just the way things are.

Space - Building

“When I first arrived – Bright Star was like a haunted mansion in Disney World. It had dim, dark hallways” (Principal 2 Interview, August 4, 2006). This is how one of the principals with whom I spoke described Bright Star before renovation.

Now, students, teachers, and parents talk about the difference the renovation has made. Seven of the eight students with whom I spoke talked about the renovation. For
five of them, it was the first thing they mentioned when asked, “What do you like best about Bright Star?” One student added, “I am fortunate that when we came in 2004, the school was completely renovated and everything was all different. But you guys were still here while the school was being renovated. I’d come here when my brother and sister were here and there were like holes in the ceiling and there was reconstructing but we came when everything was done. It was great” (Student 4, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006). The students were particularly impressed with Bright Star’s bathrooms and locker rooms: “Out locker rooms are the best” (Student 2, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006). “Our bathrooms are the cleanest. They are the best. They are awesome. I went to bathroom in another school and yuck. Things were crawling on the floor” (Student 5, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006). Two other students added, “In some schools, water faucets don’t work. Here they do” (Students 2 and 3, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006). All agreed, “We love the renovation. Yeah” (Students 1 through 6, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006).

A school-based administrator described the transformation of the building this way, “When I interviewed here there were wires hanging from the ceiling. When renovation was complete, Principal 2 used to say now our building matches our teachers. Now, we finally have this really great building that matches the people inside it. Our facility has finally caught up to the level of people we have inside of it. I think that matches what we were trying to accomplish in terms of culture” (Administrator 2 Interview, October 4, 2006).
Instructional Leadership

Administrative leadership

Bright Star had four different principals between 1980 and 1989. This continual turn-over in the leadership did nothing to engender common vision, collaboration, or feelings of stability and consistency. The turn-around began in 1989 with the arrival of Principal 3 who stayed until 1997, for eight years. The IB program and block scheduling were implemented under Principal 3, and, as mentioned earlier, violence decreased and “the school became less chaotic.” (Student Newspaper, December 15, 1998). Principal 2 came on board in 1997 and stayed for nine years, until 2006. Many of the factors mentioned in this study as being key to Bright Star’s success were implemented under Principal 2. These include: the second attendance system (CAAS), the focus on reading, double blocked classes, ASAP, the after-school remediation program, the modified calendar, and a consistent instructional delivery system.

In 2006, during the time Principal 2 was at Bright Star, the school was named a Breakthrough High School. In describing the characteristics of principals who led Breakthrough High Schools at that time, DiMartino and Miles stated, “First, in framing a vision for their schools, each principal was driven by deeply rooted care and concern for each of their students. Second, the principals had the ability to empathize with staff members when sharing the leadership for the vision; by their willingness and ability to understand the various viewpoints of others, the principals demonstrated an uncommonly high level of self-confidence. Third, implementing the strategies required them to become strong salespersons – initially for their ideas, but eventually for a collaboratively created vision for their school. Fourth, they had a strong work ethic and an almost-
stubborn determination to succeed while maintaining a sense of calm and order in the face of often-bitter conflict” (DiMartino and Miles, 2005, p. 47). A staff member at Bright Star described Principal 2 as a person who “created an atmosphere of respect. He (Principal 2) has very high expectations for everyone. [This has] created an enthusiasm for doing their jobs. …There is no guessing on expectations. He is an enthusiastic salesman for his ideas. It’s obvious that he cares about everything that goes on in the school. He stays calm in conflict situations. He tries to handle conflict by analyzing the situation rationally” (DiMartino and Miles, p. 50).

All three principals were clear in their own minds about their roles and responsibilities and often spoke about them. Principal 1, “I am here to support the teachers, and help them provide the best education they can in their classrooms.” She goes on to say, “I have a trust with the faculty and I think that’s important” (Principal 1 Interview, October 4, 2006). Principal 2, “I am absolutely committed to your (teacher) success and professional fulfillment. Everything that I do—every meeting that I attend, every letter, memo, or newsletter that I write—is done for you and our school” (Principal 2 Newsletter, August 18, 2003).

Teachers interviewed described how their principals and other school-based administrators support them through actions and not just talk. “It’s my second year here and I really like the fact that you can go up to anybody and ask anything. There’s so much support here. I agree with Teacher 8 on the support aspect of it and usually you see the Principal and Assistant Principals here. They usually have their doors open, are always willing to talk to you in the hallways anytime, whereas the first school I went to I hardly ever saw the Principal or Assistant Principals. You can always find somebody to
help you with anything, whatever it is. Even during class changes I always see them (administrators) out in the hallways; you don’t see that in other schools” (Teacher 6, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006). “It is nice that, yes, there is a level of respect but when an administrator can come up to you and go like this and say OK, you’re gonna get all that stuff done, that to me says yes there is a comfort level, yes there is most definitely respect but it’s a friendly respect, it’s not a standoffish respect” (Teacher 6, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006). “I think departments are really good people and for the most part really work hard. I feel that we are supported by our co-workers and by the administration as well. Everybody realizes that the mission of the school is to get as many students to graduate from high school with as good an education as possible” (Teacher 5, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006). “By the same token when students are tardy, have unexcused absences the administration sends letters home, something teachers had to do quite a few years ago. We had to send the actual letters out to the parents and follow up. Now the administration does that” (Teacher 3, Teacher Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006).

The assistant principals like the principals take pride in their roles as leaders in the building. They understand and believe in the vision and mission of the school. They recognize that their primary role is to help the teachers help the students succeed. “My primary responsibility - I am here to support the teachers, and help them provide the best education they can in their classrooms. Basically, I try and make all the teacher’s life easier when it comes to materials that they need, support that they need if they are having issues with individual students or having questions about instruction. I am here to
support our teachers; that’s my primary responsibility” (Administrator 2 Interview, October 4, 2006).

The stability in administrative leadership, the consistent adherence of the administrators to Bright Star’s common vision and mission, and the strong, passionate belief on the part of the administrators, especially the principals, in the talents and skills of their faculty and the ability of all of their student to learn and achieve have had a significant effect on Bright Star’s journey to success.

**Shared leadership**

Shared leadership is vital to Bright Star’s success. One administrator states it this way, “He (Principal 2) was here for nine years. When you have a principal in one school building for nine consecutive years with a clear focus and then ownership by the teachers, (the teachers) being involved in decision making, that is shared decision making and truly one of the reasons for our success” (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006). This same administrator went on offer a couple of examples of how teachers are involved in shared decision making: “In every school I have gone to, the principal hires the teachers or is the main person involved in the hiring. It doesn’t happen here. I, the department chair and possibly the team leader do all the interviews. We hire somebody and then introduce that person to the principal. I will be honest with you, more than in any other school I have been to, the respect that I have for our department chairs is considerable. They care about their departments, they have ownership in their departments. I really consider them equals with me, if not sometimes higher.” Secondly, the teachers informally monitor each other and the expectations are high for all – not just students. “The demands that teachers put on themselves and that teachers put on other
teachers is so high that as a school-based administrator I have not had to go through that kind of process of getting a teacher out of the school…” (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).

Another school-based administrator supported the importance of shared leadership at Bright Star, “Our department chairs, under Principal 2’s leadership and now under Principal 1’s leadership, have a lot of say in the day-to-day decision-making or decision about day-to-day activities. They meet once a month, and we all joke that it’s often a dinner meeting because they go from 2:20 to sometimes 5 or 6 at night but they hash out issues at the department chair level. If it’s something they don’t feel like they can make a decision on, they bring it back to their department and then back to the department chair group (the Instructional Council) the next month. I was a department chair in an elective area. Yet I had as much say at that table as the math teacher or the English department chair. So I think it creates a pretty powerful team of department chairs that I have not had before in my experience. I’m not sure how many other schools have that but I think it’s very powerful. They feel a huge responsibility to the department chair sitting next to them when they make those decisions. We really felt accountable to each other when we made a decision that affected everybody at the table” (Administrator 2 Interview, October 4, 2006).

That same administrator went on to say, “I think there is shared leadership here because of the way that the department chair structure is. They make real decisions - all the way down to the simplest thing like field trips. The department chairs approve or disapprove them. So from something as little as that to much bigger things like the
testing schedule in May and how the SOLs will be done, decisions are made at the department chair level” (Administrator 2 Interview, October 4, 2006).

One district level administrator described shared leadership at Bright Star this way, “Teacher leadership at the department level is highly developed. They never give up. They are constantly monitoring student progress throughout the year” (District Administrator Interview, June 30, 2006). When I asked teachers about who comes into their classrooms most often to see what is happening, the teachers responded, “Department chairs.” “I think that (shared leadership) is not just a little piece of the puzzle but a very important thing. There is a huge collegiality here, not a top down, not possessive, this is my territory, you stay out, type attitude. There is absolutely none of that. If anybody is that way we probably drive them out of this school because they probably are not comfortable here” (Teacher 8, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006).

Other teachers spoke about the type of support they receive from their team leaders and department chairs: “That (the curriculum) comes from the department chair. I teach algebra I part 1. It’s based on the Algebra I SOL course. The benchmarks are there. Everybody knows what the standards are. But things change and teachers are constantly readjusting their teaching methods, what they’re teaching, their content, and they are constantly revising and sharpening their focus” (Teacher 1, Teacher Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006) through collaboration with their team leaders or their department chairs. Another teacher described the support she received when she first arrived: “When I came here I got a tremendous amount of support from the social studies department (team leaders and department chair) because I was an LD teacher in social studies. People
were e-mailing me whole lesson plans for the entire year so nothing was left uncovered.
I’d say it’s definitely a school that’s focused on student engagement and instruction”
(Teacher 7, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006).

My observations support what the teachers and administrators are reporting. I observed a department chair meeting on Tuesday, January 16, 2006. It was held in the Library Conference Room. The meeting got underway around 2:30 pm and was still going strong when I left around 4:45 pm. There were approximately 15 department chairs/teachers present along with the assistant principals and the principal. The meeting was chaired by the math department chair who also serves as the academic dean. I learned that anyone in the department chair group can and do send agenda items to the chair of the group. A member of the group takes the notes and they are posted on Blackboard so all members of the faculty and staff can read them. There were plenty of refreshments available.

The agenda for the meeting included items related to “embedded” extra time for teachers and students, teacher professional issues, courses for the coming year, Back-to-School Night, and field trips. The meeting was a true representation of shared leadership. The administrators and department chairs interacted seamlessly. One of the agenda items led to a discussion of how much time selected teachers are present during the school day. It was both a sensitive and tough issue to deal with; however, the group did not shy away from it. Teachers and administrators actively participated in the discussion and eventually they arrived at a consensus as to how the problem would be resolved.
Teacher leadership

Teacher leadership is also important at Bright Star. “In most schools, teachers lead their classrooms. They accomplish objectives or goals through the efforts of other people, their students. They are leaders. In our school, teachers lead more than their own classroom. Through distributed leadership and shared responsibility, they make the key instructional decisions that drive our school” (Principal 2 Newsletter, October 18, 2004).

A year later in a follow up article in his weekly newsletter to staff, Principal 2 stated, “A combination of our relatively small size and the neediness of our students, pushes many into early leadership roles. Emerging as a ‘Leader’ is an expectation at Bright Star, not a surprise. Most schools would be ecstatic if a staff member became recognized as a leader. Not so at Bright Star. We want all of our staff members to rise to the level of ‘Owner.’ What separates a ‘Leader’ from an ‘Owner?’ ‘Leaders’ take on responsibility. ‘Owners’ feel responsible. Owners are simply more passionate and more emotionally invested in the school, their colleagues, and their students. They see beyond their classroom or their role and they see the big picture. They accept and want more responsibility” (Principal 2 Newsletter, December 23, 2005).

In the teacher focus groups, teachers spoke about the sharing that they do to help each other out. This sharing sometimes extends beyond their own departments. They might share instructional techniques that work with particular students or types of materials they used that were particularly helpful for a specific student who is struggling. They spoke about having opportunities to leave and go to other schools but not doing so because they recognized they were part of a team, part of something larger than themselves. They talked about opportunities to lead, to make a difference. Here is one
teacher’s description of how this worked for him: “I went to a workshop on IB. We were struggling with our IB test scores. We weren’t doing so well. So it was suggested that I go to this workshop. I went to this workshop, learned a lot, came back, went to the other IB teachers in science and the department chair and talked about what I had learned. We instituted a lot of changes and our scores went up. So I think that if someone has a good idea, I think that your idea is encouraged. Your colleagues want to know any idea. I think if someone comes up with a better lesson for Bio I, a better way of doing this from a resource, the internet, a textbook or whatever, I think …If you can get a kid over a hump, I think it is definitely encouraged” (Teacher 5, Teacher Focus Group #1, November 1, 2006).

**Teachers and Instruction**

*Skilled, dedicated faculty that functions as a professional learning community*

Students, parents, administrators, and teachers are passionate in their belief that the Bright Star faculty is crucial to the success of the school. The faculty is one of the factors mentioned when stakeholders were first asked what made Bright Star successful and why? Consider the following comments made by different groups with whom I met. I have placed the two student focus groups first because their remarks so clearly express their gratitude and appreciation of the teachers.

The first three remarks are from the first student focus group:

- “I agree because teachers don’t get paid for staying after school with us but they put themselves out there” (Student 1, Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).
- “Yeah. Teachers have taught us what we need to know. They’ve fulfilled their job. I’ve only had one teacher whose license should have been revoked. He was
stuck on himself. He left the school” (Student 3, Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).

- “I like the support you get from teachers. I think ten years from now I’ll look back and think they did not give up. They kept pushing” (Student 4, Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).

The next four comments were extracted from the second student focus group:

- “I do believe it is a good school because the teachers know what they are doing and they care about education” (Student 8, Focus Group #2, January 18, 2007).

- “Teachers stay after school to help you” (Student 8, Focus Group #2, January 18, 2007).

- “Teachers and counselors help by answering our questions and tutoring students” (Student 10, Focus Group #2, January 18, 2007).

- “What I like best (about Bright Star) is how the teachers stay to help especially after school. They are the best” (Student 9, Focus Group #2, January 18, 2007).

All of the students with whom I spoke believed their teachers, for the most part, had a strong, positive affect on them as students. The students did not say all of their teachers were great; but, they believed their teachers cared about them, and that meant a lot to them. Their teachers communicated to Bright Star students they wanted them to be successful.

These student opinions about Bright Star teachers are similar to those expressed by other Bright Star students who met with officials representing ten Pennsylvania school districts visiting the school in September of 2005. These officials were on a Study Tour sponsored by the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE). ICLE had
named Bright Star one of thirty model schools in the nation. Principal 2 wanted teachers to know what the Bright Star students said to the guests about their teachers, so he put their comments in his newsletter to the faculty after the visit. Students said:

- “Our teachers really care about us.”
- “The way teachers are here makes me really want to be a teacher. They make it like teaching is the greatest job in the whole world.”
- “I was behind in my Physics class and I had a test coming up. I went to the teacher and told him that I wanted to come after school, but I just had too many commitments. The teacher came to my play practice and tutored me between scenes of our rehearsal. I can’t believe that he did that.”

Principal 2 concluded his report to the Bright Star teachers with, “Don’t ever sell yourselves short, you are doing great things every day. Shine diamonds, shine” (Principal 2 Newsletter, September 26, 2005).

Parents agreed with the student comments. During the parent focus group, parents communicated the following about the Bright Star teachers:

- “The teachers are amazing. I tell parents when they asked me what I think. I tell them at this school there are a lot of challenges. But you will have great teachers. You are not going to have teachers that can’t handle change and challenges. You’re going to have a handful. But as I told my kids and friends you’ll have the great ones too. But life is that way too. You will not always have the best. There is no utopia” (Parent 4, Focus Group, November 1, 2006).
• “One thing I want to say is Bright Star has a lot of long-term dedicated teachers. We have a lot of teachers who have been here 25 years. They take a lot of pride in the school” (Parent 3, Focus Group, November 1, 2006).

• “Some of the teachers who taught my oldest daughter were still here with my youngest and they were good” (Parent 1, Focus Group, November 1, 2006).

PTSA Presidents spoke about the dedication of the teachers in their newsletters to parents saying, “We are fortunate to have a terrific and caring community, led by Principal 2 and his hard-working staff and extraordinary teachers” (President’s Letter, PTSA Newsletter, September 2003). “Bright Star is a terrific school made better and better each year because of the dedication of its staff, teachers, and, just as important, its parents” (President’s Letter, PTSA Newsletter, May 2005).

During the opening days of school in 2003, Principal 2 wrote in one of his newsletters: “One of the keys to Bright Star’s success has been the presence of a core group of highly dedicated, highly effective, experienced staff members who have willingly sacrificed personal convenience and have stopped at nothing in order to help our kids and our school succeed” (Principal 2 Newsletter, August 18, 2004).

Of course, the question in my mind, and in the minds of many others, was whether or not Principal 2 had to “clean house” (i.e. force teachers out) for Bright Star to be successful. In 2005, Principal 2 responded to that query with a version of a story titled, “Acres of Diamonds” told by Russell H. Conwell, Temple University Founder, “…the discussion of our school’s ability to accomplish things that very few schools have leads to the question, ‘Did you have to start all over and get a whole new staff?’ Why would I go out to search for riches, when we had acres of diamonds in our own back yard? We
already had a group of the finest, most dedicated teachers that I had ever known. My job was to find the diamonds and let them shine. And shine they did” (Principal 2 Newsletter, February 7, 2005).

Principal 1 agreed:

“We believe that the teachers are very dedicated professionals who are here for the students. The teachers are here because they want to be here. We don’t have teachers who just are here because it is the first available position. We have teachers who work long hours and Saturdays and during holidays.

We can’t be successful if the teachers aren’t collaborating and as I said before, teachers on all levels have to fully collaborate. We can’t expect a 9th grade self-contained English student to do well if the teachers are not there for that student as they are for a general education student. When the student gets to the 11th grade they have to take the same SOL and if we are not giving them the same education then we are not fulfilling our job of giving that student the education they deserve and I’m very adamant that there are no LD lines, that there are ESOL lines that they are going to get out of school” (Principal 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).

Based on the responses from Principals 1 and 2, I concluded I would find that there was quite a lot of collaboration and sharing among the faculty and staff. This conclusion was supported by other administrators at the school who also spoke about the dedicated, hard-working faculty and about their collegiality and focus on building relationships that strengthen collaboration. “We have a very dedicated staff; we have dedicated students, and I think at Bright Star, as opposed
to maybe other schools, you can see the rewards of the work that you do in the school, more than possibly other schools. The learning environment here at this school is focused on relationships as it should be - teachers building relationships with students, students building relationships with teachers, students building relationships with the administration” (Administrator 1, October 4, 2006).

The teachers themselves spoke positively about their efforts to collaborate, support each other, and make connections with teachers within and outside of their departments. “I think one of the things here is the collegiality we have. We are not all doing all the work. We work incredibly hard, all the time, more hours than anybody can put in. But, does anybody act like ‘these are my materials and I’m not going to tell you about them?’ (Laughter among the teachers in the focus group). Nobody does that here. You can spend your life developing your stuff. But then here you just put it all out on e-mail and pass it on to everybody else. And literally, as far as I know, everybody in the school does that” (Teacher 6, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006). “We have common assessments and a fair amount of administrative pressure on the department chair level” (Teacher 2, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006). “Everybody’s looking for magic and it’s not magic. It’s incredibly hard, dedicated work and if we’re not willing to do that no programs you put in are going to be successful. …Number one is that dedication and camaraderie and incredible hard work, none of which are any magic educational strategies” (Teacher 2, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006).

“What I noticed when I came to Bright Star is every department not only gave common assessments but every department has team meetings, like in chemistry there might be teachers that teach chemistry and well before school started they all met. I taught World
History I. The World History and Geography teachers met before school started and they mapped out for the year what they were going to do. And this year, I taught English 9. Before school started, not only did I get the yearly breakdown but they gave me the common assessment tests, the midterm tests, and sample lessons” (Teacher 7, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006).

I asked about the diversity within the staff and whether this was a factor in the success of Bright Star, especially in light of the diversity within the student body that had been so prominent in our discussions. A district administrator who worked with Bright Star responded, “There is some diversity in the staff but no greater than in others. This is not seen as a factor in success.” I followed up and ask Principal 1 the same question. She said, “All of our teachers are so dedicated and I never hear a student say they are prejudiced against me or they don’t like me because I’m Spanish or they don’t like me because I’m black. I don’t hear that. But I have seen our African American population of teachers grow as well. But I don’t know that that (by itself) makes a difference to the students.”

*Instructional delivery system*

The emphasis on using a unified instructional delivery system began in 2003. In a newsletter to the faculty, Principal 2 wrote, “Set the tone! Begin each class with ‘Bell Work,’ which not only helps students transition from the hallway to the classroom, but it sends the message that, when you enter this room, work begins.” He continued with, “Set a precedent! Use the in-between moments! Don’t waste words! Keep the fun element! Don’t forget to keep their attention!” (Principal 2 Newsletter, December 1, 2003).
Principal 1 has continued to emphasize the importance of a consistent instructional delivery system today. In an interview she stated, “We still do – BEEP (Beginning, Ending, Engaging and Practice). Every teacher is expected to follow that. When I go into your class, I should be able to come in at any time during your class and I should be able to see where you are in that model. When I come at the beginning of the class, during the first five minutes, your students should be working on bell work (seat work that the students do as soon as they enter the classroom). If you go to a teacher before the beginning of the class, the teacher should be standing at the door. If you go into the teacher’s class, you should be able to see work on the board and essential questions. You should be able to see the agenda on the board” (Principal 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).

Not all of the teachers responded favorably to a consistent, instructional delivery system when it was put into practice, “I don’t think there was a lot of sharing (before we started using a consistent instructional delivery system). Everybody basically ran their own classroom. You had your own tools and you had your own people. …education was left up to the teachers and there was not a lot of oversight. And that’s good and bad. If you were a good teacher you could do what you wanted. If you were a poor teacher … you could do what you wanted. I think that as a result there was a lot of diversity in the educational delivery and what kind of an education the kids got. Between Teacher A and Teacher B it could be drastically different. I think Principal 2 took the school and put it more onto an assembly line kind of system where Teacher A, Teacher B and Teacher C needed to get together and say ‘Hey, what is important? What do we need to do (to improve student learning). Now when a student goes from my class to another teacher’s
class they can step in and pick right up on what is going on. Standardized delivery has been helpful with this. But there’s been a lot of resistance. I don’t think the better teachers are necessarily crazy about it” (Teacher 5, Teacher Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006).

A teacher who has only been at Bright Star for two years had a different opinion, “Last year when I first got here I think I was against a lot of things like the instructional delivery model, bell work…models, and literacy classes because as a new teacher I think there is a lot put on you. But now that it’s my second year teaching I’m using it a lot more. I see that the kids come in and actually ask ‘where’s the bell work?’ I was just amazed in the first week of school these kids actually want bell work. I think it’s the consistency here that really makes it successful. For a new teacher and an experienced teacher – we’re all doing the same thing, whether its physical education, chemistry, whatever. The kids know … we’re all doing the same thing. It’s just a different subject” (Teacher 6, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006).

Bright Star students are aware that a consistent, instructional delivery model is being used. When asked if there was anything that seemed to happen in all or most of their classes, they responded as follows:

- “Principal 2, our former principal, put something in place a few years ago where every class was required to do a warm-up because he believed the first ten minutes of a class are important and it should not be wasted on kids coming in late to class and getting prepared. They should be ready for class by the time the late bell rings. So a lot of teachers now require us to do warm-ups and activities to get us started at the beginning of the class before we
move on to the next part of the class” (Student 6, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006).

- “Teachers are on students’ backs all the time. We have bell work every day” (Student 10, Focus Group 2, January 18, 2007).
- “Bell Work” (Student 9, Focus Group 2, January 18, 2007).
- “Agendas on the board” (Student 8, Focus Group 2, January 18, 2007).
- “Take it out of the door – review of the lesson. What are you taking out of the door with you?” (Student 7, Focus Group 2, January 18, 2007).

While the students might complain about the bell work at the start of class, the school-based administrators praised it. “I think our instructional delivery model (is critical to our success). We have an instructional delivery model where every class starts with a warm-up activity. Every class has bell work and that goes a long way toward reducing tardies. With BEEP, there’s an expectation regarding the standardization of teaching; but, (with bell work) its not necessarily how you do it or what warm-up you do, just as long as there is work when the student walks in the door. That helps a lot on discipline, attendance, tardies …” (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006)

One of the other school-based administrators spoke about how the model helps new teachers, “This delivery model minimizes some of the behavior and management issues that teachers can have. I think the teachers that really grab a hold of it, and we really do stress it with our first year teachers as well as everybody, but I think it can help them eliminate a lot of the first year stuff that they may have to deal with as teachers on a day-to-day basis” (Administrator 2 Interview, October 4, 2006).
Thus, while I found that there was resistance, philosophically, to the use of the instructional delivery model among some of the teachers, I found most teachers used it. Why? Because, according to the teachers, the students, and the administrators, it worked. Principal 2 recognized that this resistance was there when he worked with key staff members to put the model in place; however, he said they started with the premise that they were going to do whatever it took to help students succeed. If this is what it took, they would do it. If it did not work, they would abandon it. Teachers appeared to appreciate that kind of down-to-earth attitude.

*Teacher staff development*

Staff development is another key to the success of Bright Star. It is closely tied to the ongoing emphasis on school improvement. Much of the staff development that occurs at Bright Star is conducted by the teachers themselves as evidenced by the School Improvement Plans, 2000 through 2006. Department chairs, team leaders, teacher mentors, literacy coaches, and others conduct in-services. There is an emphasis on the teaching of reading throughout all subject areas. Bright Star has a literacy coach who conducts ongoing in-services open to all teachers. Some of these in-services are mandatory for new teachers. In order to reach all staff members, an in-service offered during the school day, may be repeated several times so those who want or are required to attend can do so. For example, “The literacy meetings are run two days in a row because they (teachers) have the red/blue alternating day schedule so she (the literacy coach) runs those two days in a row every period so that teachers can come down during their planning period. Our technology specialist does what she calls Tech Thursday where she focuses on different topics related to the use of technology in the classroom.
Lately, it’s been Blackboard because of the county requirements related to blackboard issues. It’s always on a Thursday but she runs it every period so that teachers can come down during their planning periods” (Administrator 2 Interview, October 4, 2006).

Time is set aside at the start of the year for teachers to participate in in-house staff development activities. “One of the things we do in the very beginning of the year is not only give teachers time to arrange their classrooms but also give them time to discuss year-long scheduling for content topics related to the POS and SOL standards. They developing common assessments and decide when they are going to be given. They might be given the third week of the 1st quarter, the 6th week of the second quarter, and/or at the end of the every quarter. We might also have pretests. Each team leader (in the departments that I supervise) will give me their schedule. They’ll give me their common assessments. (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).

Teachers are encouraged to attend conferences and in-services outside of the building and then do turn-key training in the building. Principal 2 was a firm believer in supporting teachers who will use and share what they learn before focusing attention on those unwilling to change their instructional techniques, even in the face of their students’ failures. “We don’t send people (to conferences and staff development) who need it… We reward people who demonstrate that they will use it if it is provided. The way to improve performance is to increase the performance of your top performers. That’s how we overcome resistance to change and growth” (Principal 2, 2006 in Student Newspaper)

Staff development is conducted by national and local experts. Several teachers recalled having Harry Wong speak to the faculty about six years ago. “I have been here six years and the first year that I came, we had Harry Wong. We had the books and we
had the videos. Our faculty meetings are not where we go in and make announcements. They are instructional. My first year here every faculty meeting we did a chapter of Harry Wong” (Teacher 3, Teacher Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006). “About five years ago, we had Tool Box from South Carolina” (Teacher 5, Teacher Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006). Additionally, district-level instructional services staff have conducted in-services at Bright Star on various topics as well.

One of the most frequently mentioned in-services was one conducted by the teachers themselves. “One of the best things we ever did, and this is probably four or five years ago, instead of faculty meetings, we did department visits. Every month you went to a different department and the department presented on what different techniques they used, what they were teaching in their department. It rotated around to different departments. It was amazing to sit there and see the lesson plans that other teachers did and what they were teaching and how” (Teacher 8, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006).

**Guaranteed and viable curriculum**

The phrase, *guaranteed and viable curriculum*, comes from Marzano’s works. It refers to teaching students the essential content - what they will be assessed on - and making the time for them to learn it. If students are taught the content on which they are going to be assessed, and they are given the time they need to learn it, then they have access to a *guaranteed and viable curriculum*. For teachers to insure students have this access, they need to:

- collaborate with their colleagues to identify the essential concepts students must learn for the course(s) they teach.
• be intimately familiar with the types of assessments the students will have to take.

• collaborate with their colleagues to develop pacing guides and common assessments.

• have a support plan in place when students do not learn the content in the time provided.

Collaborating with their colleagues is particularly important if we want to insure student success. If a student is taking biology from Teacher X and has a schedule change because of an issue with math that results in him going to Teacher Y for biology, student success in biology is best insured if both teachers have worked together to follow similar course curricula for the year at about the same pace.

The students believe they have a guaranteed and viable curriculum at Bright Star. They just don’t call it that.

• “Yes (all teachers of the same course teach the same content). Definitely” (Student 9, Focus Group #1, Focus Group #2, January 18, 2007).

• “How do we know? We have competitions with another class and we had been taught the same stuff” (Student 10, Focus Group #2, January 18, 2007).

• “In biology, we have similar tests” (Student 8, Focus Group #2, January 18, 2007).

• “And in English” (Student 9, Focus Group #2, January 18, 2007).

• “It’s specific to the type of classes you are taking. For instance, all the history teachers teach the exact same way. They work out the way they teach and they
teach the same things. And English pretty much goes that way also. But math is way different” (Student 6, Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).

- “Similar (in history or social sciences) but not the same because they (teachers) try to keep us away from cheating as much as they can. They don’t like to tempt us; however, in the science department they will use the same work sheets and the same tests. They just throw them back and forth at each other” (Student 6, Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).

Teachers were not all on board with the idea of a guaranteed and viable curriculum in the beginning. But it has been in place since about 2002, and they have seen the success it has brought for their students; hence, they now support it and they use it. Here is how one teacher describes it, “Because the kids are so needy we have to focus on what is essential. We don’t have time to do anything that’s not essential. So after the first failures on the SOL or the practice SOLs the first couple of years, it was real clear to everybody that the reason we failed miserably, as well as everybody else in the county, is that we were teaching one thing and they were testing another. And so we had to look at the test and say OK, this is what they’re expecting out of the scores. OK. I can’t teach my favorite topic anymore. I’ve got to teach this and I’ve got to figure out exactly what they need to know because at this school we don’t have the luxury of saying, ‘Well, we’ll get to that stuff next week. What we have done is taken our curriculum and focused it on the SOL tests and it would be very nice to do a lot of other stuff, but you have to have the kids pass the SOLs. I think everybody at the school has come to that realization that we may like to do other things; but, the reality is they have to pass and if they don’t pass, they don’t graduate and then they are not successful. We feel bad, they feel bad and so
we have figured out like a laser beam what they need to graduate and that’s what we do”
(Teacher 2, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006).

Data driven instructional decision-making

“There is extensive use of data for programmatic and curricular decisions. Administrators use the statement, ‘time is relevant, outcomes are absolute’ as a guiding principle for staff. The principal opens each year with a ‘State of the School’ PowerPoint presentation to the faculty. Data demonstrate how Bright Star is closing the achievement gap between student abilities and test performance and reflect how the school ‘does the right things, the right way, for the right reasons.’ The passing rate on SOL tests was the starting point for analysis and decision making. The individual test results are charted for a five-year period to note the gains and to establish an instructional emphasis for the current year, using phrases such as, ‘continue the emphasis on the writing process; continue to analyze all relevant math test data to ensure departmental improvement; modify science sequence for at-risk and students with disabilities; and expand the use of LearnStar and the Social Studies lab’” (International Center for Leadership in Education, ICLE, June 2005, p.8).

School Improvement Plans, teacher comments, and administrative remarks provide evidence of the extensive use of formative and summative data in all subject areas at Bright Star. For example, in the 2005-2007 School improvement Plan, the Social Studies Department determined that “once-a-year standardized tests are not likely to affect the day-to-day, week-to-week, or even the month-to-month instructional decisions. Therefore, the social studies department has increased the frequency of common assessments in order to identify instruction that has been unsuccessful. More importantly,
the increase in the use of common assessments allows teachers to identify SOL standards that have not been mastered by individual students early enough to remediate students to promote greater success” (School Improvement Plan, 2005-2007). This team made the decision to use quarterly common assessments for all team level courses.

Teachers spoke about similar steps taken in their departments. Two teachers who work with Algebra I, Part 1 described the usefulness of common assessments. They also spoke about getting together “every once in a while to see where we stand and what’s working and what’s not working” (Teacher 6, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006). Teachers teaching in the four core areas (math, science, social studies, and English) and elective areas joined in the conversation indicating they also collaborated on lessons and pacing guides and had common assessments. “In Chemistry, we have meetings with the other chemistry teachers, we have assessments that we give every quarter. We also have so much transfer (sharing of information about the content we are teaching) between the teachers. If I’m not in the same place as the other chemistry teachers these kids are just lost. It was very tough coming in because we just couldn’t get in gear, but it’s (the collaboration and use of pacing guides and common assessments) here” (Teacher 8, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006). “I teach business so I’m not in an SOL testing support group. We teach single term courses and have to determine ourselves what the essential knowledge is. We do have common assessments. We have our benchmarks” (Teacher 7, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006). One of the special education teachers stated, “What I noticed when I came to Bright Star is every department not only gave common assessments but every department has team meetings, like in chemistry there might be teachers that teach chemistry and well before school
starts …I know I taught World History I, the world history and geography teachers met before school started and they mapped out for the year what they were going to do. And this year, for English 9, I taught English 9 in other schools, but here, before school started, not only did I get the yearly breakdown (pacing guides) but they gave me the common assessment tests and the midterm tests” (Teacher 1, Teacher Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006). The commitment to doing what ever was needed to help students be successful, that is to graduate, meant the teachers at Bright star had to work together. They had to collaborate. They had to use all of the formative and summative data that was available to help them and their students see clearly what students had learned and what they had not learned. Armed with this knowledge, teachers could then, and they did, put strong, systematic support systems in place for all students. This differs from what happens in some schools where only selected teachers provide support for struggling students beyond the classroom.

Accountability

Accountability can be seen, heard, and felt through the voices of the Bright Star faculty. Teachers know and recognize Bright Star is a place where student learning is the main focus. They know the impact that focus has on their decisions and actions. They spoke about themes they have had over the past six years such as, Whatever it takes and It’s about time. Teachers feel accountable and talk about it in both direct and indirect ways. “The teachers are expected to get the most out of the students and I think that the teachers work really hard in this school. There are no free days. There aren’t a lot of parties here because by and large, especially in the ESOL class and especially in the adaptive courses they are behind and they have a lot of ground to make up for them to
pass they have to hit the ground running and the teacher has to keep pushing them. Basically, squeeze that lemon until they can make lemonade. I think there is a lot of stress and a lot of pressure” (Teacher 5, Teacher Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006).

“Everybody has accountability. In the Business department we now have statewide accountability because we have MOS certification. We provide these certifications but now, not only are the students learning how to type but we have a way to measure how successful our school is compared to Virginia or the district” (Teacher 3, Teacher Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006). “Like in biology, they changed the standards on the Biology I SOL. So the Biology I and Biology Adaptive teachers are readjusting their teaching methods, what they’re teaching, their content. They are constantly revising and sharpening what they are doing” (Teacher 1, Teacher Focus Group 1, November 1, 2006).

Bright Star recognized early on, before it became a mandatory requirement, that the students had to pass the Virginia SOLs in order to graduate. The teachers worked collaboratively with each other and with the school administrators to determine what needed to be done. They concluded they had to:

- determine the essential questions for each course and lesson;
- become very familiar with the assessments and develop pacing guides starting with the end in mind;
- develop and implement common assessments that could be used throughout the courses to monitor student progress.

As the faculty initiated these objectives they realized some students were going to need more time to learn the essentials than others. Consequently, they set up systematic
support programs. One of the teachers described the process this way: “We have designed this whole thing and we have done it with blood, sweat and tears because that’s the dedication that I was talking about. We just did it because we needed it that way” (Teacher 2, Teacher Focus Group 2, November 1, 2006).

As indicated in previous sections of this document, there was resistance to some of these steps in the beginning. However, success is a great motivator and the Bright Star students began quickly to show steady gains with each step the faculty and staff took to improve student learning. Also, Principal 2 was relentless in supporting, urging, and cajoling teachers to do what they needed to do to assist students in being successful. Many examples of his messages to the teachers related to student achievement have already been cited in this document. Here is one more that speaks to the issue of teacher expectations and, indirectly, to teacher accountability:

“Nothing reveals more about the true nature of a teacher than how that teacher approaches assessment. The manner in which we judge and evaluate our students sheds the light of day on our innermost thoughts and feelings about human nature. Are you a teacher who teaches the course to the kids? This is the ‘old school’ approach. Are you a teacher who teaches the kids the course? This is the ‘new school’ approach. ‘New school’ meaning that, given enough time, all students can learn and succeed. Failure is not an acceptable option. These teachers focus on what the students learn. Time is relevant, student outcomes are absolute. These teachers talk about the challenge of helping all students succeed. They describe their classroom experience according to how well the students are doing and what
they are learning and need to learn in order to succeed. Their grade distribution is skewed to success” (Principal 2, November 11, 2004).

The Classroom and Student Learning

Reading

As stated by President Bush when he addressed the Bright Star community in January of 2004, Bright Star spells hope, R-E-A-D. The emphasis on the teaching of reading at Bright Star first began in the fall of 1998 when the staff analyzed the results of the spring 1998 SOL tests in addition to the results they received after administering the Gates-MacGinte test to rising 9th graders. These results highlighted the strong need to improve the reading abilities of Bright Star students. A reading coach was hired and the effort to significantly improve and strengthen the reading abilities of Bright Star students commenced (Student Newspaper, November 24, 1998).

Between the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years, Principal 2 called for a school-wide focus on reading and for all teachers to be aware of the need to teach literacy in all subject areas, not just in English or reading classes. He was relentless in the communication of this message and frequently invited faculty members to write about the teaching of reading. He included their writings in his weekly newsletters to faculty and staff:

“Reading Comprehension Strategies”

“Pre-Reading, connecting to background knowledge during reading, making connections to text and graphics, post-reading, and monitoring and understanding through questions” are part of a “thoughtful focused lesson” that will “offer continual assessment”
and help our students develop higher literacy levels. (Reading Coach, Principal 2 Newsletter, October 10, 2004).

Reading All The Way Across The Curriculum #2

“The Director of Bands integrates numerous literacy strategies within his class work” (Principal 2 Newsletter, March 14, 2005).

Reading All The Way Across The Curriculum #3

“By using the instructional delivery model (BEEP) throughout our school, assisting students to focus by using their time constructively and productively, and strengthening learning by using literacy skills within the secondary tier, we are helping every student succeed with higher thinking levels and problem solving skills. (Reading Coach, Principal 2 Newsletter, April 4, 2005).

“We spell “hope” R-E-A-D and so does the American public who indicated by a wide margin that the key to improving student achievement was improving literacy.” (Principal 2 Newsletter, September 19, 2005).

Reading was among the first factors mentioned by parents, teachers, and administrators when asked what they thought made Bright Star so successful. And it was mentioned over and over again. Three of the four parents interviewed mentioned it:

- “The other thing I give credit to Principal 2 for is making sure our kids got up to par with their reading levels” (Parent 1, Parent Focus Group, November 1, 2006).
- “I applaud the “whole concentrated effort in moving us into a category where most of our kids are reading at grade level …” (Parent 3, Parent Focus Group, November 1, 2006).
• “I personally thank the county for funding the reading programs. There was a group of schools that needed reading. We surpassed all who had it. This school has had to work hard to be what it is” (Parent 4, Parent Focus Group, November 1, 2006).

Teachers spoke about the emphasis on reading: “Last year, I taught world history and geography and I saw immediately that there was a heavy emphasis on reading. This year I teach developmental reading and I’m seeing how Bright Star works their reading program. Kids that come from 8th grade take the Gates Reading test. If they score below grade level they are going to get a reading class. So I guess two or three weeks ago, a lot of teachers saw their schedules change and the developmental reading class went from 2 to 12. I have to chart what strategies I’m using and test them often” (Teacher 7, Teacher Focus Group #2, November 2, 2006).

Administrators also discussed the emphasis on reading:

• “I can talk about what has been in place over a number of years, going back 5 years. I had literacy training my 1st year here 2000-2001. Now I think (reading) as the primary focus at a lot of schools is developing; that and having a literacy coach. This is something that we (at Bright Star) have been doing for 5 years” (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).

• “We have an “all-school focus on literacy. We have a literacy coach, and she’s been working really hard to, not only work with new teachers, but work with any teacher who wants some assistance. She holds once a month, I believe, meetings where she focuses on a different literacy topic. When I went through the program with her, we were sharing a lot of ideas, stealing from each other, things we could
do in the classroom. New teachers to the building are required to attend and anyone is invited” (Administrator 2 Interview, October 4, 2006).

The current principal, Principal 1, strongly supports the reading emphasis and continues to work with the faculty to focus on it and refine it: “We have an outstanding literacy program and we sincerely believe that in order to be successful, a student needs to be literate. We embed the literacy program in 9th grade and feel that all students who are reading 2 years below grade level should be enrolled in reading. All new teachers go through new teacher training before school starts and we have new teacher meetings throughout the school year. We have one assistant principal who is the coordinator of that. But we have a teacher who heads that up” (Principal 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).

At Bright Star, R-E-A-D is truly how they spell hope. The need to be literate is a value held by all who are associated with Bright Star.

*International Baccalaureate Program (IB)*

The International baccalaureate (IB) Program was one of the other most frequently mentioned factors when stakeholders were asked about what makes Bright Star so successful – particularly among the parents and students. “The IB program is a rigorous academic curriculum for 11th and 12th grade students. Students can earn a full IB diploma that consists of external examinations in six subjects, participation in community service activities, completion of the Theory of Knowledge course, and completion of a 4,000-word extended essay. Students who do not want to complete a full IB diploma may earn a separate IB certificate for each IB course completed. The IB program is open to all students, and any student enrolled in an IB course is required to
take the end-of-course IB examination. IB courses are recognized for college credit by
many universities in the United States” (School Improvement Plan 2005-2007).

“Bright Star also has an IB in the Middle Years Program (IBMYP) that ‘provides
an academically challenging framework for students in grades 6 through 10, grades 9 and
10 at Bright Star. The program provides a thorough study of English, another modern
language, history, science, mathematics, the arts, physical education, and technology. The
subjects are taught using five areas of interaction: approaches to learning, community
service, health and social education, the environment, and Homo Faber. The culmination
of the program is a personal project of the student’s choice, completed during 10th grade.
The IBMYP is a whole-school program and prepares students for the IB diploma
program, but students who participate in the IBMYP are not required to complete the IB

IB has brought a great deal of recognition to Bright Star. In 1999, Bright Star
placed eleventh in the top 100 most challenging high schools in the nation according to
the Jay Matthews Challenge Index. In 2004, Bright Star received an Inspiration Award
from the International Baccalaureate Organization of North America (IBNA). In
presenting the award, the IB representative stated, “Bright Star High School serves a
diverse population, with over 50 percent minority enrollment as well as a large number of
economically challenged students. What is impressive and inspiring is that Bright Star
opened its IB Program to all students in the school” (Campbell, P., PTSA Newsletter,
September 2004). In 2005, the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE)
published a case study of Bright Star. In their report, they stated, “The IB program is a
significant influence on the achievement of all students.”
Parents at Bright star are particularly passionate when they talk about the IB Program. Here are some of their comments:

- “My oldest graduated for Bright Star in 2000. She went to William and Mary and graduated from there and she is now in graduate school. She found through the IB program that she was so much better prepared for college than a lot of the other students she met and she had a very successful undergraduate experience. My son will graduate within a year from West Virginia University and he also found himself prepared academically through IB classes for college. I now have two here, one to graduate in the spring and one three years from now” (Parent 1, Parent Focus Group, November 1, 2006).

- “My son graduated in 2005 with the IB Diploma and he is at UVA working terribly hard but he feels the IB classes prepared him for college. He is working harder than he thought he would have to work. But that is a good thing. My daughter will graduate this year and she is also an IB Diploma candidate and I think she is more than challenged in the IB Program. It is just perfect for her. It provides the challenge that she needs to work hard in school and be able to make it in college and I hope that is what she will be able to do” (Parent 2, Parent Focus Group, November 1, 2006).

- “All three (of my children) have been in the IB Program and they have been more than ready for college. Freshman year was a great rest after senior year in high school. I really applaud the program, a program that does not require a magic IQ number like GT to get in. If you have a kid who is willing to work hard… My second daughter had a lot of challenges. She was dyslexic but she was determined
• “I’d have to put the IB program at the top (in my list of factors that have helped Bright star be as successful as it is). Even the kids who don’t choose to work their tails off and do the essay and the Creativity, Action, Service (CAS) hours and work around the clock – even if they take one IB course they are still bumping it up a little” (Parent 4, Parent Focus Group, November 1, 2006).

Teachers receive training via the IB Organization. They teach IB and non-IB courses; hence, the techniques and strategies they learn are available to students in IB and non-IB courses. Seven of the eleven students interviewed elaborated on the IB classes they were taking and two of the other four students not taking any IB classes spoke about IB being one of the factors that has helped Bright Star become successful. It is obvious the International Baccalaureate Program has had a huge impact on student achievement and the reputation of Bright Star High School.

**High expectations**

High expectations are heard, seen, and felt everywhere at Bright Star; however, no where are they described more clearly and directly than in the weekly newsletters that Principal 2 sent to the faculty and staff while he was at Bright Star.

• “Talking to our teachers about having high expectations is literally preaching to the choir. No one who knows our students and understands the challenges we face
can believe what we have accomplished at Bright Star. Foundations and national associations have marveled at our combination of high test scores and nurturing school climate. Bright Star High School has every reason to fail. We are tops in our system in poverty, mobility, and primary language other than English. We have every reason to excuse poor performance. Yet we have demanded the best from our students, and, in doing so, we have out-achieved schools that have none of our risk factors. Our success is the result of our loving and caring for our students so much that we are not willing to accept anything from them but their best. We do the right things, the right way, for the right reasons even if it means making the tough decisions, even if it means risking having our students not like us temporarily, so that, collectively, we can get them to do the things they need to do.” (Principal 2 Newsletter, November 17, 2003).

- “Now no teacher that I have ever known consciously set out to have students fail. In the old days, before SOLs, we taught, we tested, and we hoped for the best. I emphasize ‘unconsciously’ because it would be hard for me to believe that someone teaching in a Breakthrough High School could consciously put limits on what students could accomplish. The fact is that we are a Breakthrough High School because our school has defied the odds. We are doing what other high schools, holding to time-tested ‘flat world’ belief systems, can’t bring themselves to recognize—Given time, all students can learn. I could never imagine looking a kid in the eye and saying, ‘You can’t learn.’ Our beliefs about student success have enabled our school to do what no others could—help all students succeed.” (Principal 2 Newsletter, September 27, 2004).
• “We have all heard the saying that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. A class of students is only as good as the weakest performer. A school is only as good as the weakest department. A department is only as good as the weakest staff member. We get what we expect. By constantly comparing ourselves to the weakest among us, we set the bar low for everyone. When it comes down to a child’s future, good is never good enough” (Principal 2 Newsletter, January 27, 2006).

Students interviewed made it clear they understand the priorities were at Bright Star. This came through most noticeably when they described their classes:

• “No - not much down time” (Student 4, Student Focus group # 1, October 30, 2006)

• “… we are working until the end of the class to get everything done” (Student 5, Student Focus group # 1, October 30, 2006)

• In response to the question, What do you think is expected of you when you are struggling in a class? “… that you work harder” (Student 10, Student Focus group # 2, January 18, 2007))

Teachers emphasized the importance of high expectations, the need for all Bright Star teachers to believe that these students can learn, and the conviction that we, collectively, will do whatever it takes to get them to learn. They recognized what was expected of the students and of them. They had participated in setting many of those expectations.

• “… I think the kids know that this is a place where learning is the focus. The teachers are expected to get the most out of the students and I think that the teachers work really hard in this school. There are no free days. There’s no ‘oh
it’s a holiday so let’s have a party.’ There aren’t a lot of parties here because by and large, especially in the ESOL class and especially in the adaptive courses they are behind and they have a lot of ground to make up for them to pass they have to hit the ground running and the teacher has to keep pushing them. Basically, squeeze that lemon until they can make lemonade” (Teacher 5, Teacher Focus Group #1, November 1, 2006).

• “And that’s number 1 because everybody’s looking for magic and it’s not magic, it’s incredibly hard, dedicated work and if we’re not willing to do that no programs you put in are going to be successful. And the reason we are willing to do it is because you want to win this thing for the kids and for each other. You want them to do well, but not because any outside authority is saying to us ‘we want to win this prize for the school.’ We do it because we want the kids to graduate, not just to be successful. …Number one is that dedication and camaraderie and incredible hard work; none of which are there any magic, educational strategies. (Teachers 2 and 7, Teacher Focus Group #2, November 1, 2006).

The administrators were equally firm in their beliefs about the need to have high expectations for all, including themselves:

• “Focus. I think our school culture is focused on student achievement. More than any other school I have been a part of, and this includes going back to my childhood and watching my father. There is so much focus on academics here and student achievement that it trumps everything else. I’m not going to say that this is great for all schools, country-wise, county-wide or even within our cluster, but
it is for Bright Star because most of our students come from at-risk backgrounds. That focus on student achievement pays dividends in the long run, especially when we talk about our success of student achievement on SOL scores. Academics come first, everything else comes second. The climate we have here is high expectations, not only for the students but the teachers and everyone else” (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).

• “I think the reason we have been able to have that achievement in our students even though we may have a high rate of free and reduced lunch or the language issues is because our staff really set the bar high. They work very hard and they meet the students where they are at in terms of their knowledge and their skills. I think collectively the staff has a philosophy that they are not going to let our students fail” (Administrator 2 Interview, October 4, 2006).

As one of the district administrators who worked closely with this school said, “Bright Star has high expectations and accepts no excuses. Principal 2 used the expectancy theory – I expect success and will accept nothing else” (District Administrator Interview, June 30, 2006).

Support and interventions

There are a number of supports and interventions in place to help struggling students at Bright Star. Among them are:

1) a strong belief that academics come first;
2) high expectations and a desire on the part of teachers to not let students fail;
3) engaging lessons that are shared among teachers of the same subjects;
4) a strong focus on literacy in all classes;
5) two summer school sessions as a result of implementation of the modified calendar;
6) a requirement for students reading below grade level to take a reading class;
7) special courses during the school day such as the English as a Second Language courses (ESL), Concept courses, double blocked classes for Algebra I & II and geometry, Algebra I, Part 1 followed by Algebra I taught over two years, reading courses, and an Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) course;
8) a school-wide, established after-school program, the After-School Academic Program or ASAP, strongly supported by all associated with Bright Star;
9) a willingness on the part of all to make schedule changes during the school year.

I have already discussed the first six items earlier in this chapter. Double-blocked courses will be discussed in the next sub-section. For the rest of this sub-section, I will focus on ASAP, AVID, and the willingness on the part of counselors, administrators, and teachers to make schedule changes during the school year. ASAP and AVID were mentioned by students, parents, and/or staff who were interviewed. Of these two factors, ASAP was mentioned the most frequently in response to those factors that have had a significant impact on student achievement.

The After-School Academic Program or “ASAP was designed for the purpose of giving administrative support to core teachers who wish to require at-risk students to attend an after school program for additional help in their subject. At the conclusion of each interim and nine-week period, teachers (of the core subjects) are asked to create a list of students they feel will benefit from participating in this program. These students and their parents are notified they will be part of the next ASAP session. ASAP sessions are four to five weeks in duration” (School Plan 2005-2007). The program was initiated
in 1999 and has evolved over the years, gradually increasing its positive impact on student achievement. By 2005 “all students with a D or an F average in courses at interim or end-of-quarter, who are not attendance or behavioral problems, were required to participate in the ASAP program until their averages improve to a minimum of a ‘C.’” (School Plan 2005-2007).

Does ASAP really take precedent over other things such as clubs, sports, fine arts rehearsals, and the like? You bet: “There is just so much focus here toward academics. As a coach, you come in here and you think this is after school. A kid has ASAP and he is supposed to go to football practice, but ASAP comes first. Some coaches have a hard time dealing with that. It’s after school, why can’t they go to practice. But its very clear, its ingrained not only in our faculty but also in our students. They know ASAP comes first over anything else. You can’t say that about all schools. I went to a high school of 500 kids and we were very into sports. At my high school, it was said we can’t pass a school levy but we can build a $300,000 track” (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).

All of the parents interviewed were familiar with ASAP and mentioned it as a factor that has an impact on Bright Star’s success. Five of the eleven students (Students 6, 7, 8, and 11) referred to it and several of the others nodded in agreement when it was cited. “In addition to teaching until 2:20, if you have students getting D’s or F’s in your course or if you feel it will benefit them, you can assign them to go to ASAP or come see you after school” (Teacher 5, Focus Group #1, November 1, 2006). The others agreed.

In describing the program and what it has meant to the Bright Star School community, Principal 2 affirmed:
“Can you believe it? Our now nationally famous After-School Academic Program (ASAP) is five years old (in the fall of 2004). What separates our school from all others is that we are willing to take a stand and to do whatever it takes no matter how inconvenient. We aren’t better or brighter than anyone else. We are just more determined. What was the impact of ASAP? Simple. Within one quarter, ‘D’s’ and ‘F’s’ dropped in half in the four core and the grades have remained virtually unchanged since. The message to students is a simple but very important one. Poor performance will not be accepted or tolerated in this school. The message of determination plus the fear of loss increases student motivation dramatically. Students, like everyone else, will fight or work harder to keep something they have than they will to acquire something they want. What will they lose by participating in ASAP? The most important commodity that any teenager has – free time with their friends.

Here are some key points about ASAP:

- “The After-School Academic Program (ASAP) was originally designed to support teachers in their effort to offer additional instructional time to students who were in danger of failing their course.

- Teachers are available after school to assist students at least two days per week.

- ASAP requires no work beyond contract time for teachers. Teachers who wish to have their students stay beyond 2:45 p.m. may do so. Others may dismiss their students and send them to our (an administratively) supervised study hall.
• What teachers do with students in ASAP is left to their discretion. There is no requirement to teach another class.

• Despite protests from non-core departments, we were forced to limit participation to the four core (English, math, social studies, and science).”

(Principal 2 Newsletter, October 3, 2004).

There was some resistance to the ASAP program from students and teachers when it began; but, as one student said to me, “Students don’t like ASAP. But as long as it helps, it’s cool” (Student 7, Focus Group #2, January 18, 2007). From the teachers, there was reluctance. “… this wasn’t all smooth sailing. It never is. You are going to have teachers who, for whatever reason just do not agree. But I think most of our teachers expect it now and if we said we are not going to have ASAP this quarter you would have a backlash about that. It has come full circle with the importance of ASAP” (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).

One of the supports offered during the school day is a course called AVID. “AVID is an acronym for Advancement Via Individual Determination. It is another program mentioned by one parent, several teachers, and two of the school-based administrators. It is “an academic program designed to increase the rigor of coursework taken by Bright Star students. Every AVID student is in at least one MYP or full IB (honors) class. AVID provides structure and support to students taking those advanced courses. Why more rigor? Because AVID’s goal is to have our students go to college and that is what colleges are looking for in their applicants – advanced level coursework. We regularly discuss college – from why it’s important to where is the right place for each
student to attend. The college and career prep portion of the program includes college field trips, guest speakers from various career paths, and SAT/PSAT prep.

The AVID program is designed to have students:

- succeed in a rigorous curriculum (all AVID students take at least one IB/MYP course)
- participate in activities of the school
- enroll in four-year colleges
- become educated and responsible participants and leaders in a democratic society” (School Improvement Plan, 2005-2007).

The last intervention or support for student who are struggling goes along with the conviction among the Bright Star faculty that given time all students will learn. So rather than let a student fail a course, such as Algebra I, if a student is getting a ‘D’ or ‘F’ even though he/she has taken advantage of the other available supports, a change is made in the student’s schedule to move him/her back to Algebra I, Part I rather than let the student fail and vice versa. This may mean some fairly significant schedule changes at the end of interim periods of time and/or each quarter throughout the school year.

All of these support systems and interventions have a significant impact on the academic success of the students at Bright Star. And the difference is in the school-wide emphasis and the requirement for students to attend. I have been in schools where some teachers stay after school to help students; but, the students who most need the help frequently do not show at these voluntary sessions. However, at Bright Star, ASAP has been supported and inculcated into the culture of the school community. None of these programs are done just by individual teachers. Rather they have been adopted and
supported by the entire faculty and staff and the parents because the teachers have seen the impact they have on Bright Star students. The power of these programs is in the numbers of faculty and staff who support them and make them happen.

*Double-blocked classes*

As a result of double-blocked classes, Bright Star went from “a 32% to as 98% pass rate” in Algebra I. (Interview, Principal 2). Double-blocked classes exist in English and mathematics but are most prevalent in mathematics, i.e. Algebra I and II and geometry classes.

How does it work? Bright Star students take seven classes. They have block scheduling. This means that students go to three of their classes every other day for approximately 90 minutes and one embedded class every day for approximately 50 minutes. Double blocking courses means the student takes the same 90 minute course every day rather than every other day, as is the case with Algebra I and II. The double-blocked geometry class was put in place as the faculty recognized the success their students were having with learning Algebra I and II in double-blocked course scheduling. “Because so many of these students have succeeded as a result of the double block concept in both Algebra 1 and Algebra 2, many are struggling in the single block geometry. In order to ensure their success at this level, we will implement a double-block Geometry for seniors in the school year 2006-2007” (School Improvement Plan, 2005-2007).

There is also a double-blocked English 11 course. “Self contained English 11 students have a 50% pass rate on the 2005 English SOL Test. As a result of SOL scores, we have created an English 11 supplemental course which will provide the opportunity
for special education students to master the skills necessary for the English 11 SOL Test. The class is team taught with retired English teacher and a Special Education English teacher, both of whom are proven teachers and hold high expectations for all students.” (School Improvement Plan, 2005-2007).

These double-blocked classes have resulted in reduced failures and increased graduation rates for Bright Star because the double blocking is done in subject areas where students are required to have a verified credit, pass the course and the associated SOL test, in order to graduate.

Emphasis on SOLs

“The Standards of Learning (SOL) tests were first given in 1998. Only three high schools in Virginia, the Governor’s School in Richmond, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, and one other high school, passed the SOLs with a 70 percent pass rate which is what was the goal at that time; however, because the scores did not have immediate consequences for students, there was not a lot of attention given to the early pass score data” (Student Newspaper, February 12, 1999). There were a fairly high number of educators in the schools who appeared to adopt a wait and see attitude or who, if they took the test results seriously, believed they had time before making any significant changes in what was happening at both the classroom and school levels.

However, at Bright Star, the faculty and staff viewed things differently. They began to examine how and what they could do better as soon as the first two years the test results were published. They looked at their data and recognized that if they did not start immediately start to focus on how they were going to help Bright Star students pass the SOLs, they would lose state accreditation in addition to failing to achieve Adequate
Yearly Progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Accordingly, their graduation rate would decline and they would fail to provide their students with the tools they needed to move from high school into the post secondary education or the work world.

Bright Star’s efforts were led by Principal 2. He recognized time was short before the consequences for not having a 70% pass rate would affect the school’s accreditation and graduation rates. He took the statements that schools “that fail to have at least 70 percent of their students pass the SOL tests by 2007 will lose their accreditation” and that “beginning in 2004, students who fail to pass the SOLs will not receive a high school diploma” (Student Newspaper, February 12, 1999) very seriously. His communications to all Bright Star stakeholders emphasizing the importance of Bright Star students passing the SOLs were, once again, relentless. Furthermore, he backed up his statements by working closely with the faculty and staff to establish a vision and mission and put programs in place that were successful in supporting student learning. More detail about the messages Principal 2 communicated can be found in Part II of this chapter.

Did the teachers, students, and parents hear what Principal 2 was saying? Without a doubt they did. As was expressed in earlier parts of this chapter, teachers became more adept at analyzing data, not just SOL data, but all kinds of formative and summative data. They looked at the assessments students had to pass, asked themselves the hard questions, and made changes in what they were doing. They developed pacing guides and common assessments. They began to share the engaging lessons they found worked with students. They became more collaborative. Additionally, the roles of counselors and administrators changed as well. Counselors worked more closely with students to insure
they were placed in courses that stretched students but did not overwhelm them. As time went on, counselors learned they had to make schedule changes throughout the year not just at the beginning of the year. Moreover, administrator roles changed. For example, they took on the “administrivia” of attendance and the close monitoring of the cafeteria and halls during the school day so teachers could focus on teaching.

When asked what makes Bright Star successful, two of the four parents responded without hesitation, “SOLs” (Parents 1 and 3, Parent Focus group, November 2, 2006). Students had similar responses. “I think the reason why they (Bright Star) received so much recognition is because the teachers stressed the importance of the SOLs and passing those, which as you know are the Virginia Standards of Learning tests” (Student 3, Student Focus group #1, October 30, 2006). Teachers 1 and 3 in Teacher Focus Group #1 and Teacher 2 in Teacher Focus Group #2 took time during the focus groups to describe in some detail all of the steps the teachers had taken in regards to helping the students pass the SOLs. And they also wanted me to know that they did this not because they were paid to do extra work or directed to do it by the administration but because they wanted to do it for the kids.

With all of this emphasis on SOLs, the thought that teachers were teaching to the test was never far from my mind. So I asked if the emphasis might be perceived by some as negative. “Some people say that we teach to the test around here –and they are not too far off. We use the Virginia Standards of Learning as the primary focus of teacher planning. But that doesn’t dispel any enthusiasm of how a teacher is going to teach. Our primary focus, on student achievement and especially the Virginia Standards of Learning,
can be directly related to our success as a school” (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).

9th grade transition

As the Bright Star faculty and staff continued with their steps to improve student achievement, they recognized that their most at-risk group was their 9th graders; hence, they began to focus a lot of their attention on them. Principal 2 spoke about the emphasis on 9th grade when Bright Star was chosen as a Breaking Ranks School by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and shortly thereafter in his weekly newsletter to the faculty and staff:

“Rising ninth graders identified as at-risk are provided a two-week summer program called the Principal’s Academy. It provides study skills and intensive orientation, and upon entering in the Fall, the students are assigned a mentor. Our nationally recognized, mandatory after-school tutoring program (ASAP), which is required for students receiving a failing or near failing grade in a course, has been the most surprising way of personalizing our school. Many of our students want to know how much the teacher cares before they care how much the teacher knows. We believe that the teacher-student relationship is the most important factor in student achievement. In 1997, the average student missed over twenty-two days of school as compared to seven days in 2004” (Principal 2 Newsletter, May 23, 2005).

The following year, Principal 2 announced a goal focused on 9th graders:

“In my opening of school message this year we announced a new school-wide goal—all ninth graders will graduate to the tenth grade. How do we know when
schools fail to deal effectively with the ninth graders? The answer is, they have large numbers of retained ninth graders. We initially began focusing on ninth graders, not because of concerns over academic achievement, but only after we analyzed our discipline data and discovered that 66% of our serious discipline incidents involved ninth graders. We wanted to improve the behavior of ninth graders, but over time, we came to realize that, in order to do so, we had to address every aspect of a ninth grader's life. It seems that every academic issue that we addressed, from literacy to extended time to learn, our focus shifted to our most at-risk or at-promise group—ninth graders. Retained ninth graders were up to twenty times more likely to drop out of school. For the sake of these students and for the sake of our school, we needed to do something. And we did. Here are just some of the many things that we did that were either directly focused on ninth graders or heavily impacted ninth graders: Literacy Coach, Reading Across the Curriculum and all the related professional development, reading lab, International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (IBMYP), AVID, Summer Academies, Summer School, Modified Calendar, Mentors, Student Assistance Program, small classes in ninth grade, double block classes, semester classes, and ASAP” (Principal 2 Newsletter, December 5, 2005).

All of these steps, along with testing Bright Star students in reading while they are still in 8th grade, immersing them in the culture of the school from day one, and making them understand their most important responsibility while at Bright Star is to learn go a long way toward insuring 9th grade students make it into 10th grade.


Parent Involvement

From my own professional and personal experiences, I recognize that “parent involvement” refers to a myriad of actions and activities and occurs on many different levels. Some parents will actively participate in the PTSA. Some will attend the special meetings and events sponsored by the district, the school or the PTSA. Some will attend only the events in which their children are directly involved. Some give a lot of support and direction to their children at home with regard to school. Some parents do all of these things as well as a lot more. Some do very little. As with most schools, I found all of these different levels of involvement at Bright Star too.

The parents who participated in the focus group were very involved parents. They represented the PTSA leadership. Likewise, they were knowledgeable and articulate about the school, its programs, how their own children were doing, and how things in general were going at Bright Star. As indicated earlier in this chapter, they all believe Bright Star is a good school. They believe it has been good for their children. Correspondingly, when other parents are critical of the school, they are quick to respond: “I hear all of the time, ‘How can you send your kids there?’ And I say, ‘When was the last time you were there?’ And they say, ‘Oh we have never been there and we do not know anyone who has.’ I respond, ‘Then how are you judging the school?’” (Parent 4, Parent Focus Group, November 1, 2006). “If they (parents) have kids here they think of it as a good school, maybe not a great school but a good school. But if they don’t, they do not think it as a good school” (Parent 2, Parent Focus Group, November 1, 2006).

Three of the parents interviewed had been associated with Bright Star over ten years. They believe in reaching out to other parents in the school community. Some of
their outreach efforts include: receptions for parents and students to meet the teachers, guidance staff, and the school administration; open houses to tour the building; and, special programs involving students and parents. (PTSA Newsletter, February 2002). I asked which parents were typically involved in organizing parent events and I questioned if there was a larger group of parents other than just those already named who actively participated in the PTSA. The parents said, “No. There are about ten involved parents and they cover all the groups – boosters, PTSA, band, theater, etc. We all know each other.” A district administrator who has worked closely with Bright Star agreed declaring, “The involved parents tended to be Caucasian parents of highly achieving students” (District Administrator Interview, June 30, 2006). These parents are knowledgeable and articulate. They are advocates for the school. They are valued for their expertise and for the extensive amounts of time and effort they offer in support of the school. The parents who participated in the focus group recognized that some of the other parents may not be in a position to give as much as they do because they may be working two or three jobs.

The students who participated in the student focus groups tended to see parent involvement as parent interest in what they were doing at school. Using their criteria for describing parent involvement, their parents were fairly involved. Consider the following statements:

- “My mom never told me her opinion of the school but she believes the school is like another guardian to me. If the school says, ‘Do it.’ She says, ‘Do it.’ If they ask me to stay after or if I have to do something, my mom is like, ‘Do it’ unless it is hurting me in any way” (Student 4, Student Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).
• “My Mom is like Crystal’s Mom. My mom definitely pushes me to do everything I could possibly do. We have a lot of events we do during the year. We just recently had a cultural night during Hispanic Heritage Night. My mom came and helped with decorations. My mom is definitely involved. She pushes me. She is like I am behind you 100%. When I go home I know I have that support” (Student 1, Student Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).

• “Yeah. My Dad is really involved. I am in IB Bio and he will come and bring articles and stuff. Not so involved with English. My parents are behind me for most of the clubs and they come to my competitions and stuff” (Student 5, Student Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).

• “My mom has two other children at home. She wants me to be really good in whatever I do. Whatever I love to do she backs me up like track and field she likes me to do. She hates me to say what I hate” (Student 4, Student Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).

• “She makes me do it. My honors classes I really don’t want to do it but my teachers tell me and my Mom, ‘Your daughter is really gifted, she should do it.’ And they call and my Mom says ‘Just do it’” (Student 4, Student Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).

• “My mom does not come to all events (because of work) but she is always there for the main things. She likes Bright Star” (Student 3, Student Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).
One student dissented stating: “My parents came to one event and heard student cussing. They did not return. They do not like what I am studying either (cosmetology)” (Student 7, Student Focus Group #2, January 17, 2007).

The students with whom I spoke, other than the one who dissented, believe their parents think Bright Star is a good school and is providing them a good education. They feel their parents are as involved in the school as they can be, based on all of the other things their parents have to do.

Teachers at Bright Star are, for the most part, grateful for the support they receive from the parents. “I think they are extremely supportive. Sometimes … all you have to do is call the parent and say, ‘Your child is not being cooperative.’ And the child comes in the next day, and for the most part, any problems you had are gone” (Teacher 3, Teacher Focus Group #1, November 1, 2006). Another added, “You know something, I think that students who are in ESOL or post ESOL or regular classes have parents that are much tougher on them than (the parents of students in) IB. When they are coming from 3rd world countries, there is a lot more respect for education. I think that since some of them have made a huge sacrifice to get here and those kids are in school to get a U.S. education, there’s no way there’s going to be trouble. They say ‘I’m very sorry, it will never happen again.’ The kids are appreciative and I think the parents are especially appreciative” (Teacher 5, Teacher Focus Group #1, November 1, 2006). Another added, “They (parents) are very supportive. They want to know what they can do to help and they expect their kids to do well” (Teacher 1, Teacher Focus Group #1, November 1, 2006).
Over the years, Bright Star administrators have sent messages that support and encourage teachers to open lines of communication with parents and form positive, cooperative relationships with them. “If we together can convince our parents that we sincerely care, everything else will take care of itself. If we can’t, we all have a tough road ahead of us” Principal 2 Newsletter, September 20, 2005). “Always remember that we all listen to the same radio station—WIIFM (What’s In It For Me). Parents want to know what you can do for their child. Everything you say and do passes through that filter. So it is important to consider parent perceptions when planning, not just to communicate with parents, but to persuade and influence parents” (Principal 2 Newsletter, September 13, 2004).

Most of the parents at Bright Star, through their own voices, and through the voices of the students and teachers with whom I spoke, feel respected and valued. This feeling, added to the kind of broadly defined parent involvement discussed here, is what makes parent involvement an important factor in the success of Bright Star.

Part II: How Did Bright Star Become As Successful As It Is?

As indicated at the beginning of Chapter 4, the purpose of this case study was to examine what makes Bright Star so successful and how it came to be that way. There is a lot of overlap in the responses to these two questions; however, there are also some data that apply more directly to the second question than to the first question. That data is presented in this section of the report.

In general, change occurred at Bright Star on a number of levels over a period of about twelve to fourteen years beginning with the implementation of the IB Program and block scheduling in the early to mid-nineties. Staff development, developing instructional
leadership capacity, and continuous improvement have been and continue to be constants. The other major changes occurred in the past nine years. The changes occurred as administrators and teachers learned and grew together, analyzed their data, and recognized what had to be done to improve student attendance, achievement, and the graduation rate. Changes were influenced by Bright Star faculty and staff and a changing student body and parent community. Changes were influenced by what was happening at the district, state, and national levels. For example, the IB Program was brought to Bright Star by central office personnel. Block scheduling, on the other hand, was a change initiated and implemented by the faculty and staff within Bright Star (Principal 3, Interview, June 10, 2007). State and national policies, regulations, and laws, such as those associated with accreditation and No Child Left Behind, certainly helped drive the implementation of standards-based instruction, pacing guides, common assessments, data driven instruction, the laser-like focus on SOLs, and the modified calendar.

Common Vision and Mission

**Collaboratively develop a vision and mission**

The data presented in this subsection demonstrates some of the gradual changes that have taken place over a period of six years as the faculty worked to bring their vision and mission to fruition. As indicated in Part I of this chapter, the vision and mission statement for Bright Star High School remained constant from 2000 through 2006:

“The Bright Star High School Community - staff, parents, and students - is committed to providing our students with an education that prepares them for the global economy and life in the 21st century. Our mission is to provide educational programs and resources for our diverse population in order to ensure: academic
success; social, emotional and physical growth; and, the development of productive and responsible citizens. In order to achieve this mission, we will focus on and encourage: academic success; the use of effective teaching strategies; and, the creation of a positive school climate that celebrates diversity and promotes tolerance, understanding, and cooperation” (2000 – 2006 Bright Star School Plans).

However, a number of other factors associated with Bright Star School Improvement Plans (SIPs) were altered during this period of time. In 2000 -2002, the SIP was written by Principal 2, who also served as the chair of the committee, and the four-core department chairs – math, English, science, and social studies. In 2002-2003, the previous members of the SIP Steering Committee were joined by a literacy coach who replaced Principal 2 as the chair of the group. In 2003-2004, the group was presided over by the math department chair who also served as the “instructional coordinator” for the school. The SIP Steering Committee was expanded to include the assistant principals and the department chairs for health and physical education and for business. In 2005-2007, an assistant principal and the instructional coordinator/math department chair shared management of the committee and the group was expanded yet again to include the English as a Second Language (ESOL) department chair, the international Baccalaureate (IB) coordinator, and the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (IBMYP) coordinator, and the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) coordinator. This expansion of the School Improvement Steering Committee parallels the increased collaboration and development of leadership capacity within the faculty between 2000
and 2006 and correspondingly the significant improvement in SOL scores during that period of time.

Table 4.2: SOL Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>80% Pass Rate</td>
<td>89% Pass Rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>67% Pass Rate</td>
<td>95% Pass Rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>69% Pass Rate</td>
<td>82% Pass Rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>63% Pass Rate</td>
<td>89% Pass Rate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between 2002 and 2006, Bright Star was fully accredited by the Commonwealth of Virginia and the school met Adequate Yearly Progress (ATP) under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) each year.

The section of the School Improvement Plans at Bright Star that had the most significant changes between 2000 and 2006 was the “Work Plans” section. Each of the core departments developed specific, content-related work plans as required; however, all of the core departments followed the same format in developing their work plans. They subdivided their work plans into six sections: focus; assessment; pacing; methods; remediation; and review. In order to carry out these work plans, the faculty had to increase their collaboration, especially among instructors teaching the same or similar courses.

In the focus section, the curriculum for the different courses was emphasized. For example, in the 2000-2002 School Improvement Plan, the mathematics department wrote the following for their focus section: “Teams of Algebra I, Algebra II and Geometry
teachers will analyze SOL test data, align instruction with the SOL curriculum guide and construct and monitor the implementation of a seven-month instructional timeline.”

The assessment sections of the plan focus on formative and summative assessments being used: “Ensure that formative and summative assessments contain essential knowledge and that those assessments are valid when compared to essential knowledge identified by the SOL curriculum guide. Include sample SOL test questions in formative and summative assessments. Include tables, graphs, and diagrams in formative and summative assessments. Conduct final exams prior to administration of SOL exams.”

The pacing section of the plan concentrates on timelines for the teaching of content: “Use backward design (Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. 1998) to determine the pace of instruction by developing a timeline for Algebra I and all other Math courses, to ensure that content is covered according to each topic in direct proportion to the number of questions included on the SOL test by topic. Eliminate topics that are not addressed by the SOL curriculum guide.”

For the methods section, instructional delivery is emphasized. The following is an example from the same plan and department: “Fully implement a learner-focused instructional delivery model that seeks to provide for the orderly delivery of classroom instruction matched to how students learn and that does not limit teacher creativity. Organize instruction into appropriate ‘chunks’ which are based on both the needs of the students and recommendations contained in the SOL curriculum guide. Integrate the use of technology throughout the math curriculum and utilize the available software that addresses all academic levels. Reinforce reading and higher order thinking skills by
including in daily warm-ups and other instructional activities the analysis of tables, graphs, and diagrams.”

In the remediation section the math department did some out-of-the-box thinking and implemented “semester courses in Algebra I to ensure that students advance only when mastery of the material has been demonstrated.” They also determined to “use double-blocked related math sections whenever possible to assure student success and to require all students with an F average in Algebra I, Geometry, or Algebra II at interim or end-of-quarter to participate in the ASAP program (After School Academic Program) until their averages improve to a minimum of a HC” (high “C”).

For the review section the math department asked all math teachers teaching courses with an SOL end-of-course test to “systematically review previously learned essential knowledge throughout the school year according to a specifically defined schedule.

The 2005-2007 School Improvement Plan contains the same six sections under “Work Plans;” however, the work plans are even more specific and sophisticated. For example, in math under methods, the math department wrote: “Reinforce reading and higher order thinking skills by including in daily warm-ups. Fully deploy and utilize the three wireless labs, using LearnStar, Sketchpad and other evolving technologies” (School Improvement Plan, 2005-2007).

The specificity in the SIP for each core department provides a clear roadmap for the core departments to follow as they make their vision and mission a reality.
As indicated in Part I, Principal 2 communicated the school vision with great frequency and clarity. Between 2003 and 2005, he wrote eleven articles (5/8/06; 3/6/06; 9/19/05; 9/6/05; 3/7/05; 8/30/04; 8/23/04; 5/24/04; 5/10/04; 3/1/04; 4/4/03) for his weekly newsletter that were directly or indirectly related to the school’s vision and mission. One of these articles was presented in Part I as an example of how he delivered his messages about vision and mission. Another of these articles was one that recognized teachers for Teacher Appreciation Week. In this article, Principal 2 describes many of the steps the faculty and staff have taken to bring their vision and mission alive:

“This week is Teacher Appreciation Week. It is our time to recognize and thank you for the contributions that you make to our school. We are the school that we are because of what you do in the classroom each and every day. Our success is realized one student at a time and you, the teachers, make that happen. We want you to be proud of our school and to realize that it is our combined efforts, working together as a team, that make Bright Star High School a national model. As we celebrate you, the teachers, this week, let’s take a moment to reflect on our school and our profession.

• Teamwork – This school works because we work together as a team to make it work. We look out for each other. We support each other.

• Responsiveness – We know that no school or organization can ever be perfect. However, when problems occur, we can be responsive.

• Instructional Delivery Model – Shortly after entering the ‘Age of Accountability,’ we offered a year-long professional development course entitled ‘Teaching In The Standards-Based Classroom.’ That summer, we asked ourselves, ‘How can we
help our teachers make sense and make use of what we all learned in the past year?’ That essential question led us to the development of our BEEP Model. The BEEP Model takes the guess work out of classroom instruction and ensures that we all sing from the same hymnal.

- Literacy – Nine years ago I asked our teachers, ‘What do we need to do in order to raise student achievement.’ Without hesitating, you, the teachers, said, ‘Our students don’t come to school and when they do, they can’t read.’ Since then, we have been relentless in our efforts to raise reading and literacy levels of all students.

- Focus on Learning – The focus of our entire school is on teaching and learning. To that end we base our decisions on how an action will impact the classroom.

- Professional Development is continuous, connected; ongoing, and job-imbedded. We make a special effort to ensure that our staff development activities are practical and relevant to your needs in the classroom.

- Professional Opportunities – Programs like IB, MYP, AVID, literacy, and technology offer our teachers a number of opportunities to travel to meetings and conventions.

- Focus on what is important- Instead of micromanaging our teachers by requiring them to sign in or perform non-teaching duties, we treat you as professionals and allow you to do the job that you were hired to do – teach.

- Weekly Newsletter - Visitors frequently ask me ‘How do you find time to write a newsletter each week?’ I respond by saying that this newsletter is a part of my commitment to the success of our school.
• Substitute Teacher Coverage – Our well defined process for obtaining substitute teachers and ensuring class coverage is a model for the entire school system.

• Administrative Detention – We are one of the few schools that allow teachers to assign students to administrative detention. Instead of being forced to baby sit recalcitrant students, teachers are free to do what they do best – teach.

• Celebrate Accomplishments – We take many opportunities to celebrate the accomplishments of our staff. When we recognize a staff member as our Teacher of the Week, we deliver a beverage and snack accompanied by a commercially produced sign to hang on their door, and a write-up in the weekly newsletter” (Principal 2 Newsletter, May 8, 2006).

It is obvious that Principal 2’s messages were not lost on the parents, teachers, and students with whom I spoke during my study. They did not hesitate to mention that Bright Star’s main focus is to help all students learn and they were able to quickly express some of the many diverse factors that have contributed to its recognition and success.

Culture, Time, and Space

Culture – Diversity

Bright Star students recognized and celebrated their diversity in their yearbooks and student newspapers long before National Geographic came to their school to do an article spotlighting the culture of the student body and before they received much of the recognition that has come in the past four or five years. It was as though they instinctively knew their diversity was something that made them unique. In 1997, the student yearbook, celebrated diversity with, “We are the world …” (Yearbook, 1997, p.
The 1999 yearbook had a spread about students expressing their cultural backgrounds in a number of ways: clothing, food, music, language. That year the mix was 32% Hispanic, 31% Caucasian, 26% Asian, 11% African American, and .5% Native American. (Yearbook, 1999, p. 26). The 2002 yearbook theme was, “Any way you say it.” Students wrote the following: “Farsi, Russian, Spanish. Red, green, white, black. Chinese, English, French. The shirt that you wear, the shoes that I have. The language you speak, the way that I laugh. The foods that you eat, the traditions I love. The way that you smile, the blue in my eyes. The music you hear, the dreams that I hide. The streaks in your hair, the shade of my skin. How much we differ, you and I, and what can we possibly share?” (Yearbook, 2002, p. 3). They went on to write about the items that were shared by all in the everyday life of school.

The 2003 yearbook theme was “Colorblind” (Yearbook, 2003). In 2005, the students expressed their own interpretation of the national attention and recognition they were receiving: “Times are changing. People are changing. We are moving on. The scene is coming into focused. We are beating the odds. Stereotypes are meaningless. Minority is a misnomer. After years of renovation and decades of changes, we are reaching a state of balance. This is our school, this is our book, this is us – exposed” (Yearbook, 2005, p. 3). In a later section of the 2005 yearbook, there appears this passage: "From flashing ID badges to flashing skin, rules tightened and students adjusted to stronger security. In addition, we became one of a few dozen Breakthrough schools across America. While getting acclamation from across the country, here at school, students managed to lessen ethnic barriers and create new bonds. Such strong friendships allowed each person to unmask their facade and let their inhibitions go - revealing a truer, more candid self"
It was as though the students understood they were successful in spite of and because of their diversity.

The year 2005 was also the year students did several articles on cliques within the student body. They addressed the issue in this way: “If school was the jungle then the cafeteria was the watering hole. Everyone knew who sat where and with whom. There was an obvious social landscape where everyone sat with, walked with, and hung out with their own group. Movement between groups was difficult because of unwritten rules. Race was not the determining factor, but clothes were a way to tell who belonged with whom. Clothes, activities, sports, classes taken, and attitude were more important factors than social sorting” (Yearbook, 2005, p. 18).

When I conducted the student focus groups for this study, I asked about cliques. The responses were mixed but they were basically in agreement with what was written in the 2005 yearbook. The following is from the first student focus group composed of juniors and seniors who took one or more IB classes:

- “First it is based on classes you take and from there, there is a racial breakdown. So for instance IB students tend to mix together but most IB students tend to be Caucasian. That’s default” (Student 6, Student Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).

- “I just feel that personally that IB students and kids that take other classes together tend to stick together. But like we have a group of Asian IB students and they are more likely to stick with each other. They might ‘conversate’ with other people of other races but we are more likely to stick with our races” (Student 4, Student Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).
• “In the lunch room we’re in our comfort zone. (We) share the same ideals and background. I don’t know it is just comfort zone. Those are the people you stick with” (Student 1, Student Focus Group #1, October 30, 2006).

Another student stated, “Some kids hang out with their race and other kids hang out with everyone.”

In the second student focus group with freshmen, sophomores, and a junior, I heard similar responses. Students recognized there were cliques. One student said the cliques were based on race. “If you go in the cafeteria you will see all Blacks sitting together, all Hispanics, etc. We know each others’ cultures and we are more comfortable with others of our own culture” (Student 10, Student Focus Group #1, January 18, 2007).

Others, as in the previous group, disagreed. “Wait – my group is pretty mixed” (Student 9, Student Focus Group #2, January 18, 2007). The other students said, “Ok maybe there are not race cliques. … but cliques based on other things” (Student Focus Group #2, January 18, 2007).

On the two days that I stopped by the cafeteria, I observed groups of students that were mixed in terms of race and ethnic origins sitting together and interacting with each other as well as some student groups who were separated based on race and ethnic origins. I found the students in the hallways to be polite and friendly – regardless of race or ethnic origin. It was obvious, and at least two teachers commented on the fact that, students who knew little English and were in classes together tended to stick with students who either were in their same classes or who spoke the same language. Once they were more comfortable with the English language, they were more likely to mix with others of different backgrounds.
Over the past fifteen years, the leadership at Bright Star has been uncompromising in their efforts to improve safety and security in the building and on the grounds. According to a 1998 article in the Bright Star student newspaper, there were “many hate crimes in the 1960s and ‘70s, and gangs in the early ‘90s. However, since then, violence has decreased and the school has become less chaotic” (Student Newspaper, December 15, 1998). At that time, one of the administrators interviewed indicated that this improvement in the safety and security of the building and grounds was due to several things: a police officer on site; less tolerance at the school and district-wide for serious misbehavior; a new computerized attendance system (the first one, not the second one implemented in 2003). (Student Newspaper, December 15, 1998).

In 2004, Principal 2, having worked with the faculty and staff to complete the implementation of the second student ID attendance system, spoke with the faculty about the installation of cameras saying: “My first responsibility to you and to our students is to provide a safe and orderly school environment, one that is pleasant to be in and one that we are all proud of. We took steps to improve security two years ago when we volunteered to pilot the CAASS student ID system, and this fall we will be installing sophisticated external video surveillance cameras. We had a full year to use the student ID system and we are convinced that it is a highly effective program. The reason behind our student ID program is safety. When it comes to safety, there can be no compromise. Safety must always be our first priority” (Principal 2 Newsletter, September 20, 2004).
This emphasis on safety and security continues today. “Our expectations of appropriate student behavior, I think, has increased over the past 10 to 15 years and our tolerance toward that behavior, especially gang related, has changed. We have a zero-tolerance policy” (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).

Time - Attendance

The Comprehensive Attendance Administration and Security System (CAASS), was implemented at Bright Star in May of 2003. It is a suite of powerful software modules that work together in the school’s networked environment. In discussing this second attendance system with the faculty in 2003, Principal 2 said CAAS was beneficial because it:

- “Improved school security. We know who is in the building and who is not.
- Personalized the school environment. We greet all of our students each day as they enter school.
- Gave an immediate response to class cutting and truancy. We are able to respond to class cutting and failure to attend detention and ASAP by the next morning. This quick response time is already showing dividends in reducing absences in ASAP and in reduced class cutting.” Principal 2 Newsletter, November 17, 2003).

CAAS is a part of daily life for students and teachers at Bright Star. While they do not all love it, it appears the majority of the students and staff understand its importance and uses in the life of the school as well as the need to keep it in play.

Space – Building

Bright Star opened its doors on September 1, 1959. Renovation got underway in 1998. It occurred in three phases over five years with a cost of $22 million plus. During
phase one, the auditorium, student lockers, and the science, art, and business rooms were renovated. During phase two, the front of the building, the library, and all other classrooms were renovated. This included heating, lighting, and pipes. In 2003, the student newspaper sported the headline, “Construction entered third and final phase” (Student Newspaper, March 20, 2003). This renovation was a huge project for the district; however, it was an even bigger change for the faculty and staff, students, and parents in the Bright Star school community who spent a good portion of their waking lives every day in the facility. Many of them expended some of their time during the two years prior to the start of renovation participating in planning the specific changes the renovation would bring.

Teachers and Instruction

Data-driven instructional decision-making

The emphasis on data and the development of common, formative assessments did not come all at once. “…we started off gradually, not throwing everything out, not trying to do it all at one time, but having one or two common assessments in each subject area for the core departments. The next year we had two or three common assessments. Now you are looking at quarterly assessments. In English, we are doing it quarterly and we have a pre-test. It’s something that evolved over the years” (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006). The same administrator went on to describe the value of creating and using common assessments in this manner, “I think the common assessments have helped to make sure teachers are being consistent across the board. Usually, the content area teams get together (all biology teachers, all World History I teachers, etc.). I know that some of the teams are larger and smaller than others but many
times they collaborate. For example, some of the teams may have a love for a certain thing and the rest of the team will say ‘OK you work on that part of it and we’ll work on another part of it.’ To the best of my knowledge, they are collaborative. That’s how it is across the board” (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006).

A district level administrator said the current school planning process was the work of Principal 2. Principal 2 was “obsessed with data” (District Administrator Interview, June 30, 2006). For the Bright Star School Improvement Plans dating from 2000 to present, each of the four-core departments have an improvement objective that is common to all schools in the district; however, at Bright Star, for each of the core areas, they also have work plans grouped under the categories of focus, assessment, pacing, methods, remediation, and review. For instance, in math under each of the categories mentioned above, the 2003-2004 plan reads,

- **Focus** - “Plan instructional strategies, develop and ensure the validity of formative assessments that assess essential knowledge. Develop and plan for the use of resource materials, and develop and implement a systematic review schedule.”

- **Assessment** – “Ensure that formative and summative assessments contain essential knowledge and that those assessments are valid when compared to essential knowledge identified by the SOL curriculum guide.”

- **Pacing** – “Use backward design to determine the pace of instruction by developing a timeline for Algebra I and all other Math courses, to ensure that content is covered according to each topic in direct proportion to the number of questions included on the SOL test by topic.”
• Methods – “Ensure that students are aware of essential knowledge in each unit of study by clearly and specifically identifying essential knowledge on handouts and notes and course materials.”

• Remediation – “Implement semester courses in Algebra I to ensure that students advance only when mastery of the material has been demonstrated. Use double-blocked/related math sections whenever possible to assure student success.”

• Review – Systematically review previously learned essential knowledge throughout the school year according to a specifically defined schedule.”


The use of these categories forces each department to look at the data and be very specific in describing what it is doing to maintain a focus on student learning and continuous improvement.

The Classroom and Student Learning

Reading

As mentioned earlier, the reading focus got underway in the fall of 1998 after the Bright Star faculty analyzed the SOL test results and the scores of rising 9th graders on the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Assessment. (Student Newspaper, October 18, 1999). In the spring of that same school year, spring 2000, a headline appeared in the PTSA Newsletter that read, “Test Scores and Reading Levels Are Improving. Principal 2 Selected As Greater Washington Reading Council’s Administrator of the Year” (PTSA Newsletter, May/June 2000). This emphasis has continued and increased over the past seven years.

The 2000-2002 School Plan contained these statements related to reading:
Focus: “Target essential reading, comprehension and analysis skills. Utilize the reading labs to increase student reading fluency and comprehension.”

Assessment: “Chart progress of student reading fluency and comprehension.

Pacing - Use backward design to establish a three year timeline of skills (grades 9, 10, II) consisting of 5 strands: reading, vocabulary, writing, language usage and literature.’

Methods – “Identify and implement high-yield strategies including but not limited to learning-focused lesson design, mastery learning, peer editing, cooperative learning, and essential vocabulary. Organize instruction into appropriate skill "chunks" in both reading and writing. Plan the delivery of instruction and content selection upon the reading performance of students. Integrate reading and vocabulary study at every level.”

Remediation – “Develop a plan for remediation of students that includes: careful monitoring of student achievement throughout the course, the identification of students who are performing below standard, the notification of parents of scheduled remediation sessions offered at regular times and intervals including after school tutoring within the context of the English course, and the administration of ‘second-chance’ tests. Require all students with an ‘F’ average in any English course at interim or end-of-quarter to participate in the ASAP program (After School Academic Program) until their averages improve to a minimum of a ‘C.’ Establish special skill development tutorials for students with identified writing deficiencies. Implement a continuous progress model in grades
9 and 10 where low performing students can master skills to the desired level in a
summer program.”

• Review –“Systematically incorporating essential skills from previous tests into
tests offered later in the school year. Maintaining a central database of quizzes,
handouts, and tests for each student. Conduct department content and
methodology review sessions during the month of April.”

(School Plan, 2000-2002).

In the 2002-2003 School Improvement Plan (SIP), the reading emphasis shifted
from the acquisition of content to the development of skills. “Mastery learning
assessment methods” were implemented “to insure student acquisition of SOL skills.”
(School Plan 2002-2004). Teachers were reminded to “fully implement a learner-focused
instructional delivery model that seeks to provide for the orderly delivery of classroom
instruction matched to how students learn and that does not limit teacher creativity.”
(School Plan, 2002-2003). The focus on the development of reading skills continued in
the 2003-2004 SIP. An added emphasis was placed on the establishment of collaborative
grade level teams and the development of common assessments at grades 9, 10, and 11.

In the fall of 2003, Principal 2 planted the seed about all teachers having a
responsibility to teach literacy. While speaking at a Capitol Hill event in Washington, he
stated:

“Education is the great equalizer, and literacy is the key that opens the doors of
opportunity for young people. The ability to read and write effectively enables
young people to take advantage of all that our free and open society has to offer.
Without the ability to read and write effectively, young people will be forever on
the outside looking in. While English teachers take the lead, literacy instruction is the responsibility of all teachers in all subject areas. However, few teachers have actually had training in literacy instruction. This is where the literacy coach becomes so critical to student success. For it is the literacy coach’s role to teach teachers how to integrate literacy instruction across all disciplines. On the other hand, we also know that effective literacy skills will level the playing field and create opportunities for students irregardless of their present circumstances.” His comments were distributed to faculty and staff via his weekly newsletter.

Principal 2. (2003, September 29). Back to school night -Our time to shine. Principal’s Weekly Newsletter, 7(7).

In January of 2004, one of the professors from a nearby university with whom Bright Star had established a partnership announced,

“A few years ago, under Principal 2’s leadership, Bright Star teachers decided to make reading a priority across the curriculum, and good things began to happen. Apparently, however, there continued to be a felt need for phonics instruction appropriate for adolescents. That’s where we entered the picture. As luck would have it, late in the summer of 2003 I received a Congressional Earmark extending our middle school reading research to the high school level. Our cross-sectional longitudinal research is to investigate differences between low and expert readers regarding which areas of the brain process four tasks associated with reading: tones, phonemes, words heard, and words seen. Then the project provides phonemic awareness, phonics and reading instruction for sixty low readers while providing the carefully planned Bright Star curriculum for thirty more low

151
readers. Two “imported” intervention programs are being used: Spell Read Phonological Auditory Training (SR) and Quantum Learning and Literacy (QLL). Both programs have strong research records at the middle school level, but only QL at the high school level. Both are on the U. S. Department of Education’s list of research-based programs approved for school reform. Givens, B. K. (2004, January 20). A letter to Bright Star teachers. Published by Principal 2. (2004, January 20). Principal’s Weekly

The 2005-2007 School Improvement Plan provides evidence of this ongoing emphasis and specific steps to be taken by the Bright Star faculty to teach reading across the curricula:


- “Reinforce reading and higher order thinking skills by including in daily warm-ups and other instructional activities the analysis of tables, graphs and diagrams” (School Improvement Plan, 2005-2007, Science).

International Baccalaureate Program (IB)

The IB Program was implemented at Bright Star in the 1993-1994 school year under the leadership of Principal 3. It was brought to Bright Star and one other school in the district to improve the rigor of instruction, to help raise expectations among students, teachers, and parents, to help “bring back white flight” (Parent 4, Parent Focus Group, November 1, 2006).
The institution of the IB program did what was intended according to the students and parents interviewed and others with whom I spoke. “The IB program at Bright Star prompted students to strive for excellence in school” (Student Newspaper, November 22, 1999). In 1999, Bright Star was ranked 11th out of 139 on the Jay Matthews Challenge Index. (Student Newspaper, November 22, 1999). The calculations for the Challenge Index at that time were based on student enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses.

**Emphasis on SOLs**

Below are references to three statements made by Principal 2 between 2000 and 2005 that demonstrate the emphasis on SOLs:

“In 2000, one of the headlines in the student newspaper read: ‘Test Scores and Reading Levels Are Improving’ and in that same issue Bright Star High School was recognized by the District Minority Student Achievement Oversight Committee for ‘significant improvement of minority student scores on selected Standards of Learning (SOL) test’” (PTSA Newsletter, May/June 2000).

In 2003, Principal 2 wrote, “Standards of Learning exit exams have changed a lot about how we do school in the last five or six years. Irregardless of the intentions of the framers of the original standards, we must admit that SOLs have had a deep and lasting impact on our school. Let’s pause for a minute and think about just some of the changes:

- Teaching or Learning—We’ve moved from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning.
- Learning not Coverage
- Positive not Negative
• All not Some or the End of the Bell Curve
• Time is Relative
• Assessment not Testing
• Partnership not Dictatorship
• Success not Failure

We teach the kids the course. We don’t teach the course to the kids.

Principal 2, Newsletter, October 20, 2003).

And in 2005, he wrote, “High stakes testing is here to stay and the stakes are getting higher. We miraculously made it through the first wave—Virginia’s Standards of Learning Tests also affectionately known as the SOLs. The second wave, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), is going to test everything that we have learned over the past eight years. I confidently say to you that there is no other school that is better prepared to face the second wave than our school, but it will take every ounce of effort and a laser-like focus to succeed” (Principal 2 Newsletter, March 7, 2005).

In this part of the chapter, Part II of Chapter 4, I have provided additional data that helped me understand more clearly how certain “success factors” originated. Some of these factors came about quickly and without much input from the faculty and staff such as the IB Program. Others arose gradually with a lot of input, planning, and implementation on the part of the faculty and staff, such as identifying essential content for courses, designing pacing guides, and developing common assessments. No single factor stood out as being responsible for Bright Star’s success; however, the common sense of purpose, the IB Program, the attendance system, the consistent focus on reading
and the After School Academic Program or ASAP were the factors mentioned most frequently and by all groups of stakeholders.

**Conclusion**

Bright Star High School is a complex, ever-changing, delicately balanced system. The school has been influenced and shaped by changes, factors, and events that have occurred inside its walls and those that have occurred outside of the school, at the district, state, and national levels. Some of the key aspects within the school have been: the stability in school leadership that occurred after 1989; the consistent presence of a talented, dedicated group of teachers and staff members; the common belief among all members of the faculty and staff that, given time, Bright Star students can learn and achieve; the empowerment of teachers by the school leadership thus enabling them to participate in the school’s decision-making process; the willingness of the administration to take care of duties outside of the classroom so that teachers can focus on what is happening in the classroom; the implementation of block scheduling; the implementation of the IB program; and, a consistent message to the parent community that they are valued and respected partners in educating Bright Star students. Some of the key items outside of the school from the mid-1990s to the present have been: the development and implementation of standards-based learning accompanied by the Standards of Learning (SOL) tests in Virginia; the reauthorization of the Secondary Education Act that brought with it the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements; the development and use, on a national level, of the Jay Matthews Challenge Index; the outcry from the general public and the business community that our public high schools were too big, had drop-out rates
that were too high, and graduated students ill-prepared for the work world or post-secondary education.

Bright Star has evolved over time. Attention has been paid to every facet of school life. There is not a single program you can point to and say this, and this alone, is what made the difference. At Bright Star, it is the people who work and attend school there, along with their beliefs and values, and the culture they have established that make the difference.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings, Conclusions, Limitations

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that make, an at-risk high school, so successful and to learn how it got there. A qualitative methodology, the case study, was used. Case study research focuses on “each case as a whole unit … as it exists in real-life context” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 47). In this case study, Bright Star High School was the unit of study. This study involved what and how questions. “In general, case studies are the preferred strategy when how or why questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 2003, p. 1).

The design for this case study was based on reviews of the literature and other research studies related to at-risk, successful schools. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Articles about Bright Star, student newspapers, principal letters to faculty and staff, PTSA newsletters, and student yearbooks were reviewed. Observations of various events and daily happenings were conducted. The collection of data took place over a twelve month period of time between June 2006 and June 2007. During this time period I visited the school nine times, between July 19, 2006 and February 21, 2007. Once the study was completed, the data were loaded into a qualitative software program called NVivo 7. This software was enormously helpful in coding, identifying themes, and organizing the data for presentation.

Chapter 5 is divided into the following sections:

- Discussion of findings
- Conclusions
Discussion of Findings: What Makes Bright Star High School So Successful?

Overall, the findings from the case study of Bright Star High School show that there is not one factor that makes the difference but multiple factors that interact with each other. These factors are organized under six major domains: (1) common vision and mission; (2) culture, time, and space; (3) leadership; (4) teachers and instruction; (5) classroom and student learning; and (6) parent involvement. While the language is not identical, these domains and success factors are very similar to the themes in reviews of the literature and research studies on successful, at-risk schools.

Common Vision and Mission

The Bright Star faculty and staff have a clear “understanding of and commitment to specific instructional goals, priorities, assessment procedures, and accountability” (Association for Effective Schools, 1996). They know the reason for their presence at Bright Star. They are there for the kids. They know the kids have to pass a certain number of courses and their corresponding state Standards of Learning (SOLs) tests in order to graduate. The teachers firmly believe their responsibility is to help all students who enter Bright Star learn, achieve, and graduate.

The faculty and staff expressed the belief that, given time, support, and engaging instruction, all of their students will achieve and graduate. They have made learning the constant and time the variable. They have a common set of goals and values. They work hard to communicate those goals and values to all newcomers. In addition, they have
been relentless in communicating Bright Star’s top priority, that of student learning and achievement, to the students and parents, so much so that many of the students and parents can identify Bright Star’s top priority just as quickly as the faculty and staff.

The power of a common vision and mission is as evident at Bright Star as it is in the effective schools literature, the professional learning community literature, and in Marzano’s “Factors Affecting Student Achievement.” It is also listed as a key factor in studies conducted of successful, at-risk schools. It is specifically mentioned in four of the eight research studies reviewed in this document and indirectly mentioned in two of the other studies.

*Culture, Time, and Space*

The culture at Bright Star High School has been recognized and celebrated by those within the school and by those outside of the school (author, Patricia Hersch, the International Center for Leadership in Education, and the National Geographic) who have visited and had a chance to observe and spend some time among the faculty and students. The culture is open, inviting, and respectful.

Bright Star has diverse student body. Students differ in terms of race, ethnicity, economic status, language, religion, and in numerous other ways; but, they are similar in that they are all students of Bright Star. They think and talk about Bright Star being like a family. The student body is relatively small (1500 students) compared to other high schools in the district. Students get to know their teachers and they treasure their relationships with them. Students and the faculty and staff see Bright Star as a safe place. They understand that, while they may not like some of the structures and rules that are in place, the structure and rules are necessary. Students and parents see Bright Star as a
place of opportunity. They believe that the relatively small size of the student body allows many more students to participate in co- and extra-curricular activities at Bright Star than at other, larger high schools in the district.

At Bright Star, time has truly become the variable and learning the constant rather than the other way around. Three school-wide, organizational structures stand out when looking at how learning time is protected and used at Bright Star: a second, unique computerized attendance and identification system, the Comprehensive Attendance Administration and Security System or CASS, that works together with the school’s networked environment; an annual calendar that calls for school to open two weeks before Labor Day and close two weeks earlier than other schools in the district; and block scheduling.

The second attendance system or CASS has been in place for four years. It enhances and extends the first attendance system by increasing student time in class. Some of the features it provides are: the identification and greeting of all students as they enter the building on a daily basis; an immediate follow-up on student class cuts and chronic tardies; and wake-up calls to students’ homes. These additional features enable administrators to better support teachers and parents in getting students to class every day and getting them there in a timely manner.

Bright Star has what is called a modified calendar. This calendar allows them to open two weeks before Labor Day and close two weeks earlier than most other schools throughout the district. The modified calendar gives more instructional time prior to the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) tests and IB exams. It also allows Bright Star to run two school-based summer school sessions at their school as opposed to one session.
Block scheduling was implemented at Bright Star in the 1995-1996 school year. At the time, it was a major shift in student and teacher scheduling. Previous to the implementation of block scheduling, students went to seven classes each day for fifty to fifty-five minutes. With block scheduling, students go to four classes each day. Three of the classes meet every other day. These classes run approximately ninety minutes. One of the classes is an everyday, embedded class that runs approximately 50 minutes. Block scheduling reduces fragmentation and the amount of time needed for class changes. It also allows for more time for instruction and student learning.

In terms of space, Bright Star underwent a major renovation between 1998 and 2003. It occurred in three phases over five years and cost 22 million plus. Every part of the building was evaluated and updated. This renovation was a huge project for the school district; however, it was an even bigger deal for the faculty and staff, students, and parents in the Bright Star school community. The school opened in 1959 and this renovation was the first major change and updating of the building. The result was probably best summed up by one of the administrators who said, “Now, we finally have this really great building that matches the people inside it” (Administrator 2 Interview, October 4, 2006).

Leadership

Three aspects of leadership are key to Bright Star’s success: its administrative leadership, shared leadership, and teacher leadership. Leadership at Bright Star involves building instructional capacity among all the administrators and teachers.

In terms of administrative leadership, Bright Star had four different principals between 1980 and 1989. This continual turn-over in the leadership did little to engender
common vision, collaboration, or feelings of stability and consistency within the faculty and staff. The turn-around began in 1989 with the arrival of Principal 3 who stayed until 1997, for eight years. The IB program and block scheduling were implemented during this period of time. Principal 2 came on board in 1997 and stayed for nine years, until 2006. Many of the other success factors including the focus on reading, double blocked classes, the after-school remediation program, the modified calendar, a consistent instructional delivery system, and the second attendance system (CAAS) were implemented under Principal 2. These two principals, while very different in their approaches to leadership, were passionate about Bright Star students and faculty. They cared deeply that Bright Star students learn and achieve.

The stability in administrative leadership since 1989, the consistent adherence of all administrators to Bright Star’s common vision and mission, and the strong, passionate belief on the part of the administrators in the talents and skills of the faculty and the ability of all of their students to learn and achieve have had a significant effect on Bright Star’s journey to success.

Bright Star administrators empower teachers and share leadership mainly through department chairs. Department chairs get input from teachers in their departments and make decisions on everything from field trips to what courses will be offered to SOL testing schedules in May.

Department chairs are not the only ones who are expected to be leaders. Teachers are expected to be school-wide leaders as well. Principal 2 described this best when he said, “In most schools, teachers lead their classrooms. They accomplish objectives or goals through the efforts of other people, their students. They are leaders. In our school,
teachers lead more than their own classroom. Through distributed leadership and shared responsibility, they make the key instructional decisions that drive our school” (Principal 2 Newsletter, October 18, 2004).

*Teachers and Instruction*

Students, parents, administrators, and teachers strongly believe that the Bright Star faculty is vital to the success of the school. It was among the first factors mentioned when stakeholders were asked, “What makes Bright Star successful?” Those interviewed for this study spoke about the skills, talents, dedication, work ethic, passion for learning, and caring attitude of the faculty.

Teachers work collaboratively with each other. All departments have benchmarks for the courses they teach. Prior to the start of each school year, teachers in the core subjects work together to review and identify critical course content or essential learnings, develop and update pacing guides, and create common assessments. They review student achievement data to look for patterns in student achievement. They talk about lessons that have been successful with their students. Not all of the teachers were in favor of all of this when it got underway six to eight years ago. There was resistance; however, the teachers stuck with it because they saw that it worked. Working with colleagues and meeting to share engaging, successful lessons improved teaching and learning for all. Teachers said that they did it because it helped the kids not because they were directed from on high to do it.

Teachers also work with a uniform instructional, delivery system. Again, not all were on board when this concept came along; however, all agreed that increasing student time on task and improving teaching and learning were important. If using a uniform
instructional delivery system helped, then they would do it. The system calls for lessons to have a beginning, and ending, be engaging, and have a practice component. The beginning is to include “Bell” work that is work that the students are expected to do at the very beginning of the class so, as one student interviewed said, “No time is wasted” (Student 6, Focus Group 1, October 30, 2006).

Staff development is key to implementing many of the changes that were mentioned such as block scheduling, uniform instructional delivery system, the teaching of reading in all subject areas, the use of data to drive instruction, the development of common assessments. Bright Star teachers identify the staff development they need and work with administrators to insure it is provided. New teachers are required to attend staff development in their first year at Bright Star so they become familiar with strategies that can be used for the teaching of reading, the uniform instructional delivery system, and the after-school remediation program (ASAP).

Bright Star teachers feel accountable to themselves, their students, and the other teachers in their departments. Teachers work with each other to address issues related to academics and to help students solve some of the myriad of problems that they run into outside of school. The faculty and staff believe passionately in what they are doing and want the students to be successful in their learning. They constantly and consistently communicate high expectations to the students and their willingness to help the students learn.

*Classroom and Student Learning*

There are seven strategies/programs that have pushed Bright Star students to greater achievement. They include: a school-wide emphasis on reading; the
implementation of the International Baccalaureate (IB) and the International Baccalaureate in the Middles Years (IBMYP) programs; high expectations; intervention and support programs such as the After-School Academic Program (ASAP) and the Advancement via individual Determination (AVID) program; double blocked classes; a razor-like focus on the SOL content and tests; and an emphasis on the 9th grade transition year.

The increased focus on improving reading began in 1998 and continues today. Reading is paramount and emphasized in every class. When President Bush visited Bright star, he said “At Bright Star, they spell ‘hope’ R-E-A-D” (Bush, January 2005). Teachers, administrators, students, and parents talked about the emphasis on reading. All rising 9th grade Bright Star students are tested in reading before they arrive at the school. If they are reading two grades below grade level, they know they are going to be placed in a reading class.

The IB programs and high expectations go hand in hand. The programs are open to any student who wants to enroll in the classes and do the work. Support is provided to help students. As one parent said, “I’d have to put the IB program at the top (in my list of factors that have helped Bright Star be as successful as it is). Even the kids who don’t choose to work their tails off and do the essay and the CAS hours and work around the clock – even if they take one IB course they are still bumping it up a little” (Parent 4, Parent Focus Group, November 1, 2006). But high expectations are not only a part of the IB classes, they exist in all classes. “There is so much focus on academics here and student achievement that it trumps everything else” (Administrator 1 Interview, October 4, 2006). Students confirmed this statement in their comments.
There are a number of supports and interventions in place to help students at Bright Star when they are struggling. Among them are: a strong belief that academics come first; high expectations and a desire on the part of teachers to not let students fail; engaging lessons that are shared among teachers of the same subjects; a strong focus on literacy in all classes; two summer school sessions as a result of implementation of the modified calendar; a requirement for students reading below grade level to take a reading class; a school-wide, after-school help program, called the After-School Academic Program or ASAP; special courses during the school day such as the English as a Second Language courses (ESL), double blocked classes for selected mathematics and English courses, reading courses, and an Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) course; and, a willingness on the part of all, including guidance counselors, to make needed changes in student schedules throughout the school year in a timely manner.

ASAP, along with the emphasis on reading and the IB program were mentioned the most frequently in response to those factors that have had a significant impact on student achievement. ASAP has played an important and prominent role for both IB and non-IB students at Bright Star. “ASAP was designed for the purpose of giving administrative support to core teachers who wish to require at-risk students to come after school for additional help in their subject. At the conclusion of each interim and nine-week period, teachers (of the core subjects) are asked to create a list of students they feel would benefit from participating in this program. These students and their parents are notified that they will be part of the next ASAP session. ASAP sessions are four to five weeks in duration” (School Plan 2005-2007). The program got underway in 1999 and has evolved over the years, gradually increasing its positive impact on student achievement.
Double-blocked classes exist in English and mathematics but are most prevalent in mathematics, in Algebra I and II and geometry classes. How does the concept of double blocked classes work? Bright Star students take seven classes. They have block scheduling, which is students go to three of their classes every other day for approximately 90 minutes and one embedded class every day for approximately 50 minutes. Double blocking courses means the student takes the same 90 minute course every day rather than every other day, as is the case with Algebra I and Algebra II.

At Bright Star, there is a razor-like focus on the Virginia Standards of Learning objectives and the associated tests. Teachers are adept at analyzing data, not just SOL data, but all kinds of formative and summative data. They look at the SOL assessments students have to pass, ask themselves what needs to be done to help students improve their achievement on the SOL tests, and make changes in what they are doing. They develop and use common pacing guides and assessments. They share lesson plans that they find work well with students. Counselors work closely with students to insure they are placed in courses that stretch students but do not overwhelm them. Administrators are responsible for the “administrivia” of attendance and the close monitoring of the + and halls during the school day so teachers can focus on teaching and student learning.

As the Bright Star faculty and staff continued with their steps to improve student achievement, they recognized that their most at-risk group was their 9th graders. They initially began focusing on ninth graders, not because of concerns over academic achievement, but after they analyzed their discipline data and discovered that 66% of their serious discipline incidents involved ninth graders. Some of the school-wide structures, programs, and strategies implemented for rising 9th graders include: early
testing in reading and placement in a reading class if students are found to be reading two or more grades below grade level; and participation in a two-week summer program, the Principal’s Academy, for students identified as at-risk. The Principal’s Academy provides study skills and intensive orientation, and upon entering in the Fall, these students are assigned a mentor. There are smaller classes in ninth grade, double block classes, semester classes, and, of course, ASAP. The goal is clear - to have all 9th graders “graduate” to grade 10.

_Parent Involvement_

Parent involvement can be defined in different ways. If parent involvement is defined as those who run the parent, student, teacher association (PTSA) and the various booster groups, then the amount of parent involvement at Bright Star is quite limited, probably ten to twelve parents. A district administrator who worked closely with Bright Star agreed stating, “The involved parents tended to be Caucasian parents of highly achieving students” (District Administrator interview, June 30, 2006). These involved parents are knowledgeable and articulate. They are advocates for the school. They are valued for their expertise and the extensive amounts of time and effort they give to supporting the school. They are the parents who participated in the parent focus group for this study. They recognize that some of the other parents may not be in a position to give as much as they do because they may be working two or three jobs.

The students who participated in the student focus groups tended to see parent involvement as parent support for and interest in what they were doing at school. Using their criteria for describing parent involvement, their parents were involved. The students said their parents help out with and attend activities at the school that involve them.
Teachers spoke about the cooperation and respect they receive from the parents. They expressed appreciation for the support they get when they contact parents about a concern or issue with their students.

Over the years, Bright Star administrators have sent messages that support and encourage teachers to open lines of communication with parents and form positive, cooperative relationships with them. Most of the parents at Bright Star, through their own voices, and through the voices of the students and teachers with whom I spoke, feel respected and valued. This feeling, plus the kind of broadly defined parent involvement discussed here, are what make parent involvement an important factor in the success of Bright Star.

Discussion of Findings: How Did Bright Star Become As Successful As It Is?

Change occurred at Bright Star on the school level and the class level over a period of about fifteen years beginning with the implementation of the IB Program in 1993-1994 and block scheduling in 1995-1996. Staff development, developing instructional leadership capacity, and continuous improvement have been and continue to be constants. The other major changes addressed in this study occurred in the past nine years. Changes were influenced by Bright Star principals, faculty and staff, by a changing student body and parent community, and by what was happening at the district, state, and national levels. For example, the IB Program was brought to Bright Star by central office personnel. Renovation was a district initiated and implemented project with tremendous input from the school community Block scheduling, on the other hand, was a change initiated by the faculty and staff within Bright Star (Principal 3, 2\textsuperscript{nd} interview, June 10, 2007).
At the same time, changes were occurring at the state and national levels. These changes had a strong influence over what was happening at Bright Star just as they did in schools across the state and country. These changes included: the development and implementation of standards-based learning accompanied by the Standards of Learning (SOL) tests in Virginia; the reauthorization of the Secondary Education Act that brought with it the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements; the development and use of the Jay Matthews Challenge Index for rating high schools; and, the outcry from the general public and the business community that our public high schools were too big, had dropout rates that were too high, and graduated students ill-prepared for the work world or post-secondary education.

The Bright Star leadership took a close look at the changes that were occurring inside and outside their school community and they learned and grew together. They analyzed their data, recognized what had to be done to improve student attendance, student achievement, and the graduation rate, and did it.

Table 5.1 provides a summary of when the factors that drove Bright Star’s success were implemented and who were the primary groups in influencing the changes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOMAINS</th>
<th>FACTORS</th>
<th>Implemented in</th>
<th>Change mainly influenced by:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Common vision and mission</td>
<td>• Collaboratively develop common vision and</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Faculty &amp; staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mission</td>
<td>2000-2007</td>
<td>Principal 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Communicate, communicate, communicate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture, time, and space</td>
<td>• Diversity</td>
<td>‘70s,’80s &amp; ‘90s</td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Safe and secure, small, personalized</td>
<td>‘90s to present</td>
<td>Community &amp; faculty &amp; staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>environment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty &amp; staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Second attendance system</td>
<td>Spring 2003</td>
<td>Faculty &amp; staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Modified calendar</td>
<td>2000-2001</td>
<td>Faculty &amp; staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Block scheduling</td>
<td>1995-1996</td>
<td>Faculty &amp; staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Building</td>
<td>1998-2003</td>
<td>School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional leadership</td>
<td>• Administrative/principal leadership</td>
<td>Increased leadership</td>
<td>Principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared leadership</td>
<td>role of department</td>
<td>Faculty &amp; staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher leadership</td>
<td>chair and individual teachers, 2000-2007</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers and instruction</td>
<td>• Skilled, dedicated faculty that functions</td>
<td>2000-2007</td>
<td>Faculty &amp; staff driven by local graduation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as a learning community</td>
<td></td>
<td>requirements, state SOLs and AYP under NCLB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Guaranteed and viable curriculum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Uniform instructional delivery model</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Staff development</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Data-driven instructional decisions</td>
<td>1999-2007</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Collective accountability</td>
<td>2000-2007</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The classroom and student</td>
<td>• Reading (increased emphasis)</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Faculty &amp; staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning</td>
<td>• IB</td>
<td>1993-1994</td>
<td>School district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• High expectations</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Support and intervention</td>
<td>1999-2007</td>
<td>Faculty &amp; staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Double-blocked classes</td>
<td>2000-2007</td>
<td>Faculty &amp; staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Emphasis on SOLs</td>
<td>2000-2007</td>
<td>Faculty &amp; staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 9th grade transition</td>
<td>2004-2007</td>
<td>Faculty &amp; staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement</td>
<td>• Home-school connections</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Faculty &amp; staff Community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout all of the changes that occurred, the Bright Star principals, school-based administrators, teachers, counselors, and others never lost sight of their purpose, to help students learn and achieve, and their will to make it happen, no matter what it took.
Their passionate belief in their purpose and their will to make things happen are a large part of what makes the Bright Star story so amazing.

Conclusions

In response to my first research question, *What makes Bright Star so successful?* my own experience as a teacher, curriculum developer, high school principal, and central office administrator, along with what I have learned from this case study, lead me to conclude that there is not one factor that makes the difference in highly successful, high performing, at-risk high schools but rather multiple factors that interact with each other to create a balanced, ecological-like system that helps guide and support students from the day they enter to the day they graduate. These key factors include:

1. A common vision and mission
2. A safe and secure, personalized environment in which acceptance, respect and high expectations are the norm
3. Strong instructional leadership
4. A dedicated faculty that functions as a learning community: doing whatever is needed to help students learn and achieve; using standards-based instruction and common pacing guides and assessments; using data for instructional decision-making; and holding themselves accountable
5. Rigorous, academic programs; intervention and support strategies that help insure students learn and achieve; an emphasis on reading throughout the school; a clear understanding of the phrase that learning is the constant and time the variable
6. Parent buy-in and support of the goals of the school.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOMAINS</th>
<th>BRIGHT STAR SUCCESS FACTORS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School-wide structure, strategy, or program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common vision and mission</td>
<td>• *Collaboratively develop common vision and mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Communicate! Communicate! Communicate!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture, time, and space</td>
<td>• Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• *Safe and secure, small, personalized environment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Attendance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Modified calendar</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Block scheduling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional leadership</td>
<td>• *Administrative/principal leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• *Shared leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers and instruction</td>
<td>• *Skilled, dedicated faculty that functions as a learning community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• *Guaranteed and viable curriculum</td>
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<td>• Uniform instructional delivery model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• *Staff development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• *Data-driven instructional decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The classroom and student learning</td>
<td>• *Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• IB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• *High expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• *Support and intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Double-blocked classes</td>
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<tr>
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<td>• Emphasis on SOLs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 9th grade transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement</td>
<td>• *Home-school connections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Common themes found in my reviews of literature and research studies
The findings in this case study of Bright Star High School encompass the broad, common themes that I found in the reviews of the literature and research studies related to successful, at-risk schools and go far beyond them as shown in Table 5.2.

In response to my second research question, How did Bright Star become as successful as it is? the findings of this study along with my reviews of the literature and associated research studies lead me to three major conclusions: (1) Bright Star leaders, principals and department chairs nurtured a culture that pushed all to work together to identify barriers to increased student learning and achievement, figure out what it would take to remove the barriers, and then supported, cajoled, pushed, and pulled everyone into taking action; (2) changes at the school, district, state, and national levels can have a powerful impact on student achievement; (3) change takes time, persistence, patience and an understanding that it is messy and not easy.

Bright Star has evolved over time. Attention has been paid to every facet of school life. There is not a single program that you can point to and say this, and this alone, is what made the difference. At Bright Star, it is the people who work and attend school there, along with their beliefs and values, the culture they have established, and the will to do what they know needs to be done that make the difference.

Implications

People make the difference not programs. Based on the findings from this study and associated literature reviews and reviews of related research studies, low-performing, at-risk high schools seeking to improve student achievement ought to give consideration to the following:
1. Is the principal an instructional leader who is able to form collaborative, positive relationships with students, staff, parents, and others in the community; has knowledge of the power of school-wide, systematic organizational structures and routines and their impact on student achievement; can develop leadership in others; can be the chief cheerleader for the school?

2. Do the teachers believe passionately that, given time, all students can learn? Do they have a common vision and mission, high expectations, and a sense of personal and collective accountability? Are they willing to change what they do and what is comfortable for them so that student achievement is increased? Are they learners who are willing to share what they learn, not just with their students but also with their colleagues?

3. Has the reading level of students been assessed and appropriate supports, interventions, and courses put in place to address deficiencies? Are all teachers expected to incorporate reading objectives and strategies into their lessons?

4. Have standards and benchmarks been clearly identified for all courses? Are teachers thoroughly familiar with them? Have teachers of the same courses developed common pacing guides and assessments?

5. Is a common, school-wide instructional delivery system needed? If so, what should it be?

6. Are teachers familiar with the use of data for instructional decision making? What types of staff development do they believe they need? Is it being provided?

7. Has the school’s learning climate been assessed? Are all who are part of the school considered valued members of the school? Do they have formal and
informal methods of expressing complaints and giving suggestions for
improvements?

8. What is the school’s attendance rate? Are there steps that should be taken to
insure student attend class daily and on time? If so, what should those steps be?
These same questions need to be applied to suspensions and recommendations for
expulsion.

9. Are there appropriate transition supports in place for rising 9th graders?

10. Are parents invited to be participants in their child’s education? Are there
outreach efforts to them? Are they aware of the many different levels of
involvement in their child’s education and school, and of the vital role they have
to play?

Recommendations for Further Study

There is a wealth of data that came from this study that merits further study.

Among these are the following:

1. Now that the Bright Star success factors have been identified would a quantitative
study of these factors at Bright Star, and other schools with similar demographics
and levels of achievement, lead to a clearer understanding of which factors have a
stronger impact on student achievement?

2. Is the impact of Bright Star’s After-School Academic Program, ASAP, on student
achievement as significant as teachers, students, and parents say it is? It would be
beneficial to do action research with students who participate in ASAP and those
who do not.
3. What is the impact of a school facility on student achievement? It certainly had an affect on how the Bright Star teachers, students, and parents, felt about their school.

4. Will the increased use of qualitative software, such as the NVivo 7 software used for this case study, improve the perceptions of researchers about the reliability of qualitative studies? NVivo is a powerful tool which I only scraped the surface of in this study. Using the data that I have and armed with a greater understanding of the power of the software, I believe I could make a more, in-depth analysis of my data, increase my understanding of the relationships among my findings, and demonstrate more clearly the use of triangulation of the data and constant comparison resulting in the strengthening of the reliability of the study.

5. Will the implementation of some or all of these success factors in other at-risk high schools have a positive impact on their student achievement?
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### Appendix A: Profile of Bright Star High School

#### Student Membership Demographics and Supplemental Programs (as of June for each school year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>2003-04</th>
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<th>2005-06</th>
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<td>322</td>
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<td>204</td>
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</table>

Note: Data for each school year is published as it becomes available, generally during November - December of the following school year; hence, when this study was initiated, data for the ’06-'07 school year was not available.

No Child Left Behind – Bright Star Results for 2004 – 2007

**Percentage of Students Passing**
Schools, school divisions, and states are rated according to the progress toward the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). This federal law requires states to set annual benchmarks for achievement in reading and mathematics leading to 100 percent proficiency by 2014. Schools, school divisions, and states that meet or exceed all annual benchmarks toward this goal are rated as having made adequate yearly progress (AYP). Annual accountability ratings are based on achievement during the previous academic year or combined achievement from the three most recent years.

**Bright Star High School – Percent Students Passing SOLs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Virginia Department of Education State Report Card, October 2007
Appendix B: Commonwealth of Virginia Requirements for Meeting AYP under NCLB

Adopted by Virginia Board of Education: June 22, 2005

Addendum to NCLB Amendment Request

12. AYP: Revise the annual proficiency targets (annual measurable objectives) for reading and mathematics

Critical Elements 3.1, 3.2(b)

Request: Virginia will revise the annual proficiency targets (annual measurable objectives) for reading and mathematics to reflect an annual increase. The targets currently increase from 61 percent in reading and 59 percent in mathematics in 2003-2004 to 70 percent in reading and mathematics in 2004-2005. Beginning in 2004-2005, the revised proficiency target for reading will be 65 percent and the revised proficiency target for mathematics will be 63 percent. As the results of newly developed and administered tests are used in determining Adequate Yearly Progress and accountability decisions for the state, divisions, and schools, the board will annually review and adjust, if necessary, its proficiency targets in reading and mathematics based on data analysis.

For 2005-2006, the proficiency target for reading was 69% and for mathematics 67%. For the 2006-2007 school year, the targets are: reading, 73%; mathematics, 71%.

Appendix C: Commonwealth of Virginia Requirements for Accreditation

8VAC 20-131-300 C.1.b page 51

For a school to be fully accredited the following applies:

b. With (Standards of Learning) tests administered in the academic years 2006-2007, 2007-2008, and 2008-2009 for the accreditation ratings awarded for academic years 2007-2008, 2008-2009, and 2009-2010 respectively, a school will be rated Fully Accredited when its eligible students meet the pass rate of 70% in each of the four core academic areas except, the pass rates required shall be 75% in third-grade through fifth-grade English and 50 percent in third-grade science and history/social science.

Appendix D: Commonwealth of Virginia Requirements for Graduation

**Standard Diploma**

To graduate with a Standard Diploma, students must earn at least 22 standard units of credit by passing required courses and electives, and earn at least six verified credits by passing end-of-course SOL tests or other assessments approved by the Board of Education. The table below displays the minimum course and credit requirements for a Standard Diploma.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline Area</th>
<th>Standard Credits Effective with ninth graders in 1998-99</th>
<th>Verified Credits - Effective for Ninth Graders in . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2000-01 through 2002-03 2003-04 and beyond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics [Note 1]</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laboratory Science [Notes 2 &amp; 6]</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History and Social Sciences [Notes 3 &amp; 6]</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Physical Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine Arts or Career &amp; Technical Education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electives [Note 4]</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Selected Test [Note 5]</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please note: Your school counselor can tell you which courses are offered by your school to fulfill the requirements for a Standard Diploma.

Appendix E: Bolman and Deal’s Framework for Leadership

Bolman and Deal (1997) focus on mainly on leadership, specifically four different approaches or frameworks for leadership: the structural framework; the human resource framework, the political framework, and, the symbolic framework. The table below provides a brief overview of the four-frame model.

**Bolman and Deal’s Four-Frame Model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central concepts</th>
<th>Structural</th>
<th>Human Resource</th>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Symbolic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rule, roles, goals, policies, technology, environment</td>
<td>Needs, skills, relationships</td>
<td>Power, conflict, competition, organizational politics</td>
<td>Culture, meaning, metaphor, ritual, ceremony, stories, heroes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image of leadership</td>
<td>Social architecture</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Inspiration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic leadership challenge</td>
<td>Attune structure to task, technology, environment</td>
<td>Align organizational and human needs</td>
<td>Develop agenda and power base</td>
<td>Create faith, beauty, meaning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 15)
Appendix F: Baldrige Criteria for Educational Excellence

The Baldrige criteria for performance excellence in education are: (1) leadership; (2) strategic planning; (3) student, stakeholder, and market focus; (4) measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; (5) faculty and focus; (6) process management; and (7) organizational performance results. These criteria are used as the basis for organizational self-assessments, for making awards, and for providing feedback on how well schools are performing. The criteria are “designed to help organizations use an integrated approach to organizational performance management that result in: the delivery of ever-improving value to students and stakeholders, contributing to education quality; the improvement of overall organizational effectiveness and capabilities; and, organizational and personal learning” (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2003, p. 1). The Baldrige core values and concepts include visionary leadership, learning-centered education, organizational and personal learning, valued faculty, staff, and partners; agility, focus on the future, managing for innovation, management by fact, social responsibility, and systems perspective (Baldrige National Quality Program WEB site).
Appendix G: Major Educational Reform Reports

- The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto, Mortimer J. Adler, on behalf of the members of the Paideia Group, 1982.
- Time for Results, National Governors' Association, 1986.
- The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them, E. D. Hirsch Jr., 1996.

Appendix H: Letter and Consent Form for Adult Participants

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

October 2006

Dear Administrator, Teacher, or Parent,

I am a doctoral student for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and am conducting a study of Bright Star High School. My specific research questions are: Why is it successful? How did it become that way? To help in answering these research questions, I would like to speak with you.

For this study, focus groups or interviews of selected school district personnel, staff members, parents, and students along with observations and reviews of relevant documents will be conducted. All activities except for the interview with the central office personnel will take place at the school.

The participants in this study were chosen because they are the people most likely to have vital knowledge and insights into my research questions. Interviews and focus groups will be tape-recorded and transcribed. However, the final report will not include identification of the county, school district, high school or names of the participants. A coding system will be used. All participants will be asked to sign a consent form which provides information on the study and how to express any concerns that may arise. Student participants will need to have parent permission to participate. A copy of the consent form for adult participants is attached.

The interviews and focus group sessions will be held at school at a time that is most convenient for the participants. The dates, times, and locations of the sessions will be approved by the school principal. The sessions will take no more than 90 minutes. During this time, you will be asked questions about Bright Star High School.

I asked the principal for participant recommendations. She recommended you. I hope you will agree to participate.

The attached Consent Form explains my study in greater detail. Would you please read it and sign it to indicate your willingness to participate? The completed form can be returned to me via the preaddressed, stamped envelope.

If you have any questions about this study or any matter related to it, please contact me at or via e-mail at

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,
Title of the Study: A Case Study of a Successful, At-Risk High School

Investigator:

I. Purpose of this Research/Project

The purpose of this research study is to investigate why Bright Star High School is successful and how it became that way. A case study research methodology will be used.

II. Procedures

The following procedures will take place at the school site:

- Tape-recorded interviews with administrators
- Tape-recorded focus group sessions with faculty, students, and parents
- Collection of pertinent documents and archival records
- Tour of school led by two students

III. Risks

There will be minimal or no risk to participants. The use of a tape recorder for some interviews creates minimal risk. You and your school will not be identified by name in the final report. The data provided by you will be limited to this study or other research-related usage authorized by Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

IV. Benefits

The benefits of this study are: add to the general body of literature on successful, at-risk schools and on school reform; increase the reader’s knowledge and understanding of the characteristics of successful schools and how they became that way; provide insights into what other high schools in the district and elsewhere might do to improve their school and sustain improvement; add to Bright Star High School’s understanding of itself.

No promise or guarantee of benefits have been made to encourage you to participate. Results of the study will be shared with the school at the conclusion of the study.
V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

Care will be taken to preserve the confidentiality of the participants. Neither the participants nor the school will be identified by name in the final report. Biographical information collected will be coded so names do not have to be used. Interviews will be tape recorded in order to have accurate transcriptions. These tapes will be stored at the home of the investigator and destroyed at the end of the study. Transcriptions of the interviews will be shared with the interviewees to determine accuracy.

It is possible that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view this study’s collected data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

VI. Compensation

There is no compensation associated with participation in this study.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may discontinue your participation at any time without prejudice. A copy of this signed consent form will be provided to you. You have the right to express concerns or complaints to the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

VIII. Subject’s Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities: to provide appropriate bibliographical information and participate in the interviews/focus groups.

Please complete and sign the form on the next page. Return the form to me via the enclosed preaddressed, stamped envelope. Thank you!
IX. Subject’s (ADULT’S) Permission

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Participant:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signature of Participant:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Name of investigator: Betsy Goodman  Date:

Signature of Investigator:

Should I have any pertinent questions about this research or its conduct, and research subjects’ rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury to the subject, I may contact:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investigator</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>e-mail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty Advisor</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>e-mail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review
Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research Compliance
1800 Pratt Drive, Suite 2006 (0497)
Blacksburg, VA 24061
Appendix I: Letter and Consent Form for Student Participants

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

September 2006

Dear Parent,

I am a doctoral student for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and am conducting a study of Bright Star High School. My specific research questions are: Why is it successful? How did it become that way? To help in answering these research questions, I would like to speak with your son/daughter.

For this study, interviews of selected school district personnel, staff members, parents, and students along with observations and reviews of relevant documents will be conducted. All activities except for the interview with the past assistant superintendent and the past principal will take place at the school.

The participants in this study were chosen because they are the people most likely to have vital knowledge and insights into my research questions. Interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed. However, the final report will not include identification of the county, school district, high school or names of the participants. A coding system will be used. All participants will be asked to sign a consent form which provides information on the study and how to express any concerns that may arise. Student participants need to have parent permission to participate. A copy of the consent form for student participants is attached.

Two student focus group sessions will be held at school at a time that is most convenient for the students. The same six students will participate in both focus groups. The dates, times, and locations of the two sessions will be approved by the school principal. The sessions will take no more than 90 minutes. During this time, I will ask the students questions about Bright Star High School and their experiences there.

I asked the principal for participant recommendations. She recommended your son/daughter. I hope you will give permission for your son/daughter to participate.

The attached Consent Form explains my study in greater detail. Would you please read it and sign it so your son/daughter can participate? The completed form can be returned to me via the preaddressed, stamped envelope or dropped off in the principal’s office.

If you have any questions about this study or any matter related to it, please contact me at 571-423-1180 or via e-mail at

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,
CONSENT FORM

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent for MINORS
in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Title of the Study: A Case Study of a Successful, At-Risk High School

Investigator:

I. Purpose of this Research/Project

The purpose of this research study is to investigate why Stuart High School is successful and how it became that way. A case study research methodology will be used.

II. Procedures

The following procedures will take place at the school site:

- Tape-recorded interviews with administrators
- Tape-recorded focus group sessions with faculty, students, and parents
- Collection of pertinent documents and archival records
- Tour of school led by two students

III. Risks

There will be minimal or no risk to participants. The use of a tape recorder for some interviews creates minimal risk. You and your school will not be identified by name in the final report. The data provided by you will be limited to this study or other research-related usage authorized by Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

IV. Benefits

The benefits of this study are: add to the general body of literature on successful, at-risk schools and on school reform; increase the reader’s knowledge and understanding of the characteristics of successful schools and how they became that way; provide insights into what other high schools in the district and elsewhere might do to improve their school and sustain improvement; add to the school’s understanding of itself.

No promise or guarantee of benefits have been made to encourage students to participate.
V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

Care will be taken to preserve the confidentiality of the participants. Neither the participants nor the school will be identified by name in the final report. Any biographical information collected will be coded so names do not have to be used.

Interviews and focus group sessions will be tape recorded in order to have accurate transcriptions. These tapes will be stored at the home of the investigator and destroyed at the end of the study.

It is possible that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view this study’s collected data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

VI. Compensation

There is no compensation associated with participation in this study.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may discontinue your participation at any time without prejudice. A copy of this signed consent form will be provided to you. You have the right to express concerns or complaints to the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

VIII. Student Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study and have my parent’s permission to do so. I have the following responsibilities: to provide information some biographical information (grade level, number of years at the school, etc.) and participate in the 90 minute focus group session in the spring and a similar session in the fall.

Please complete and sign the form on the next page. Return the form to me via the enclosed preaddressed, stamped envelope. Thank you!
Parent Permission for Student (Minor) to Participate in the Study

I have read the Consent Form. I give my consent for my son/daughter to participate in this study.

| Name of Student (please print): |  |
| Signature of Student: | Date: |

| Name of Parent (please print): |  |
| Signature of Parent: | Date: |

| Name of investigator: | Betsy Goodman |
| Signature of Investigator: | Date: |

Should I have any pertinent questions about this research or its conduct I may contact:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investigator</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>e-mail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Advisor</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>e-mail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research Compliance
1800 Pratt Drive, Suite 2006 (0497)
Blacksburg, VA 24061
Appendix J: Introductory Letter to Bright Star Principal

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY
Blacksburg, Virginia, 24061

July 2006

[title, name] Principal
Bright Star High School
[address]
[town, state, zip]

Dear [name]:

Thank you for agreeing to serve as a site for the research project, *A Case Study of a Successful, At-Risk High School*. Bright Star High School was selected for study because its 2004 demographics showed 70% of the student population was minority, 52% was receiving free or reduced lunch, and 93% of its students went on to college.

I am a doctoral student for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Dr. David Alexander is the chairman of my doctoral committee. Dr. Cecilia Krill is serving as my FCPS sponsor for this study. My specific research questions are: Why is Bright Star High School successful? How did it become that way?

The case study methodology will be used for the study of Bright Star High School. Interviews of selected school district personnel and staff members, parents, and students along with observations and reviews of documents will be conducted during the study. Interviews of the district personnel and school-based administrators will be done on an individual basis. Two focus sessions will be conducted with the teacher group (8 teachers), the parent group (4 parents) and the student group (6 students). One focus group session with each of the different groups will take place in September/October of 2006 and one in November/December of 2006. A request will be made to have two students conduct two tours of the school, one tour in September and one tour in December. All activities except for the interviews with the assistant superintendent and the past principal will take place at the school.

The participants in this study were chosen because they are the people most likely to have vital knowledge and insights into my research questions. Interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed. However, the final report will not include identification of the county, school district, high school or names of the participants. A coding system will be used to identify the participants. All participants will be asked to sign a consent form which provides information about the study and how to express any concerns that may arise. Student participants will need to have parent permission to participate. Copies of the consent forms for adults and students are attached.
I am looking forward to my initial visit with you. I will be contacting you shortly for an appointment to review study procedures and get recommendations for participants, dates, and locations of interviews and focus groups.

I can be reached via telephone at or via e-mail at

Again, thank you!

Sincerely,

C: Attachments
Appendix K: Background Information Collected on Participants

Teacher Background Information
November 1, 2006

Name __________________________________________________

A code will be used in place of your name in the report.

Gender ____ Ethnicity/Race _______ Position/Department _________________

# of years as a teacher including this year _____

# of years as a teacher in this school including this year ______

Degrees held and when they were received ______________________________

__________________________________________

Additional responsibilities at this school

________________________________________

________________________________________

Staff Development in the past two years________________________

Professional Organizations ______________________________

Other information that you feel may be important to the researcher of this study

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

205
Appendix L: Long Set of Questions for Participants

Preamble:

- Introduce self. Include brief overview of professional and academic background.
- Conduct participant introductions; collect teacher background information.
- Review purpose of study and methodology.
- Discuss Informed Consent, anonymity issues, ground rules, and agenda.

1. How would you describe Bright Star High School?

2. Bright Star has received quite a lot of positive attention and recognition. Why do you think this is so?

3. Do you see yourselves as a representative group of faculty members?

4. What is the make-up of the Bright Star faculty and staff in terms of race and ethnic background, gender, age, etc.? Is this important in Bright Star’s success?

Bright Star High School’s Strategic Plan

1. What is the vision and mission for the school? What role do you play in moving the school closer to its vision and mission?

2. What planning process is used to develop the school’s strategic plan?

3. What do you do to support the implementation of the school’s strategic plan? How do you monitor progress?

Instructional leadership

1. What is your role at Bright Star? Do you see yourself as a leader?

2. What are the keys to being successful in your role(s)?

3. How does change come about at Bright Star?

4. What role do you play in implementing initiatives/changes at Stuart?
5. Who are the key players in implementing change?

6. How are you supported at the classroom level in implementing changes?

School Culture

1. Describe your school culture.

2. Do you feel the faculty and staff are treated fairly here? Students? Parents?

3. Do all stakeholders have a way to participate in decisions that affect them?

4. How would you describe the learning climate?

5. Is leadership “shared” here? If so, please describe

Collaboration

1. Is teacher collaboration important? If so, is it expected, supported, and nurtured?

2. Is time set aside during the school day for teacher collaboration around topics related to student learning? If yes, please describe.

3. Please look at the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) rubric. Under the category of collaboration, where would you place Bright Star?

Assessment

1. What formative and summative data are used in making instructional decisions at Stuart? Is this data tracked over several years to identify patterns of achievement?

2. What is the process for monitoring the use of data at the classroom and school levels and who are the key players?

3. What are the expectations in terms of the use of data by teachers? What data has been most useful? Can you give some examples?

4. How do you determine whether students have learned what has been taught?

5. What interventions are in place for students who have not learned?
Expectations

1. Are there certain expectations and/or procedures that are shared by all faculty and staff? What are they? How did they come to be?

2. Bright Star High School has been successful in raising student achievement on a number of achievement indicators – SOLs, SATs, percent of students graduating and going on to post-secondary education. What are the top three to five factors involved in Bright Star’s success? When and why were these key factors implemented?

3. Are there specific organizational structures, processes, or cultural aspects in the school that, if they were not present, would translate into less success for Bright Star students?

Opportunity to Learn

1. Do all teachers of the same course teach the same essential knowledge in class?
   For example, do all Algebra I teachers teach the same core knowledge in their classes? How do you know?

2. Do teachers of the same courses use common assessments?

3. What support/ intervention is in place when students do not learn what they need to know or for low-performing students? Do students take advantage of this support?

4. What opportunities do you offer to high-achieving students? Do students take advantage of these experiences?

Home School Connections

1. What do the parents think of Bright Star High School? How do you know?
2. Are parents and the community involved in Bright Star High School? Please describe their involvement?

3. What are the key school/home communication processes at Bright Star?

The Past

1. What changes have you made, in the past five years, in how or what you teach? Why did you make these changes?

2. What changes have been made on a school-wide level in the past five years and why?

3. What critical events, over the past five years, do you feel have helped to shape Bright Star High School and bring it to where it is today?

Wrap-up

1. What is most important to you at Bright Star High School?

2. Is there anything that you think is important to my study that we have not discussed?

3. What’s next for Bright Star?

4. Closure, follow-up, thanks.
Appendix M: Revised, Shorter Set of Questions

This school has received a lot of positive recognition and awards.

1. Do you believe it is a good school?

2. What has helped to make it academically successful?

3. Are there special programs, processes, or structures in place at the classroom level that have helped? At the school level?

4. Who are the key players in helping students achieve academically? What roles do the faculty, students, administrators, parents play?

5. Describe the culture of the school.

6. How and when did the changes come about that you think helped play a role in improving the academic achievement of the students?

7. How would you describe the school today? In 2001? In 1996 (if you were here then)?

8. What significant events have occurred over the past five to ten years that have had an impact on student achievement?