

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

“Public education in the United States has always had its critics, and most of them have firm ideas about what is needed to make public schools better” (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001, p. 5). Cawelti and Protheroe continued to explain that the critics, as well as those who support public education agree that accountability is needed to make schools better. They also pointed out that individual states are now setting standards for what students should know and they require the students to be assessed to determine if students are meeting the standards. According to Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) the assessment focuses on basic skills “with the results used to rate schools and districts through an intentionally designed accountability system” (p. 5).

The Council for Basic Education and the Johnson Foundation (2001) prepared findings from a conference on *Improving Teaching Practices to Achieve Higher Standards*. They indicated that in 1989, the first National Education Summit challenged states to set higher academic standards, and in 1994, President Clinton signed the Goals 2000 legislation into law. Since the signing of this legislation 49 states have developed academic standards. The report further pointed out that in 2001 the movement to improve schools, through standards-driven reform continues to be at a critical crossroads. For years the focus seemed to have been on “creating clear, rigorous, and measurable standards, an effort accompanied by heated discussions about what should be included in standards” (p. 1). Even though discussions have occurred, the question as to the degree or extent that standards based curriculum can affect classroom practices and student

learning still remains. The report continued to state that standards have little impact on student learning unless widespread changes occur at the school level.

### National Perspective

In a paper prepared for a conference on student achievement, Hiebert (2001) wrote “education improvement in the United States is now attracting more attention and energy than at any time in recent memory” (p. 26). He further indicated that education being at the top of the political agenda of both major parties is an indication that the attention it is receiving is likely to continue. By receiving this attention Hiebert continued, much focus and emphasis has been directed toward setting standards for content and the assessment of students’ performance. He concluded by stating that, “setting standards for students’ learning and measuring progress toward these standards are essential elements in an improved educational system. But setting standards and holding students and teachers accountable are not enough” (p. 26).

Wiggins and McTighe (1998) indicated that students are the primary clients of educators, and “the effectiveness of curriculum assessment, and instructional designs is ultimately determined by their achievement of desired learning”(p. 7). Due to the achievement of desired learning, standards are needed to inform and give shape to those responsible for educating children. Wiggins and McTighe continued by stating, “we are guided by national, state, district, or institutional standards that specify what students should know and be able to do” (p. 7). They also discussed that standards should provide a framework to help educators identify teaching and learning priorities that would guide the design of curriculum and assessments. However, more than just standards are needed to promote student achievement.

## Regional Perspective

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) (2001) reported that every state in their region had improved on “some measure of student achievement in the last ten years” (p.16). The report further indicated that the states improved within this region because they have raised standards and expectations for the students. The report also revealed that due to raised standards and expectations “more fourth and eighth-graders are meeting or surpassing the National Assessment proficient levels in reading and mathematics” (p. 16).

The report continued by pointing out that “10 out of 15 SREB states improved the percentages of fourth-graders who scored at or above the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in Reading” from 1992 to 1998 (p. 16). The increases in these states were reported to be larger than the national increase of two percentage points. North Carolina was among the ten Southern Regional Education states that were three percentage points above the national average in reading.

In the area of mathematics, the report revealed that 10 out of 15 SREB states that participated in the 1992 and 1996 assessment, showed an increase in the percentages of fourth-graders who performed at or above the proficient level. It also revealed in the area of eighth grade mathematics, North Carolina’s gain of eleven percentage points was higher than the national gain of eight percentage points. North Carolina has also raised standards, developed strong accountability components, and raised expectations for the school reform efforts such as the ABC Plan.

## State Perspective

According to the SREB (2001) the first step toward increased student achievement is to “establish clear standards for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level” (p. 21). The report focused on the importance of content standards and performance standards. The report continued to emphasize that “content standards are the foundation for improving student achievement and performance standards are based on content standards and describe how well students should learn the material specified in content standards” (p.21).

The report continued to reveal, “states need to make sure teachers and principals know the standards and develop instructional strategies to help students master the required content skill” (p. 23). It also indicated, “high standards and good assessment will not improve student achievement unless the standards are accompanied by good instruction” (p.23).

Cohen (1987) emphasized the extreme importance of states setting goals, assessing performance, providing incentives for good performance and no incentives for poor performance, and promoting diversity and experimentation. He also indicated the importance for individual schools to make a commitment to students’ higher cognitive performance by changing the academic goals, curriculum, instruction, and the role of the teacher. Schmoker (1999) wrote that at the “state and local level, it is paramount that educators select, and then provide a clear, simple set of standards for every teacher that corresponds richly with the assessments by which educators and the communities will judge the progress” (p. 74).

The Instructional Services Department of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2001) documented that a Standard Course of Study has been in effect in North Carolina since 1898. This curriculum has been revised every five to seven years since that time to reflect the changing needs of students.

The Instructional Services Department of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2001) strongly endorses, encourages and supports the concept of integration among various disciplines. The endorsement of this concept allows “local school districts, schools, and classroom teachers to be able to develop curricular units that will be meaningful to the teachers and students at the classroom level” (p. 5). However, the state still has the responsibility to “set quality curriculum and performance standards and to develop models of integration that link curriculum, instruction, and assessment” (p. 5).

The purpose of these standards is to “guarantee that all students have equal access to the same basic curriculum. If public education is an avenue to equal opportunity, high standards must be set for all students” (p. 4). The standards in this Standard Course of Study did not prescribe how schools should be organized or how teachers should teach; it “sets standards against which schools and teachers may judge their success” (p. 5). Carr and Harris (2001) indicated that standards cannot be effective by themselves. Successful changes will occur “when all aspects of the local curriculum are linked through a purposeful, coherent system of processes and products” (p. 1).

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe how one identified elementary school made significant progress toward meeting high standards and developing characteristics

that were instrumental in assisting the school to be recognized as a School of Distinction. The overall research question guiding the study was: “How did a small elementary school in rural northeastern North Carolina become a School of Distinction?” This case study identified characteristics within the school that promoted high student achievement.

I discussed the strategies used by the selected school, and described how each of the following domains contributed toward high student achievement: principal leadership, teacher involvement, class size, student achievement, and parental involvement. These domains formed the theoretical framework that provided a foundation for this study because they were specific areas that emerged from the literature that contributed to a school being recognized as successful. I wanted to find out what strategies assisted the school in being recognized as a School of Distinction. Based on identified characteristics, I described the school and identified those characteristics that had contributed to the success of the school.

### Overall Research Design

A descriptive case study design was used to describe the school and develop answers to the overall-guiding question of what led to the success of the school. Based on domains identified in the review of literature, subordinate questions relating to the development of the overall-guiding question included: (1) In what way does the principal’s leadership contribute to the school’s success?; (2) In what ways do the teachers’ involvement contribute to the school’s success?; (3) Does class size contribute to success?; (4) What happens in this school to promote student achievement?; (5) In what ways are parents involved in supporting their child’s education?; and (6) What other

characteristics contribute to this school's effectiveness? A detailed description of the school's features, are also described.

Through interviews, observations, and examination of school documents, contributing characteristics that led toward a School of Distinction status are described. This study focuses on the characteristics that made a school successful. I provided a rich, thick, detailed description of this school by showing through the review of literature, and data collection and analysis, characteristics that have enabled this school to reach its high level of achievement.

Case studies according to Hamel (1993), and Yin (1994) are the "preferred strategy, when 'how' and '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" (p. 1). Yin also described case study as "contributing uniquely to our knowledge of individual organizational, social, and political phenomena (p. 2). His philosophy was supported by Hamel (1993), and Stake (1994), who focused on the design and analysis of the case study's problem being studied.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study focuses on characteristics that contributed to a school reaching a high level of success. Educators all over America strive to educate students by helping them to reach high levels of achievement, become successful productive citizens and lifelong learners. In order to prepare students, educators must structure the learning environment. Studies have been conducted on schools and classrooms in efforts to identify characteristics that contribute to learning environments in high achieving and successful schools.

George Weber (1971) conducted a study on two high achieving schools in Harlem, one in Missouri, and one in Los Angeles, that were successful in meeting the needs of children from low income families to soar in reading. Wilbur Brookover and Larry Lezotte (1979), and Ron Edmonds (1979) used the research of Weber to conduct further studies on high achieving schools that later grew into the effective school movement. This movement recognized a list of factors describing a high achieving school, of which the principal as an educational leader was included.

Studies conducted by Butterworth and Weinstein (1996), Boyer (1995), and Goodlad (1983) were used to discuss the impact that the principal has on student achievement and the school's success. Barth (1989), Rosenholtz (1989), Goodlad (1984), and Little (1982) have conducted research on teacher involvement and its impact on student achievement and the success of the school.

A number of other investigators (e.g., Boyer 1995; Goodlad 1983; and Griffin 1990) have contributed to an increased interest in enhancing student motivation and achievement. Also among those are Glass and Smith (1978); Griffith (1996); and Finn and Achilles (1999) with their contribution on class size. Epstein (1992a, 1992b, 1986); Becker and Epstein (1982); and Epstein and Dauber (1991) have made significant contributions on the impact that parental involvement has on student achievement. These studies along with others introduced in Chapter 2, provide the foundation for the five domains that have been associated with high achievement and successful schools. The following domains were the focus of this study: (a) principal as instructional leader; (b) teacher involvement; (c) class size; (d) student achievement; and (e) parental



involvement. To understand and enhance these domains in an elementary school could assist other educators in working toward a level of distinction in their setting.

Themes were identified around the five central domains presented in Figure 1. I developed this model to illustrate the connection that each domain has upon the others within a school and how one domain impacts the others in order to achieve School of Distinction status.

### Terminology and Definitions

The following terminology and definitions are presented to indicate their meaning in this study. All terminology and definition with the exception of domains and themes were taken from Public Schools of North Carolina: Division of Accountability Services (2001).

**ABCs:** The ABCs accountability program sets growth and performance standards for North Carolina public schools. The ABCs focuses on strong Accountability with an emphasis on high educational standards; teaching the Basics; and maximum local Control.

**Achievement:** The term means measurement and comparison of successful areas of academic accomplishments based on success on the North Carolina ABCs.

**Achievement Levels:** This term measures achievement level performance relative to student performance standards established by teachers. The levels are determined by teachers' evaluation of students, independent of test performance. These assigned levels are then linked to student test scores to identify expected levels of student performance at each grade level.

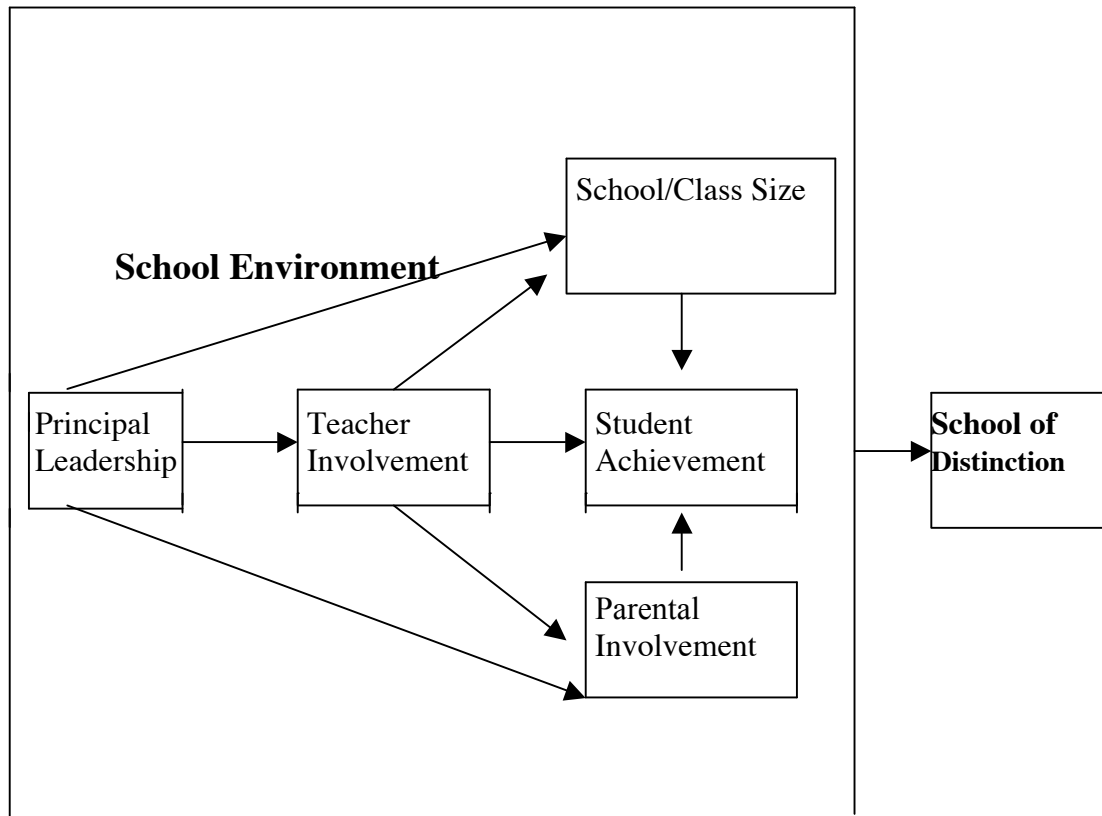


Figure 1. Indicators for School of Distinction.

District: The term district in this study refers to any convenient territorial division or subdivision of a county, created for the purpose of maintaining within its boundaries one or more public schools.

Domains: According to Weller and Romney (1988), a domain is defined as being comprised of a set of related ideas or items which form a larger category. For the purpose of this study, domains will consist of the following factors: principal leadership, teacher involvement, class size, student achievement, and parental involvement.

End-of- Grade Tests (EOG): Curriculum-based tests specifically aligned to North Carolina's Standard Course of Study to measure the achievement of North Carolina students. These tests have strong emphasis on higher-order thinking skills and are closely aligned with national curriculum standards.

Exemplary Growth: An exemplary school is one that attains exemplary growth and gain standards calculated by the North Carolina Department of Education testing program. This growth is required to be approximately 10% greater than the expected growth.

Expected Growth: Schools expected growth or gain means one year's academic growth for one year of instruction.

Standard Course of Study (SCS): The North Carolina state curriculum.

School of Distinction: A North Carolina school that had at least 80% to 89% of its students performing at or above grade level (i. e., in Achievement Levels III or IV).

School of Excellence: A school that made expected growth or gain and had at least 90 % of its students performing at or above grade level.

Themes: According to Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), theme in case study research is “An inference that a feature of a case is salient and characteristic of the case” (p. 772).

### Significance of the Study

This study was an investigation of how a small elementary school in rural northeastern North Carolina became a School of Distinction. The rich detailed description of this school’s features and characteristics will provide valuable guidance to other educators who can learn from its experiences. The researcher described and identified characteristics that are critical when working to create a high achieving school. In order to do this I wanted to know more about, and understand what was happening inside this school. I wanted to know the characteristics that were present in this school that enabled it to achieve a high level of distinction. The inquiry sought to explore, discover, and describe the school and organize findings around the domain characteristics identified from the literature.

This school made exemplary growth for the school years 1997-98 and 1998-99. In school year 1999-00 and 2000-01 the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction recognized this school as being a School of Distinction. In 2001-2002 the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction recognized this school as a School of Excellence. This school’s involvement with certain characteristics had caused it to receive the recognition as School of Distinction. Specific actions in this school were worthy of documenting, describing, and possibly replicating.

Researchers have validated many factors associated with why schools have been recognized as excellent or high performing. In this study I identified specific characteristics that emerged as contributors to achieving this level of distinction for one particular school. This study will serve as a framework for other schools with similar demographics wishing to focus on high student achievement.

### Organization of the Study

I identified and examined from the literature and analyzed data, characteristics that described how an elementary school reaches a high level of achievement. The document is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the topic, by examining the national, regional, and state perspectives on reaching a high level of achievement, purpose of the study, overall research design, theoretical framework, definitions, significance of the study, and the organization of the study.

Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature related to the principal's leadership, teacher involvement, class size, student achievement, and parental involvement as they relate to the success of student achievement.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology, significance of the study, research design, limitations and advantages, the setting, the participants, assurance of confidentiality, data collection procedures and method of data analysis.

Chapter 4 contains the findings of all interviews, observations and the review of documentation. Data analysis related to the overall research question and the five subordinate questions. The chapter also contains a detailed description of the features of the school.

Chapter 5 contains discussion of the findings and conclusions of the study. It also contains implications for practice and recommendations for future studies.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature assisted me in describing one rural elementary school's experience in becoming a School of Distinction based on the North Carolina ABC standards. There have been many studies describing excellent, high-performing, and successful schools nationally. Many studies were examined in order to gather information concerning the reasons schools were successful in reaching high levels of recognition. However, there have been very few studies that specifically look at a school becoming a School of Distinction based on the North Carolina ABC standards. Therefore, this review of literature was developed based on research findings of successful schools, but focused on a School of Distinction in North Carolina. In order to gather information about characteristics that have been successful in improving student achievement and causing the school to receive a high level of recognition, the following research studies are critical.

This chapter presents the review of literature that was developed based on research findings of successful elementary schools. In order to identify studies on successful schools the following keywords and phrases were used: (a) high-performing schools, (b) student achievement, (c) leadership, and (d) elementary schools. Based on the literature review, the following areas emerged more often as characteristics that contributed to the academic success of a school: (a) principal's leadership; (b) teacher involvement; (c) class size; (d) student achievement; and (e) parental involvement. The chapter is organized around the characteristics identified in the research. I examined each domain and reported on it in more details within this chapter.

The first domain discussed was principal leadership. To begin identifying characteristics of successful schools, I began with the studies of Weber (1971) and Brookover and Lezotte (1979). Building on the studies of Weber, and Brookover and Lezotte, were studies conducted by Boyer (1995), Butterworth and Weinstein (1996), and Goodlad (1983). Additional researchers' studies, commentaries, and opinions were also discussed.

The second domain discussed was teacher involvement. According to studies conducted by Rosenholtz (1989), Goodlad (1984), Little (1982), and Barth (1989) teacher involvement is crucial to the success of a school. Other researchers and educators were discussed concerning their studies and opinions on teacher involvement and its relationship to high achieving schools.

The third domain consisted of a discussion on class size. The positive effects that class sizes have on the success of a school is evident by a study conducted by Glass and Smith (1978). Studies by Fergurson (1991), (Finn & Achilles, 1999) [Student Teacher Achievement Ratio, Project STAR], Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE), Maier, Molnar, Percy, Smith and Zahorik (1997), are just a few other studies that were discussed indicating the impact that small class size has on student achievement and the school's success.

The fourth domain for discussion was student achievement. Student achievement according to Maehr and Buck (1993) is a standard of success that produces improvement and "its measures are enhanced skills, dependent understanding and greater knowledge" (p. 44). Other researchers have indicated similar findings (Weber, 1971; Sarason, 1971;



Goodlad, 1984; Boyer, 1995). Gardner (1993), and Campbell (1997), were briefly focused on concerning learning theories and Bruer (1997), for metacognitive skills.

The last domain discussed was parental involvement. Rosenholtz (1989), Epstein (1986, 1992a, 1992b), Epstein and Dauber (1991), and Griffith (1996), have indicated that parental involvement, has a positive impact on a student's achievement. Parents, according to these researchers are the most important persons in the lives of their children. Other researchers and educators who recognize parental involvement, as a key factor for improving learning were also discussed.

#### Organization of Literature Review

Through research of the literature, this review and synthesis of related literature was found through databases, books' references, previous studies, and references of studies once found. All searches were conducted by typing in the key words and phrases. The dissertation research covered the years 1995 to 2001. The educational research literature was covered from 1960 to 2001. The theoretical literature and professional commentary about high-performing schools and exemplary schools were reviewed before narrowing the focus to specific characteristics identified as being major contributors to the successful academic achievement of the elementary school.

#### Principal Leadership

The principal's leadership is key to the school's success. It is important for the principal's role to be a facilitator, motivator, encourager, instructional, and educational leader. These are vital characteristics in promoting student achievement and the success of a school.

Weber (1971) conducted a study of four schools that were successful in meeting the needs of elementary students in the area of reading. Weber's descriptive study provided details as to what characteristics made the schools successful. Two of the schools were located in Harlem, one in Missouri, and one in Los Angeles. Strong principal leadership was listed among the eight characteristics that led to successful schools. Weber indicated that all four schools had "clearly identifiable individuals who would be regarded as outstanding leaders by most people who are knowledgeable about the public schools" (p. 26). The principals in all four schools were not only leaders of the overall school activities, but they also led the charge for the reading program. The principals in each school kept their staffs focused on the program and monitored it.

Brookover and Lezotte (1979) conducted research on eight elementary schools. Six of the schools were characterized by improving student achievement and two were characterized by showing a decline in student achievement. The researchers collected data through questionnaires, observations, and interviews of principals, superintendents, and teachers. Their study was designed to find out "what changes occurred in the "improving" or "declining" schools that coincided with the changes in measured achievement" (pp. 1-2).

Based on data sources, the researchers indicated that in the six schools characterized by improving student achievement, the principal was "clearly an educational leader" (p. 53). It was also evident that "very clear identification of specific goals and objectives as identified by both the state and the local school district" were monitored by the principal (p. 53). Other factors that were important to improving student

achievement were high expectations, parental involvement, individualized instruction, and accountability.

Since Weber's (1971), and Brookover and Lezotte's (1979) research, later research studies (Boyer, 1995; Goodlad, 1983; & Griffin, 1990) have shown that the role and function of school-level administrators in curriculum improvement, leads to a successful school. The principal according to Boyer (1995) is the "lead teacher" who guides the school by inspiration to create a feeling of community in the school (p. 31). Maehr and Buck (1993) indicated that the definition of any course of study for students is "determined by a wide range of factors, but heavily influenced by management and leadership" of the principal (p. 47).

Reaching high levels of recognition should begin with developing a good understanding of the role of the principal. The basic question to ask here "How does the principal contribute to the school's success?" Smith and Andrews (1989) indicated that research has suggested that, "professionals associate the conditions under which they work with job satisfaction. Professionals who express positive feelings about their working conditions also appear to be more productive workers" (p. 2). They continued to discuss how school effectiveness research used findings such as professional job satisfaction to focus on research efforts on teacher satisfaction with the workplace and student achievement. Their research noted a powerful association between teacher satisfaction with their role as classroom teachers and the amount of growth in student academic achievement. Their research concluded that "teachers' perception of the school principal as an instructional leader is the most powerful determinant of teachers' satisfaction with their professional role" (p. 2).

### *Instructional Leader*

The principal is the instructional leader at the school. It is the responsibility of the principal to be actively involved in leading the staff, students, and parents in school improvement. Goodlad (1983) stated that the emphasis rest on the belief that the school is the logical unit for improvement in terms of planning, implementing, studying, reviewing and institutionalizing curriculum change. Goodlad further stated that the areas previously listed are built from the understanding that the contact between the curriculum and the student takes place in classrooms and in schools. He also stated the importance of the leadership from the district level as well as the school level to assist with curriculum change. The district, according to Goodlad (1983), is responsible for “providing support for curriculum improvement, ensuring material support for school-level work and monitoring the process of school change. However, the work of curriculum change is logically the work of teachers and administrators in schools and classrooms” (p.195).

Griffin (1990) suggested that, “leadership at the school level usually emphasizes curriculum planning skills, knowledge of curriculum-related literature, and maintaining up-to-date understanding of advances in curriculum material. Griffin continued to emphasize that the principal’s role in curriculum improvement is to possess the knowledge and skills that would be essential in being the curriculum expert leading the school toward success. He further stated that most leadership research conducted in low-performing systems-organizations in trouble, “generally attributes their problems in motivation, morale, communication, trust, and performance to the way a leader is working and assumes that a change in approach or style will correct things” (p. 102).

Glickman (1991) defines the principal of a successful or high-performing school as “not

only the instructional leader but the coordinator of teachers as instructional leaders” (p. 7). What then would a high-performing system look like? Evans (1996) refers to high-performing systems and schools as successful organizations where a wide range of leadership styles exists among their leaders. An important style according to Butterworth and Weinstein (1996) is the principal as motivator and being able to get all stakeholders actively involved in the learning process. Maehr and Fyans (1989) had earlier indicated that leaders affect motivation by establishing a motivating culture. Maehr and Buck (1993), and Sarson (1995) had similar views on establishing a motivating culture in a school. They suggested that the culture should reflect the three interdependent cultures of teachers, students, and parents. Thus, Butterworth and Weinstein’s (1996) research described how the collaboration between a principal and researcher captured a motivating principal involving teachers, students, and parents.

#### *Principal as Motivator*

Butterworth and Weinstein’s (1996) study involved a collaborative project that began in a graduate seminar on school reform. Butterworth was on sabbatical and was attending Weinstein’s seminar. Butterworth and Weinstein wanted to share their perception of a small private school that was known for the principal encouraging, supporting, and providing rich motivational opportunities for the staff, students, and parents. Butterworth and Weinstein used an ecological perspective to identify the vision and key processes the principal used to create and maintain a motivating climate for teachers, students, and parents. The authors further stated that, “a systemic focus is particularly critical given increased interest in the environmental factors that enhance motivation” (p. 58). Maehr and Midgley (1991), reported that administrative

contributions are rarely examined in terms of motivation across the school community. They further indicated that facilitating opportunities at a school wide level for motivating learning and in building on interrelationships in the motivations of teacher, parent, and student, rarely occurs.

The focus of Butterworth and Weinstein (1996) suggested a framework for the nature of administrative leadership that promotes and leads to a motivating school environment. The purpose of their study was to describe the environment that motivated the engagement of the school community. They suggested that, “the rich motivational opportunities derived not only from the school’s small size but also from the principal’s effort to maximize engagement for all participants” (p. 58).

The authors described this wealth of motivational opportunities through four ecological principles: (a) the development of diverse niches that demand student involvement and adaptation; (b) expansion of resources to include all stakeholders; (c) interdependence; and (d) balancing and monitoring (p. 58).

This project indicated that the principal in this school was supportive, visible, and constantly interacting with teachers, students, and parents. The principal according to Butterworth and Weinstein (1996) utilized the four ecological principles “to describe the leadership provided, and its implications for motivational opportunities across the school community” (p. 71). This motivation according to Butterworth and Weinstein will “stimulate and value the special talents of all participants in the school setting, including staff and parents, so that continued intellectual growth is modeled by every individual” (p. 72).

The vignettes written by the principal would allow the authors to move beyond developing a list of effective practices. The authors also suggested that the principal's behavior toward motivational outcome was viewed as theoretical and hypothesis generating due to their limited and largely anecdotal evidence. Even though the practices of this private school were innovative, the authors questioned generalizability to public schools.

In summary, "despite thousands of empirical studies yielding hundreds of definitions of leadership, there is still not consensus about it" (Evans 1996, p. 116). Lambert (1998) defined leadership as the learning process among participants in a community process that leads toward a shared sense of purpose. Leadership capacity refers to the breadth of participation in leadership and the depth of skill that teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members bring to the work.

The vast majority of similar studies (Boyer, 1995; Goodlad, 1983; and Griffin, 1990) have confirmed that an involved principal in curriculum improvement leads to a successful school. Butterworth and Weinstein (1996) suggested that rich motivational opportunities should be derived from the principal's effort to maximize engagement for teachers, students, and parents.

### Teacher Involvement

The role for the teachers during educational reform and restructuring, theoretical conceptions of bureaucratic authority and control and top-down approaches to school improvement is often changing. Key to this change perspective is the professionalization of teaching (Barth, 1989; Elmore, 1990; Murphy, 1991; Tyack, 1990). This professionalization included teachers' participation in school-wide decision making,

heightened discretion and autonomy, and power and influence in technical matters, as opposed to performing only managerial, school matters, (Duke & Gansneder, 1990; Hallinger, Murphy, & Hausman, 1991; Rosenholtz, 1989; Shedd & Bacharach, 1991).

Weber (1971) indicated that the quality of teaching is important to a successful school. His study on successful schools showed that none of the schools, in his study, had a group of teachers he considered outstanding. The teachers as stated by Weber were “on the whole, above average in competence but not strikingly so” (p. 29). He stressed the point that “outstanding teachers can teach a beginning reading program successful with any materials and under a wide range of conditions” (p. 29). However, at the other end of the spectrum, “poor teachers will fail with the best materials and procedures” (p. 29). He concluded by stating that successful schools “were somewhat favored by the quality of their teaching, but some mediocre and even poor teaching was observed” (p. 29).

#### *Teacher Practices*

Goodlad (1984) and his colleagues studied a national sample of 38 schools involving 1,350 teachers in their classrooms. His conclusions concerning classroom life were as follows: (1) the dominant pattern of classroom organization is a group to which the teacher most frequently relates as a whole; (2) the teacher is virtually autonomous with respect to classroom decisions; (3) most of the time the teacher is engaged in either frontal teaching, monitoring students’ seatwork, or conducting quizzes; (4) a small amount of praise and correction of students’ performance occurs, along with a small amount of guidance given from the teacher on how to do better the next time; (5) students are engaged in a narrow range of classroom activities; and (6) the teacher has little



influence on involvement in school-wide and other classroom matters (Goodlad, 1984, pp. 123-124).

One of the patterns that emerged from Goodlad's (1984) nationwide study was that the "teacher came through as coach, quarterback, referee, and rule maker" regardless of how he approached the classroom trying to describe what was occurring (p. 108).

Lambert (1998) took a similar position as Goodlad by indicating that "a comprehensive view of authentic relationships with children requires that teaching roles expand to include teacher as facilitator, mentor, coach, and advisor" (p. 23). This type pattern did not allow students to develop effective team skills. It only allowed them to have the same position within a group. Goodlad (1984) indicated that "no cohesion and cooperation for achievement of a school purpose" would occur among students unless teachers design classroom activities to promote effective team skills among students (p. 108). The elementary teachers in the study reported having a lot of "control over setting goals and objectives; use of classroom space; scheduling time and instructional materials; selecting, content topics, and skills to be taught; and grouping students for instruction" (pp. 109 & 110). Goodlad reported that no matter how he observed the way "teachers related to students or how students related to teachers, the overwhelming impression was one of affective neutrality-a relationship neither abrasive nor joyous" (p.111).

Goodlad (1984) noted that he observed little punitive behavior on the part of the teachers. He indicated that, "there may be reason to worry about the conforming demands of school and to wonder why there is not more enthusiasm and laughter, the teachers were not regarded by the students as brutes or ogres" (p. 111). Students revealed that they perceived their teacher as being more positive than negative when it involved concerns

for their students. This perception varied from classroom to classroom because of the way teachers conducted class activities.

### *Classroom Activities*

A component of Goodlad's (1984) study on how teachers conduct classroom activities revealed that time is very important when one considers learning. He also indicated that more efficient ways should be used to handle routines. He stated, "By learning to manage the classroom with a minimum of time lost to social activity and controlling students' behavior, teachers can increase the amount of time spent on learning and presumably, enhance achievement" (p. 101).

Continuing with Goodlad's (1984) nationwide study, he indicated that "secondary teachers did not know how to vary instructional procedures, they did not want to, or they had difficulty doing so" (p. 106). However, elementary teachers varied classroom instructional procedures and because of that "early elementary grades are those that have held up nationwide, on tests of pupil achievement" (p. 106). Pupil achievement according to Goodlad will continue to increase when teachers begin to work more collaboratively.

### *Collaboration*

Goodlad (1984) continued to analyze the working conditions of the teachers. He noted that teachers functioned independently. Due to teachers working independently, he stated that "their autonomy seemed to be exercised in a context more of isolation than of rich professional dialogue" (p. 186). Inside the schools he studied, he noticed that, "teacher-to-teacher links for mutual assistance or collaborative school improvement were weak or non-existent" (p. 186). Teachers indicated that they had never observed one of their colleagues teaching. Goodlad also pointed out that "over 75% of the teachers

indicated that they were greatly influenced in what they taught by two success—their own background, interest, and experiences; and students’ interest and experience” (p. 186). Teachers also indicated that they did not work together on school-wide problems. He indicated that there was little information in the data collected to “suggest active, ongoing exchanges of ideas and practices across the school, between groups of teachers, or between individuals in the same school” (p. 187).

Little (1982) observed four types of collaboration of teachers in successful schools: talking, observing, teaching or disseminating, and planning. However, Little warned that superficial examples of collaboration exist. She indicated that forms of collegiality involving assistance such as, sharing and storytelling represent weak links and are likely to be insignificant and have little impact on the culture of the school. “Joint work involves deeper forms of interaction, such as joint planning, observation, and experimentation, and is dependent on the structural organization of task, time, and other resources in ways not characteristics of other forms of collegiality” (pp. 14-15).

Collaboration according to Cousins, Ross, and Maynes (1994), may take place at any or all phases of the teaching learning process (i.e., planning, objective setting, delivery of instruction and assessment).

Rosenholtz’s (1989) study of 78 schools in Tennessee supports many of Goodlad’s observations. Sixty-five of the 78 schools were described by Rosenholtz as “stuck” or “learning impoverished” for both teachers and students. She described stuck schools as not being involved with school-wide goals, teacher isolation occurred, limited time for teachers learning from one another, teachers were not sure about the curriculum and how to teach it; and not being committed to their jobs or the school.

Rosenholtz continued to emphasize that in her study, teachers had little attachment to their profession and to their students. They were more concerned about themselves. When it came to performing their job responsibilities, they followed their instincts. Finally she discussed how “teachers talked of frustration, failure, tedium and managed to transfer those attributes to the students about whom they complained” (p. 208).

### *Collegiality*

In a one-year study conducted by Little (1982), interviews were conducted with 105 teachers and 14 administrators from four relatively successful and two relatively unsuccessful schools. These schools were categorized as urban and desegregated (three were elementary, and three secondary). One elementary and one secondary were selected because of its high success and high involvement. Another elementary and secondary was selected because of its high success, low involvement. Finally, one elementary and one secondary school were selected because of its low success, high involvement. Overall, the schools were selected to represent different ranges in achievement and staff development.

Little found that in each of the six schools studied, each teacher was more or less firmly a part of “being a teacher” (p. 329). They concluded that the large array of interactions that were observed and “that could somehow be called collegial in character, four classes of interactions appeared crucial” (p. 331). Due to the involvement of continuous professional development the following areas appeared to be thoroughly achieved when (1) teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete discussion concerning teacher practices; (2) teachers are frequently observed and

provided with constructive feedback of their teaching; (3) teachers plan together and share materials; and (4) teachers learn from each other. In the successful schools, all four characteristics occurred throughout the building each school week.

In the elementary school selected as “high success, high involvement, as discussed by Little (1982), it was rare to be in the presence of teachers when they were not engaged in some discussion about classroom practices” (p. 332). The three remaining successful elementary schools’ “topics of discussion were more viable, but the distinguishing factor was the discussion about the business of teaching was generally permitted and sometimes encouraged in a range of locations” (pp. 332-333). However, in the less successful schools, “teachers were more likely to report that they restricted formal meetings to administrative business and were more likely to consider the faculty lounge off limits to serious topics” (p. 333). Teachers’ awareness of each other’s work and their willingness to help each other helps to increase the school staffs’ professionalism (Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989).

Lambert (1998) discussed that when professional growth occurs in an individual, it brings about change in one’s self-perception and their role and responsibilities. He continued by stating that when roles change, new behaviors of the staff emerge. He indicated that teachers, because of the change, “no longer see themselves as responsible only for their classrooms, but for the school as well” (p. 20).

### *Professionalism*

Barth (1989) wrote that, “too often teachers do what they do today because that is what they did yesterday or because that is what they think others expect them to do” (p. 49). Barth continued to emphasize the importance of teacher growth because it is closely

related to pupil growth. He continued to indicate, “probably nothing within a school has more impact on students in terms of skill’s development, self-confidence or classroom behavior than the personal and professional growth of their teachers” (p. 49).

According to Barth “great untapped opportunities for the professional development of teachers reside within the school and that the principal can be a catalyst assisting teacher growth” (p. 48). He further indicated that the principal can also have a negative or positive influence on a teacher’s professional growth.

Barth concluded by stating that, “teachers can become learners and can be extraordinarily effective in stimulating and promoting the development of other teachers” (p. 62). Due to this involvement suggested Barth, “these kinds of practices can have a significant influence on the culture of the school” (p. 62). These experiences according to Barth, makes it possible for a school to assist students and the school in being successful.

Teacher professionalism plays a very important role in education. The Good North Carolina Elementary School (1996) guide suggests the following:

Because professional teachers know that there is no standard formula for applying their expertise to meet student needs, they can never afford to stop learning and growing. In order to improve their ability to meet student needs, professional teachers constantly seek to upgrade their knowledge base and refine their practice. They keep up on the research literature. Perhaps most importantly, they consult with their colleagues on a day-to-day basis about specific classroom issues and the best strategies for handling them. In these ways, members of a profession develop a collective knowledge base, and the most effective practices are widely shared. In the professional model, students benefit because teachers are constantly

learning new things, sharing good ideas with each other, and refining their practice to be more responsive to the needs of individual students. (p. 190)

Carnegie's Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986), called for a "transformation of the environment for teaching" that would allow teachers to have professional autonomy, provide opportunities for them to participate with lead teachers, provide staff development and maintain small class sizes; in place of bureaucratically managed hierarchy, seek alternative leadership models, encourage site based participatory decision making; and balance the decision making with increased teacher accountability (p. 55).

In conclusion, research has indicated that a teacher's involvement is important to the success of a school (Weber, 1971; Goodlad, 1984). Rosenholtz (1989) supported Goodlad's (1984) observations by indicating that the role of the teacher is important to their profession, the students and the success of the school. Little (1982), and Cousins, Ross and Maynes (1994) revealed that teachers contribute to a school's success through joint planning, observations, experimentation, collaboration, and professionalism.

### Class Size

Researchers have used various techniques to study how class size affects the quality of education. They have looked at the relationship between class size and student achievement, and they have conducted various kinds of studies related to class size and its possible influence on educational practice. Gallagher (1993) stated that "If all the research on the best environments in which to . . . educate children could be boiled down to three words, they would be Small Is Beautiful" (p. 159).

### *Class Size and Student Achievement*

In 1978, Glass and Smith presented research findings on a meta-analysis study combining the results of 77 empirical studies pertaining to the relationship between class size and student achievement. Their research findings indicated that small classes resulted in higher achievement at all grade levels, especially when students were engaged in small class instruction for more than 100 hours per month and when student placement was carefully controlled. They found the major benefits of reducing class size occurred in the class where the numbers of students were fewer than 20. In their second study, they concluded that small classes were superior in terms of the students' participation, teacher attitude, and the quality of the instructional environment.

Of the many research studies conducted on class size, Glass and Smith's (1978) meta-analysis of research on the relationship of class size and achievement is the most widely cited and comprehensive. The two primary conclusions drawn from their study revealed that "reduced class-size can be expected to produce increased academic achievement" (p. iv) "and the major benefits from reduced class-size are obtained as size is reduced below 20 pupils" (p. v). They define class size "as the ratio of pupils to instructors, or instructional group size" (p. 9). Glass and Smith reviewed nearly 80 studies showing the relationship between class-size and achievement. The studies showed 700 comparisons of the achievement of smaller and larger classes. These comparisons were made from nearly 900,000 pupils of all ages and all types of school subjects. Nearly 100 comparisons of achievement formed the basis of the authors' conclusions about how class size is related to academic achievement. Their findings showed how an increase in



class size causes a decrease in achievement. Glass and Smith indicated that benefits grow as class size is reduced below 20.

### *Differences in Enrollments*

Finn and Achilles (1999) conducted a study that included students in grades K-3 during a four-year longitudinal study to show benefits of smaller schools and class size. In each school, K-3 students were randomly assigned to one of three class configurations: small classes with enrollments of 13-17 students, regular classes with an enrollments of 22-27 students, and regular classes with a full-time teacher's aid with 22-26 students. Teachers were also randomly assigned to classes each year. Students remained in the same type of class until they were in grade 3. The results of their studies (Finn, 1998; Finn & Achilles, 1999) indicated that there were differences among the three types of classes (small classes, regular classes, and regular classes with a full-time aid). Their results also indicated that the small classes outperformed the regular classes and the regular classes with the aides. They found no difference between the regular classes and classes with aides with respect to student performance. These results held for all students: white, minority, inner city, rural or urban. However, there was an even greater benefit for minority students and those attending inner-city schools. The effect size in achievement for minorities typically was about twice as large as for white students, resulting in reduction of the achievement gap. This research indicated that spending three or four years in small classes in grades K-3 has an enduring effect for at least five years after the intervention (Finn, 1998; Finn & Achilles, 1999).

Finn, Gerber, Achilles, Boyd-Zaharias (2000) presented additional analyses of the Tennessee Project, Student Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) data that included (1)

reanalysis of earlier data using the Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HML), (2) number of years in a small class and the effect it has on achievement, (3) carry-over effects to higher grades, and (4) strength of effects in terms of months of schooling. The HLM Analyses confirmed differences in favor of small classes in every grade. Students in regular classes and classes with aides still showed no significant differences in achievement. Students who were in small classes in K-3 still performed better than those who were in regular classes and regular classes with an aid when they were in grades, 4, 6, and 8. However, the number of years in small classes during the early grades was still important. These carry-over effects were significant for students who were in small classes for four years. During the K-3 years the effects increased from grade to grade in reading and mathematics. The impact for students in small classes also increased with each additional year they were in the class. As with the 1985-89 study Finn, et al., (2000) continued to indicate that spending three or four years in small classes in grades K-3 has an enduring effect for at least five years after the intervention.

#### *Advantages of Small Class Size*

Class size reduction changes numerous features of the classroom situation. There are fewer students to distract each other. Reduced class size also reduces the level of noise in a class. Each student in a reduced size class gets more attention on average from the teacher. Molnar, Percy, Smith and Zahorik (1998) explained the positive effects of class size reduction on student achievement. They continued by explaining that in smaller classes each student receives a larger portion of the educational resources represented by the teacher's instructional time and consequently, learns more, which leads towards higher student achievement.

The Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program (Maier, Molnar, Percy, Smith, & Zahorik, 1997) was a statewide effort in Wisconsin. The purpose of SAGE was to promote academic achievement of schools serving low-income students in grades K-3. One of the components of SAGE was to reduce class size. According to Maier et al., (1997), the SAGE legislation defines class size as “the number of pupils assigned to a regular classroom teacher” (p. 2).

The SAGE evaluation study used teacher interviews, classroom observations, and other data-gathering techniques to study what happens in smaller classes, and the researchers suggested that students benefit from more individualized instruction and attention. The teachers also knew each of their students better, and kept track of how each student was engaging in the learning task assigned. Molnar et al. (1998) found that this type knowledge enabled the teacher to intervene more effectively to help the individual student make progress.

In another study conducted on the Texas education system, Ferguson (1991) found significant relationships among teacher quality, class size, and student achievement. For students in grades 1 through 7, Ferguson used student/teacher ratio as a measure of class size, and found that the district student achievement fell as student/teacher ratio increased for every student above an 18 to 1 ratio. He also found that measures of teacher quality (that is teacher literacy skills and professional experience) were strongly related to higher scores for students.

To further understand class size, it is important to know that a minor reduction in class size may not be a significant reduction. The pattern of research only favors class size reduction if it is substantial and brings the class size below a certain threshold.

Reducing class size from 30 to 25, for example, may well have no effect. Project STAR's research indicated that class size must be below 20 in order to make a real difference.

Hanushek (1998) concluded that reducing class size should not be expected to produce better student performance. His examination found that the relationships between various school expenditures including class size reduction and student achievement are remarkably weak. However, Greenwald, Hedges and Laine (1996) have used different analytical techniques to examine the same data and have disagreed with Hanushek's conclusion arguing that the data showed important effects for student achievement including the influence of smaller classes. Finn (1998) and Achilles, Nyne, Zaharias, Fulton, and Cain (1996) questioned the limitations of the basic analytical approach used by Greenwald et al., because it relies on student/teacher ratios as a measure for class size, it usually groups the data for all grade levels together, and the data represents student achievement at the level of school or school district average scores instead of representing individual students placed in larger or smaller classes.

In conclusion, according to the available research on class size and how it impacts student achievement, the large majority of studies indicate that smaller is better. Research through Project STAR, the SAGE Program, and studies conducted by Glass and Smith (1978), Fergurson (1991), and Finn and Achilles (1999) have documented findings that class size does impact on student achievement that leads to overall school achievement. Project STAR's and SAGE's, research findings revealed the following: In project STAR, the larger classes with instructional teacher assistants did not yield the same benefits as the smaller classes; whereas the SAGE program showed an increase in student

achievement in classrooms which had a 15:1 and 30:2 student teacher(s) ratio (Achilles et al. 1996 & Molnar et al. 1998).

Hanushek (1998) was of the opinion that class size should not be expected to produce better student performance. However, far more studies concluded that small classes assisted with the quality of the instructional program, therefore, leading to increased student achievement (Finn & Achilles, 1999; Glass & Smith, 1978; Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996).

In studies conducted by Goodlad (1984), support was given to class size reduction by showing that teachers can increase the amount of time spent on learning and achievement will be enhanced if classes are smaller. Goodlad continued to state that varied instructional procedures would also increase pupil achievement.

#### Student Achievement

It is important to encourage students and to recognize them for their accomplishments in curricular and extra-curricular activities. Studies have been conducted which suggests that a higher level of achievement is revealed when students are given immediate feedback and are rewarded for their accomplishments. Based on his nationwide research, Goodlad (1984) stated, “learning appears to be enhanced when students understand what is expected of them, get recognition for their work, learn quickly about their errors and receive guidance in improving their performance” (p. 111). In his findings, he reported “over half of the upper elementary students reported that many students did not know what they were supposed to do in class” (p.112). Boyer (1995) indicated that the school’s environment has to also be appropriate for students to experience achievement.

### *School Environment*

In a study involving successful schools, Weber (1971) emphasized that the schools he studied had a good atmosphere that contributed toward student achievement. He further indicated that it is “difficult to escape the conviction that the order, sense of purpose, relative quiet, and pleasure in learning of these schools played a role in their achievement” (p. 26).

Boyer (1995) also described how a school’s environment has to be appropriate for an elementary school in order to contribute toward student achievement. He described school environment as a formal learning place where all teaching and learning must occur. He stated that having an environment conducive to learning gives priority to language and proposes a curriculum with coherence. He also indicated that a school environment should be basic because it “identifies proven components of an effective education and brings them all together in a single institution -- the Basic School” (p. 3). A learning community appears to be an important quality for a successful school. Boyer described a community for learning as “a place where staff and students, along with parents, have a shared vision of what the institution is seeking to accomplish” (p. 15). Goodlad (1984) indicated a similar finding from his research that “the school is to be in the eyes of parents and students, a nurturing, caring place” (p. 62).

To further understand the importance of a nurturing school, Maehr and Buck (1993) wrote teachers, students, administrators or parents will readily discuss clear notions about what the school stresses when asked about school climate and goals. These areas are assessed in the form of questionnaires, rating scales, portrayal and replication.

They indicated that these forms of assessment are important in order to have a “further understanding of the nature and nurture of school culture” (p. 45).

Maehr and Buck (1993) further stated that “goals are affected if not created, by how learning tasks are structured, organized, and managed--and can be changed in ways that will enhance the investment of students” (p. 46). They continued to emphasize that the “purpose and goals that students adopt for learning are affected by the learning environment” (p. 46). These learning environments are then affected by the action of the leader and staff, or the learning environment may be affected by inaction.

The point the authors made is that teachers alone do not decide what students do in their classrooms. They found that “decisions flow from a shared conception of what schooling is that is embodied in and created by certain policies, practices, and procedures” (p. 46). They also found that the “scheduling of the school day and school activities is an important element in the determination of the learning environment of the school day” (p. 50).

### *Student Motivation*

Maehr and Buck (1993) stated that the “ultimate bottom line in schools is and has to be the creation of a student who learns, and who acquires a continuing motivation to learn” (p. 43). They discussed goals that were very closely associated with student investment in learning. They continued by stating that these goals reflect, “how the individual’s beliefs, perceptions, and thoughts about self and the situation affect his or her motivation to learn” (p.43). The two goals that they considered to have emerged as far as student motivation and learning are concerned were ability goals and task goals.

According to the authors, “ability goals represent a focus on students’ demonstration of ability relative to others. This means when a student pursues an ability goal, she is likely to be primarily concerned with her performance relative to other students” (p. 44). The authors define task goal as representing “a concern with the process of learning and the development of skills, knowledge, and understanding. The standard of success is improvement and its measures are enhanced skills, dependent understanding, and greater knowledge” (p. 44). “A task goal is rooted in the proposition that doing the task, in and of itself, is the source of motivation” (p. 47).

According to Goodlad (1984), students worked independently at all levels but primarily on identical tasks, rather than on a variety of activities to accommodate their differences (p. 105). In the study conducted by Weber (1971) on four successful schools, he indicated that with regard to the achievement of students, all four schools demonstrated high expectations as a characteristic contributing to successful schools. He also indicated that individualization and classroom participation were contributing factors to successful schools. He referred to individualization in the sense of “having each child work at a different level” (p. 27). The nationwide study conducted by Goodlad (1984) revealed that at the elementary level, about 55% of the students who participated in the study reported that they did not participate at all in choosing what they did in class (p. 109).

### *Classroom Participation*

Sarason, Davidson, Lighthall, Waite and Ruebush (1960) did an observational study on anxiety with children in an elementary school. Observers were placed in classrooms to note anything that a teacher said that would help shed light on the whys



and hows of learning and thinking. These observers recorded anything relevant to the following question: (1) if a child did not know something, what was the teacher's response to find out the child's thought processes, (2) how frequently did a teacher say, "you don't know" and move on, and (3) how frequently did the teacher ask intellectual inquiry or problem solving questions. The observers noticed that discussions did not take place. They concluded that the task of the student was to get the right answer. How the answer was gotten did not appear to be important. They also found that no matter what the problem or question might be, there might have been, a correct way of thinking about and answering it. Finally they concluded that thinking was not a difficult matter.

Sarason (1971) was of the opinion that "life in the classroom could be viewed and understood from different vantage points, one of the most important ones is that which looks at the implicit theories teachers have about thinking and learning" (p. 181). Sarason further concluded that, "teachers are very aware of their own experiences of differences in characteristics between dull and exciting conditions of intellectual activity" (p. 182). However, he continued when it related to the same kind of identity between their pupils and themselves involving the same conditions, the teachers would find the conditions boring. It is for this reason that he sums up by stating "classroom learning is primarily determined by teachers' perceived differences between children and adults, a fact that makes recognition of commonalties almost impossible" (p. 182). He pointed out with much emphasize that "children know relatively little about how a teacher thinks about the classroom" (p. 185). He continued to discuss the importance of teachers involving students in planning classroom activities.

Sarason's (1971) overall opinion on enhancing student motivation and achievement was to allow students the opportunity to participate in modification of the curriculum, or achievement objectives. Clark and Yinger (1980), shared Sarason's viewpoint when they stated no matter how elaborate and complete a teachers classroom plans may be, unless the students are fully aware of what to do and how to do it, the classroom plans cannot be carried out. They continued to suggest that students must be "brought to a commitment to cooperation in the process . . . but communication of plans to students is almost never addressed (pp. 21-22).

### *Learning Theories*

According to Gardner (1993), the implication of The Theory of Multiple Intelligence is that learning and teaching should focus on the particular intelligences of each person. He stated as an example that an individual with a strong spatial or musical intelligences should be encouraged to develop these abilities. Gardner further pointed out that the different intelligences represent different content domains as well as learning modalities. A further implication of the Theory of Multiple Intelligence is that assessment of abilities should measure all forms of intelligence, not just linguistic and logical-mathematical.

Campbell (1997) suggested that when teachers promote self-directed learning, in which students ask researchable questions; identify varied resources; and initiate, implement, and bring closure to a learning activity, this helps to draw on numerous multiple intelligences for the students. Campbell suggested that when this type of teaching and learning takes place, students discover meaning and understanding to material being taught. Greenhawk's (1997) position on multiple intelligences was that

teachers should teach students about the theory of multiple intelligences, then ask them to think about which intelligences they used during different activities. This method of teaching continued Greenhawk would provide an opportunity for the students to reflect on the intelligence or intelligences that assisted them in understanding the activity. It also provides the students the opportunity to be instructed in different types of teaching styles from the teacher, thus enhancing their learning styles.

### *Metacognitive Skills*

Research on metacognitive skills shows how the skills enhance student learning. Theorist John Bruer (1997) stated that the effective learners do more than acquire knowledge of facts and concepts. They have an awareness of how they are learning and use this awareness to monitor their own thought processes and to change their approach to fit the situation or activity. Some researchers argue that “teaching thinking skills, learning strategies, problem solving, and creativity can make a difference as fundamental as how the brain itself works” (Languis, 1998). Bruer (1997) stated that students should be involved in discussions of their learning process and problem-solving strategies. He further stated that by listening to students think out loud, teachers can recognize what specific understanding a student is missing, and then help the student to obtain it. In studies conducted on instruction, Bruner (1966) stated that the instructor should try to encourage students to discover principles by themselves. The instructor and student should engage in an active dialogue (i.e., Socratic learning). The task of the instructor, according to Bruner, is to translate information to be learned into a format appropriate to the learner’s current state of understanding. He indicated that curriculum be organized in a spiral manner so that students continually build upon what they have already learned.

In order to build upon a continuous level of learning, Goodlad (1984), suggested that student achievement is also reached when students understand what is expected of them. The school environment also needs to have a nurturing, caring and structured environment, one in which clear and understandable goals are present (Boyer, 1995; Maehr & Buck, 1993; and Weber, 1971).

Students must be motivated (Goodlad, 1984; Maehr & Buck, 1993) and classroom participation needs to provide for a variety of self-directed learning activities (Campbell, 1997; Gardner, 1993; Greenhawk, 1997; Sarason, 1971; and Sarason et. al., 1960). Parental involvement has to also occur to enhance student learning (Maehr and Buck, 1993).

#### Parental Involvement

Research studies have shown that parental involvement has a positive impact on students' achievement. In studies conducted by Epstein (1992a, 1992b) parent involvement not only improved student achievement, it also improved the way teachers deliver instruction. Parental involvement according to Griffith (1996) "is an integral part to the success of a student's academic performance" (p. 33). He wrote that researchers have investigated the relations between parental involvement and student academic performance using homogeneous samples of low-income, minority students, and how these researchers expected to find similar relations in studies at elementary, middle, and high schools. However, studies conducted by Iverson, Brownlee, and Walberg (1981) and Reynolds, Weissberg and Kaspro (1992) revealed that elementary students benefit more than middle and high school students, when parents are involved in their education.

Griffith (1996) examined the extent of parental satisfaction with elementary education and variables associated with satisfaction. The study revealed a correlation among parental involvement, parental empowerment scores and school Criterion-Referenced Test (CRT). The purpose of this study was to “examine the relations of parental empowerment and involvement to student academic performance” (p. 35). He studied the relations among parental involvement and empowerment, school characteristics, and student academic performance using the school as the unit of analysis. His sample consisted of elementary schools where parental involvement and student academic performance was expected to have a great relation. The sample consisted of 42 elementary schools representing a large suburban school district of 122 schools. The survey consisted of 41 items. Thirty of the items to which parents responded utilized a 4-point Likert-type scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree). Eight items had closed-ended response options. The remaining three items wanted to know about the parents’ participation in school activities. A total of 11,317 parents in the respondent sample completed the survey. This represented an 83.3% median response rate across the 42 schools.

The study indicated schools with higher levels of parental involvement and empowerment had higher student CRT scores. Griffith (1996) also indicated “schools having higher levels of parental involvement had fewer teachers and more experienced teachers than schools having lower levels of parental involvement” (p. 38). Schools, which had a higher percentage of “African American and Hispanic students that were enrolled in the free-or-reduced-lunch programs had low parental involvement and CRT scores” (p. 38). Fullan (1991) identified parental involvement and student achievement in

the following manner: “The closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievement (p. 227).

Rosenholtz (1989) found significant differences in the way teachers in “moving” vs “stuck,” or “learning impoverished” schools encourage and accept parental involvement in their child’s school. She described teachers in “stuck” schools as showing little attention to school-wide goals and having low commitment to their jobs and the school. She found that teachers from stuck schools “held no goals for parental participation” (p. 152), while teachers from moving schools “focused their efforts on involving parents with academic content, thereby bridging the learning chosen between home and school” (p. 152). Teachers in stuck schools assumed that nothing could be done with parents while teachers in the moving schools viewed the parents as part of the reason for making academic progress.

Lezotte and Jacoby (1990) indicated that in order to have a positive impact on student achievement, a strong home-school relations and parent-teacher cooperation has to be present. They continued to state that parents should be provided with an “orientation to the school effectiveness process” in order to strengthen the home-school relations (p. 22). Parents also need to be aware of the challenging task the school faces in order to achieve success.

The involvement of parents has provided insight into the strength and weaknesses at the school. The views of these parents need to be “used in guiding improvement efforts” (p. 22). When parents become involved with their child’s education at “an early stage, parents are likely to be strong supporters and helpful participants” (p. 22).

Student achievement is best achieved when partnerships between the parents and the school are firmly established and supported (Rosenholtz, 1989; Epstein, 1986; Dixon, 1992; Chavkin, 1989; and National Coalition of Advocates for Students 1991) . When this type of home-school partnership develops the parents' involvement strengthens each level of the schools performance. Research studies indicated that this type of involvement produces measurable gains in success and academic achievement (Dixon, 1992; Chavkin, 1989; and National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1991).

The North Carolina legislature has recognized the importance of parental involvement in schools by passing legislation requiring employers to give employees time off for this purpose. Schools should make sure all parents are aware of and take advantage of this opportunity. When schools do not explicitly work to involve all parents in the life of the school, parent education and social class are strong determining factors in which parents do become involved (National Coalition of Advocates for Students 1991, p. 45). In order to expand parent involvement beyond a core of well-educated, well-off, and usually female parents, schools must make special outreach efforts. Communications with all parents in the language they are most comfortable speaking is crucial (Good North Carolina Elementary School, 1996, p. 15).

Epstein and Dauber (1991) indicated that, “most parents need help to know how to be productively involved in their children’s education at each grade level” (p. 290). They stated that when teachers “involve parents as a part of their regular teaching practices parents increase their interactions with their children” (p. 289). As a result of this practice, students improve their attitude and achievement (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein, 1986).

### *Parent-Teacher Practices*

Epstein (1986) stated that some teachers “believe that they can only be effective if they obtain parental assistance on learning activities at home” (p. 277). She further indicated that other teachers believed their professional responsibilities would be in jeopardy if parents were involved. Epstein conducted a statewide survey in Maryland involving 82 first, third, and fifth grade classrooms and 1,269 parents. The sample involved 36 “case study teachers of these parents’ children who were identified in an earlier survey as strong supporters and users of parent involvement in learning activities at home, and 46 control teachers who, by their own report did not emphasize parent involvement” (p. 278). Parent involvement was measured in terms of the amount of times parents participated in 12 types of learning activities that the teachers asked parents to assist with at home or at school.

In this survey, Epstein (1986) found that 58% of the parents indicated that they rarely or never had received requests from the teacher to become involved in learning activities at home. However, “fewer than 30% of the parents reported that teachers gave them many ideas of how to help their children” (p. 280). Over 80% said “they could spend more time helping children at home if they were shown how to do specific learning activities” (p. 280).

Epstein emphasized that the most important finding from the study was that “teachers frequent use of parent involvement practices improved the parents knowledge about their child’s instructional program” (p. 288). She also indicated that parents felt that “teachers who built parent involvement into their regular teaching practice were more aware of teachers’ efforts, received more ideas from teachers, knew more about



their child's instructional program, and rated the teachers higher in interpersonal skills and overall teaching quality" (p. 291).

Epstein and Dauber (1991) conducted a study involving eight inner-city elementary and middle schools to examine "the connections between school programs of parent involvement, teachers' attitudes, and the practices that teachers use to involve parents of their own students" (p. 289). This study was a 3-year initiative to seek ways to improve parental involvement programs and practices. The schools were randomly selected from Chapter 1 schools in economically and educationally disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Epstein and Dauber (1991) provided surveys to the teachers, principals, and parents in each school. The profiles "summarized the strengths and weaknesses of the school on the five types of parent involvement as perceived by the teachers, principals, and parents.

Five major types of involvement emerged from the questionnaire. They are as follows: (1) parenting skills; (2) communication from school to home; (3) volunteers at school; (4) learning activities at home, and; (5) decision making, leadership, and governance. The teachers, principals, and parents felt that these areas of parental involvement were crucial in a child's success at school. These areas of involvement were much stronger at the elementary level than at the high school. The study revealed that overall, teachers and principals in the sample had strong positive attitudes about parental involvement. They felt that parents needed to be included in their child's learning at school as well as at home. The study also showed that parents wanted information on how to help their children succeed in school.

### *School Involvement*

Solo (1997) wrote that, “parents who visit their children’s school and keep in close touch with their teachers, know what is going on, and can support the school and their children better” (p. 30). She further indicated that a child does better in school when the parent is more involved, because it sends a message to the child that school is important.

Dixon (1992) also focused on the fact that parents are important to their child’s school and are important stakeholders to the school. She discussed the importance of “parents as full partners in decision making because of the close linkage that parent involvement has to the child’s achievement in school, and because of parents’ willingness to become involved in the school” (p. 15).

She reported that The Southwest Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas had conducted extensive interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators. Based on these interviews it was revealed that, “parents are eager to play all roles at school from tutor to decision-maker” (p. 15). The interviews also revealed that, “the barrier to more parent involvement is not parent apathy but lack of support from educators” (p. 15). Dixon (1992) continued to point out that “full partnership requires the shedding of old patterns and the development of new ones” (p. 16). Educators are no longer the only ones with the knowledge and expertise to solve problems in education she indicated. “In order to close the distance between home and school, parents and teachers must work together” (p. 16). Dixon concluded by stating that working together would require “building support, learning new roles, developing behavior and strategies congruent with aims, and developing a climate of acceptance” (p. 17).

Parental involvement has a positive impact on student achievement (Epstein, 1992a; 1992b; Griffith, 1996). Fullan (1991), and Griffith (1996) indicated when parents are close to the education of their child and they are involved, the greater the impact on the child's achievement. North Carolina has passed legislation requiring employers to give employees time off to be involved in their child's education.

### Summary

The purpose of this review of literature is to identify characteristics of successful, excellent, and high achieving elementary schools, and use these results to assist in describing how a small elementary school in rural northeastern North Carolina became a School of Distinction. After examining research studies on high achieving schools, five domains emerged. The domains most frequently recognized as contributing to student achievement or belonging to a successful school are as follows: (a) principal leadership; (b) teacher involvement; (c) class size; (d) student achievement; and (e) parental involvement.

The principal's role in studies conducted by Boyer (1995), Goodlad (1983), & Griffin (1990) revealed the role and function of the principal in helping to improve the curriculum in leading to a successful school. Evans (1996) and Lambert (1998) agreed that the leadership includes the principal's ability to involve teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members.

The teachers' involvement was corroborated by researchers indicating that the role and involvement of the teacher is very important in student achievement and the overall success of the school (Goodlad, 1984; Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989; and Weber, 1971). Goodlad (1984) and Lambert (1998) continued to emphasize the importance of

teacher classroom practices. Professional growth of teachers as discussed by Barth (1989) and Lambert (1998) is important to the growth and achievement of students.

One of the most widely cited studies Glass and Smith (1978) indicated that smaller classes resulted in higher achievement. More studies followed, also documenting the impact that class size has on student achievement (Achilles et al., 1996; Ferguson, 1991; Finn, 1998; Finn & Achilles, 1999; and Maier et al., 1997).

Student achievement according to Goodlad (1984), Ferguson (1991), Maehr and Buck (1993), and Boyer (1995) occurs in schools when high levels of expectations exist. The researchers also discussed that student achievement is enhanced when parental involvement occurs, small class size is present, teacher involvement occurs, standards are met, and the presence of a nurturing school environment is experienced.

Studies conducted by Epstein (1992a and 1992b), and Griffin (1996) showed that parental involvement has a positive impact on students' achievement. Other researchers have also been discussed for their contributions in examining and describing the benefits that parental involvement have on student achievement.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research design, which is a case study approach. A description of the role of the researcher and qualitative data collection procedures are discussed followed by procedures for data analysis.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe one rural elementary school's experiences in being recognized as a School of Distinction. Stakeholders within any educational setting have the responsibility to ensure that their school is preparing their students to be successful citizens. Stakeholders have validation of this when the school reaches high levels of achievement. School staffs try to reach this recognition, but may not always know the most important characteristics that contribute to their success. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate and then describe how a small rural elementary school reached a level of distinction.

The following subordinate questions formulated from the literature guided this study: In what way does the principal's leadership contribute to the school's success? In what ways do the teachers' involvement contribute to the school's success? Does class size contribute to success? What happens in this school to promote student achievement? In what ways are parents involved in supporting their child's education? What other characteristics contribute to this school's effectiveness?

#### Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was the development of a rich detailed description of characteristics that assisted one small elementary school in rural northeastern North

Carolina in achieving a high level of recognition. The review of literature included characteristics that led toward school effectiveness, high-performance and excellence. The review results assisted in identifying the most frequently noted characteristics of successful schools in order to use them as a guide for interviews, observing behavior occurring in this school, and examining school documents. It was my intent to provide a pathway for other educators in schools with similar demographics to follow in improving the educational environment. In order to make this transferability meaningful to the reader's setting; a detailed description of the features of this school is included.

### Research Design

The research methods for this study formed a descriptive case study design. According to Yin (1994) and Hamel (1993) "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" (p. 1). A first stage of the study was the development of a detailed description of the school. Next, data were collected through conducting interviews, observations, and reviewing school documents. Overarching themes that focused on how the school achieved success were then identified.

Data triangulation as described by Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) was used to strengthen the credibility of the study. It also helped to reduce bias that might result from relying exclusively on any one data collection method, source, or theory. Although data from one school does not allow for general transferability of the findings, they permitted the researcher to conduct a rich and deep examination of a variety of characteristics and provide a detailed description of success.

### *Investigator's Role*

My professional role is a central office administrator with the selected school's district. My job title is curriculum director. Primary responsibilities that I have in this district are to serve as curriculum specialist, accountability consultant, staff development coordinator, support personnel, and liaison between the district level and state level education agencies. As the primary investigator, I did not have any direct supervision over the study school principal or the school staff, nor did I have any personnel evaluation responsibilities.

Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) indicated that if a researcher was employed by an educational institution, the researcher might consider conducting the research study at her institution. They further stated that the "majority of doctoral dissertations with which they had been associated were conducted at the institution where the student is or was currently employed" (p. 102). They discussed some advantages and disadvantages of conducting research at one's own institution. An advantage would be a less complicated way to obtain approval for the study because the researcher would have access to those making decisions within the institution. The researcher would also be more familiar with normal routines of the institution. However, a disadvantage of studying one's own institution as stated by Gall et al., may cause the researcher to be less aware of some concerns from other staff members that might affect the research. They concluded by indicating that the researcher could be "hindered in carrying out the study, or vulnerable to certain sanctions, because of the relationship with particular individuals in the institution" (p.103).

Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) indicated that in order to have an effective interviewer-respondent relationship the background experience of the interviewer was critical. Gender can also be a concern in this study. In this study I had insider status with female teachers being interviewed. There were no male teachers in grades 3, 4, or 5 in the school. Being an insider with the school system and my background as an elementary teacher in grades 3, 4, and 5 added to the strength of the study. I brought 24 years of elementary experience as a teacher and administrator working with principals, other elementary teachers, students, and parents within the school system. I had knowledge of a principal's leadership roles and responsibilities, and a better understanding of how elementary teachers collaborate within and between grade levels, the expectations of the students, and the importance of parental involvement.

Due to my experience, I was able to better understand the instructional approaches used by the teachers. I had a better understanding of the curriculum being taught along with the types of activities that occurred at the elementary level. Being able to interpret the facial expressions and other types of nonverbal communication from the students was considered strength developed while teaching in these grade levels. This experience brought a personal insight to the investigation of real life occurrences encountered by the school community striving to achieve a high level of student achievement at the school.

I collected and analyzed data. I also served as the primary "measuring instrument" (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996, p. 554). Gall et al. referred to this as the researcher being responsible for data collection and becoming involved with the phenomenon being studied. In this case I was already involved. This allowed me, a participant in the school,



to more fully grasp the meanings of the phenomenon being studied. My role strengthened the study because I knew the selected school's mission, its' beliefs, and its' community involvement.

Gall et al. (1996) continued to point out that understanding the participants' language and culture were needed in order to understand the phenomena being investigated. As an insider, a definite advantage existed because I already knew and understood the language and culture of the participants and the setting being studied.

Stake's (1994) definition of a qualitative case study is "characterized by the main researcher spending substantial time on site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting, and revising meanings of what is going on" (p. 242). I also served the role as being a teacher to the readers. Eisner (1985) described it this way; "the researcher is a teacher using at least two pedagogical methods" (pp. 33-34). The first was didactic; meaning the researcher taught others what she had learned from a particular case. The second was discovery learning; meaning material from the case was being provided so that the readers could learn things on their own. These new discoveries involved combining new material with what was already known regardless of the new material having positive or negative influences.

While my professional role within the school being studied provided multiple benefits to the study, to the best of my knowledge, limitations did not arise because of my close association with the school. I was not a stranger to the principal and teachers being interviewed; those two categories of participants openly expressed their feelings and beliefs to interview questions asked by me. They did not need to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear to make the school and perhaps themselves look good. They did

not think that if they revealed any areas of concern, they would be reprimanded or they would discredit the school.

### *Gaining Access and Entry*

The first step in gaining access and entry into the selected school involved a visit with the county school superintendent to explain the nature of the study being conducted. After the initial visit, the superintendent was sent a letter (Appendix A1), along with a copy of the approved proposal, formally requesting permission to conduct the study. After a letter had been received from the superintendent granting permission to conduct the study, I called the school principal to request his permission to conduct the study. It was during this telephone conversation that I made an appointment to visit the principal at his school.

During this visit, I provided the principal with a copy of the letter from the superintendent granting the permission and I also shared a copy of my abstract. I asked the principal if he would consent to being interviewed, observed, and shadowed during the study. Since the response was positive, the next step was to send a follow-up letter to the principal thanking him for allowing the study to be conducted in his school and his willingness to be a participant in the study (Appendix A2). I assured the principal that I would provide a rich detailed description of the characteristics that made the school one of distinction.

### *Limitations and Advantages*

I was an insider totally engaged in experiencing the participants and setting being studied, yet at the same time I was trying to understand and describe the participants and setting through interviews, observations, document review and my personal experiences.

My role was considered a limitation because participants may not have freely expressed their views and concerns about the things occurring at the selected school. This was also a strength because there were those who wanted their voices heard, and a trust relationship had already been established between the interviewees and me. The school size was a limitation due to a small number of teachers available for selecting the participants to be interviewed. The specific findings revealed in this study cannot be generalized to any other school.

### Setting Selection

The setting for this study was a school in a rural northeastern North Carolina county. The unit of analysis being studied was a Pre-Kindergarten to fifth grade elementary school. The school was selected because of its performance on the North Carolina End-of-Grade (EOG) tests in reading and mathematics. Eighty-six percent of the students scored level IIIs and IVs on the North Carolina ABCs testing program in 1999-2000 and 89% scoring levels IIIs and IVs in 2000-01. Due to these high scores, the school was recognized as a School of Distinction by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Information from the computer program, ABC Tools, was adopted by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to perform all of the calculations associated with determining the school's growth and verifying that it earned recognition as a School of Distinction. This recognition came as a result of over 80% of the students who received achievement levels III and IV on the EOGs. In order to earn the School of Distinction recognition, a school must have scored at least 80% or higher on levels IIIs

and IVs according to the guidelines in the North Carolina ABCs testing program, and meet expected growth projections.

The tests' results were used by the school and the state, to determine the amount of expected growth the students made in reading and mathematics. The tests were administered each spring and scored by the local education agency's testing coordinator. Student scores were used to determine the school's growth and the effectiveness of how well the state curriculum (SCS) was taught.

### Participant Selection

McCracken (1988) in describing qualitative studies stated, "respondents are not a 'sample,' and should not be governed by sampling rules" (p. 37). The participants for this case study consisted of the school's principal, selected teachers and students, and parents. These were the major stakeholders and the ones who knew about the people within the school and reasons for the school's recognition. I asked the principal to recommend teachers for the study and then parents who were active with the PTA. Criteria for teachers and parents was based on the principal's recommendation of whom he believed was willing and able to articulate responses to research questions. The principal was asked to recommend 3 teachers per grade level (a total of 9) who had been at the school for more than 5 years.

Student participant selection was limited to those who were in grades 3, 4, and 5, the tested grades for the North Carolina End-of-Grade (EOG) tests. Each study teacher selected was asked to pick one student from her class who she felt would be willing and able to articulate responses to the research questions. The students were also selected because they had special knowledge or perceptions about their views of things that

happened in the school. According to Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) these “key informants often have more knowledge, better communication skills, or different perspectives than any other member of the defined population” (p. 306). A total of nine students were selected, three from each grade level. When consent by students or their parents, was declined, I asked teachers to make another selection. This process continued until nine student participants had been selected.

The principal was also asked to recommend three parents who had children in grades 3, 4, or 5 for a total of three parents. The principal was asked to make recommendations based on parents he thought were willing and able to articulate responses to the research questions. When willingness to participate was declined by the selected parents, the principal was asked to make other recommendations. The principal, teachers, and parents were sent a permission form presented in Appendix A3 to sign and return to me indicating their willingness to participate in the study.

After potential students to be interviewed had been identified, a cover letter and permission form (Appendix A4) was sent to students’ parents requesting permission for their child’s participation. A student consent form (Appendix A5) was attached to the cover letter along with a permission form. When consent, was denied by the parent, or the student, I asked the teacher for another recommendation. This process continued until three students from the three grade (to total nine students) levels being investigated had been selected. After all participants had been selected, a thank you letter located in Appendix A6 was sent to each of them thanking them for their willingness to participate in the study. The interviews with students occurred after the first classroom observation had been held. This allowed time for students to see me in their classrooms.

### Assurance of Confidentiality

Confidentiality according to Berg (1989) “means an attempt to remove from the research any elements that might indicate the subjects’ identities” (p. 138). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, participants were assigned pseudonyms. This assisted me in later identification of the teachers’ and students’ grade level. To further protect the identity of the participants, the name of the school was not identified in this study. It was referred to as “the selected elementary school.”

All participants were informed that their participation was strictly voluntary and they were free to withdraw from the study at anytime. I also included in the permission forms a statement that confidentiality of participants was protected. Permission to conduct the research was requested from Virginia Tech’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Virginia Tech’s IRB Form 4 was used to make this request (Appendix B). A copy of the letter of consent from the superintendent was attached to the request.

Berg (1989) further stated that by having the participants sign consent forms might avoid an ethical dilemma. I preserved and protected permission forms by securing them in a place that was only accessible to me. If any questions had developed concerning ethical practices, I would have followed Berg’s suggestion and revealed the permission forms only to the IRB.

### Data Collection Procedures

The qualitative procedures for data collection were interviews, observations, and review of documentation. Van Maanen, Dabbs, and Faulkner (1982) stated that, “qualitative research is marked more by a reliance upon multiple sources of data than by its commitment to any one source alone” (p. 15). This collection was conducted by

providing: (a) a description of the school; (b) interviews with principal, teachers, students from grades 3, 4, and 5, and parents; (c) observations in and out of the classrooms, staff meetings and school activities; and (d) analysis of school improvement documents, grade level meetings and administrative letters/memos. These procedures took place from July to October 2002.

### *Interview Procedures*

I conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews. Yin (1994) pointed out that researchers conducting case studies should be “ (a) able to ask good questions; (b) be good listeners; (c) be adaptive and flexible; (d) have a firm grasp of the issues being studied and; (e) be unbiased by preconceived notions” (p. 56). It was for those reasons that I followed a written guide for asking questions during the interview.

Berg (1989) suggested that once the researcher developed the written guide and sequencing of questions she should have other researchers examine them. The first step involved an examination of the written guide by other researchers. According to Berg this step “facilitates the identification of poorly worded questions, questions with offensive or emotionally laden wording, or questions revealing the researcher’s own biases, personal values or blind spots” (p. 26). The second step recommended by Berg involved several practice interviews. He stated that this would allow the interviewer to “assess how effectively the interview will work, and whether the type of information being sought will actually be obtained” (p. 26).

Therefore, prior to conducting the interview, interview questions were pre-tested for credibility using Berg’s (1989) steps as a guide. This pre-testing was conducted with the assistance of doctoral candidates within my cohort. In this setting, I

had cohort participants respond to interview questions to determine if the questions were appropriate and addressed the overall research and subordinate questions. The questions were reviewed by a minimum of 8 cohort participants. This was my way of ensuring that the interview questions would elicit meaningful information from the participants. It was also my way of knowing if domains from the theoretical framework and guiding research questions were addressed.

Cousins, Ross and Maynes (1994), indicated that during an interview the researcher should ask participants to select, describe, and analyze specific characteristics, activities or other contributions they deemed important when answering the interview questions. This technique was used to assist me with specific questions related to the structure, environment, and climate of the school. Informal questions occurred during shadowing and attendance at school activities. To ensure confidentiality, interviews were conducted one to one. All interviews were concluded by asking, “What other characteristics do you think contributed to this school’s effectiveness? Why?”

All interviews were audio-taped. The principal’s interview session was approximately one hour. Teachers, students, and parents’ interview sessions ranged from approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour.

I carefully listened to each participant and recorded the observations of body language and facial expressions. I was flexible enough to adapt to new twists that appeared during the study. I analyzed what was transcribed from tape recordings, what was observed, and any ideas that developed from hunches. I described events and activities that took place along with my ideas about the observations. Field notes based on the interviews were summarized following each visit to the school.



The primary focus during the interview was to obtain a clear picture of school-wide activities that had a positive effect on the daily instructional life and the performance of students in the selected school. Interviews were conducted to gather impressions and data about what was happening in this school to cause it to reach School of Distinction status. The goal was to identify and describe overarching and supporting themes that had assisted the staff in this school to accomplish gains in students' achievement. The information obtained by interviewing the principal, teachers, students, and parents was used to provide the richest description possible.

The interview procedures began before the first formal question was asked. I spent time establishing rapport with the interviewees and putting them at ease concerning the nature of the study. I also assured participants that the interviews would be confidential, and that I would be looking for their ideas throughout the study. Once the interview began, I demonstrated to the interviewee that I was listening, by showing positive facial expressions, body language and repeating phrases to ensure correct understanding. McCracken (1988) stated "The investigator listens to the self in order to listen to respondent," (p. 33). My experience as an administrator had given me the opportunity to work with parents, teachers, and other administrators. My experience as an elementary teacher helped me to talk to and unobtrusively listen to the students.

Yin (1994) suggested when interviewing key participants, the investigator must "cater to the interviewee's schedule and availability" and not that of the investigator (p. 68). All participants were considered key participants and were interviewed in a way that their instructional duties and responsibilities were not greatly disrupted. The principal was the first participant to be interviewed, followed by the teachers, students and parents.

Prior to the structured interviews, I visited informally with teachers (during lunch, planning periods, recess, or after school) to establish a friendly relationship.

### *Interview Protocols*

A set of protocol questions presented in Appendix C1 was asked of the principal. The teachers' protocol questions are located in Appendix C2, students' protocol questions are located in Appendix C3, and Appendix C4 contains parents' protocol questions. The questions that were developed from the literature were asked in order that I might begin to collect information on reasons the selected school had reached its high level of recognition. I had questions tightly organized around the overall and subordinate research questions for study participants. The same questions were asked in the same manner with each participant. Probing questions were also used to elicit responses when participants had difficulty providing answers. There were times when the participants answered the question and wanted to add some additional information. I was flexible in allowing the participants to tell their own stories. McCracken (1988) stated that it is an important process to "allow respondents to tell their own story in their own terms," (p.34). Interviews were transcribed from audio recordings verbatim in order to maintain accuracy of the interviewees' responses.

Patton (1990) pointed out "the basic purpose of the standardized open-ended interview is to minimize interviewer effects by asking the same questions of each respondent" (p. 285). He also suggested because of open-ended interviews, the "interviews are systematic and the necessity for interviewer judgment during the interview is reduced" (p. 285).

## *Observations*

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) indicated that, “the researcher should write many observer’s comments as he collects data. The idea is to stimulate critical thinking about what one sees and to become more than a recording machine” (p. 158). The principal was shadowed on a scheduled day after his interview. This shadowing was an entire school day. The classrooms selected for observations were the classrooms of the teachers being interviewed. This allowed me to have a richer description of the types of characteristics, and interactions between teacher and students occurring in this school. Two classroom observations each were conducted in grades 3, 4, and 5 at different times and lasted for approximately 30 to 45 minutes each.

A narrative summary written on each observation was focused on the study domains. This provided first hand information for a chronological narrative of everything that occurred during the observations related to the research questions.

Observation procedures as described by Jorgensen (1989) stated that observations “begin the moment the participant observer begins contact with a potential field setting” (p. 82). According to the author, the basic goal of unfocused initial observations is to get familiar with the insiders’ world so as to refine and focus subsequent observation and data collection (p. 82). Merriam (1998) described participant observation as the data method that simultaneously combined analysis of documents, interviewing of participants, direct participation and observation, and introspection. According to Merriam, this allowed the researcher to enhance her information processing skills by having direct access to the natural setting. This method also allowed the researcher to

“understand the lives of people in their own terms by spending extended amounts of time with people in the natural setting they inhabit” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 69).

Yin (1994) stated that when an investigator makes real-life observations of activities, that investigator is intruding into the world of those participants being studied. When this occurred, he stated that the investigator “may have to make special arrangements to be able to act as an observer (or even as a participant observer)” (p.68). For these reasons, I became involved in attending a staff meeting, a PTA meeting, and an assembly program. These steps occurred prior to the first interview of each set of participants. A total of eighteen 30 to 45 minutes teacher classroom observations were conducted. The observations were participant observations with my being involved with the class’ routine activities. My observations consisted of recording facial expressions, duration and frequency behaviors of teachers and students, or anything else that helped to provide a richer description of what was happening in the school.

I made an informal visit to each of the teachers’ classrooms selected for the study. This occurred prior to the initial observation to allow students to get used to an outside person being present in the classroom.

#### *Observation Protocol*

The observation protocol provided a format for me in recording information in an organized format. Merriam (1998) stated that “field-notes based on observations need to be in a format that will allow the researcher to find desired information easily” (p. 105).

Therefore, scheduled observations were documented immediately at the conclusion of each observation. According to Jorgensen (1989) the researcher “should record dates, times, places, and major activities and events” (p. 96). Observations

included the physical surroundings as well as the characteristics of the participants as they performed their routine responsibilities. Merriam (1998) also suggested that once the observations had been completed, field-notes should be summarized, a diagram of the setting should be made and movements traced through it. She further stated that, one should also record pieces of data that were recalled by the researcher but not written in field-notes. This would allow the researcher to use this information at a later date.

I also had a diagram of the classroom prior to beginning the scheduled observations. This allowed me to give a more accurate account of things going on inside the classroom.

Another important component described by Merriam (1998) is the observer commentary. This means “the researcher’s feelings, reactions, hunches, and initial interpretations” (p.106). These comments shed light above factual descriptions of what was happening, and “they are comments on and thoughts about the setting, people, and activities” (p. 106). Merriam concluded that asking questions and writing responses allowed the researcher to engage in some preliminary data analysis. Therefore, I was involved in asking “what if” questions based on shadowing the principal, classroom observations, and other school related observations. These “what if” questions were asked in order to speculate what those questions meant. The setting, people and activities were thoroughly described in the study. Direct quotations from participants and other encountered activities were recorded on the observation form located in Appendix D. Recording the information assisted me in providing the reader a richer detailed description of how this school looked and felt.

### *Document Review Procedures*

When outlining document procedures, Patton (1990) described using documents in qualitative research as “leaving a trail of paper that the evaluator can follow and use to increase knowledge and understanding about programs being studied” (p. 233). Therefore, it became the responsibility of the researcher to reveal to the reader what the documents were saying.

Merriam (1998) suggested, “documents often contain much that is irrelevant to the study; by the same token, they can contain clues, even startling insights, into the phenomenon under study” (p. 119). She concluded by indicating that most researchers find documents worthwhile to locate and examine and that “documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research questions” (p. 133). Patton also suggested that document analysis gives a “behind-the-scene look at the program that may not be directly observable and about which the interviewer might not ask appropriate questions without the leads provided through the documents” (p. 245). Patton continued to state that these documents reveal things that have happened long before the researcher begins the study. The information revealed in the documents may not have been known, or made available to the researcher, unless the review occurred.

### *Documentation Protocol*

A documentation protocol was followed while examining a variety of documents. I obtained permission from the principal during the initial visit to view these documents in a location designated by him. Permission was also obtained from the principal to make copies of any documents that would assist me in later analysis.

Documents collected included administrative letters/memos, minutes from grade level meetings, professional development activities, students' assessment data, and the school improvement plan. Review of these documents occurred after each set of participants' scheduled interviews and observations in the following manner: (1) administrative letters/memos occurred after principal's interview and observation; (2) professional development activities and minutes from grade level meetings after teachers' interviews and classroom observations; (3) students' assessments after student interviews; and (4) the school improvement plan was reviewed after interviews and observations with each set of participants. Information related to the domains from these documents, were recorded on a documentation protocol form presented in Appendix E.

Merriam (1998) indicated that the type of documents previously listed would supplement other data collected during this investigation. The documents provided additional support data for interviews and observations, helping to identify recurring patterns of themes, key phrases or key words from data. This documentation from the school provided the necessary information to give a better understanding of what had taken place at the school and the type of progress that had been made.

Documents resulting from the investigation of this study became part of the data collection. Additional documents included my notes from interviews, observations, and document reviews. Copies of minutes from meetings attended, lesson plans, and samples of students' work also became documents. To ensure continued confidentiality of teachers and students, names were deleted from all lesson plans and samples of students' work.

## Data Analysis Procedures

The interviews and observations according to Merriam (1998) are “two data collection strategies to gather data that specifically address the research questions” (p. 112). Merriam (1998) indicated, “data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research. Analysis begins with the first interview, the first observation, and the first document read” (p.151). She further indicated that by doing this emerging insights or hunches will help direct the next phase of data to be collected. This process helps to lead to “refinement or reformation of questions” (p. 151). Merriam referred to this as “organizing and refining rather than beginning data analysis” (p. 162). Immediate interactions with participants and triangulation of data allowed for clearer interpretations, and provided a richer and thicker description for the reader. I continued to analyze data after each interview, observation, and review of documents.

Listening to the recordings from interviews a number of times was used to categorize data into smaller units to be analyzed. These smaller bits of data were categorized into the domains, which developed from the study. Principal leadership, teacher involvement, class size, student achievement, and parental involvement was expected to be identified because of the question format. However, I was also listening for additional categories. I used the constant comparative method to constantly compare key words, phrases, or direct quotes in order to identify patterns and emerging themes from data collected. Therefore, field notes from interviews, observations, and school documents were compared for recurring themes to build on the strengths of each data collection source limiting weaknesses of any one source. By triangulating these sources, the data findings had an increase in credibility and trustworthiness. As new information,



was introduced by participants I described, interpreted, and presented new information in narrative form to develop the descriptions of the characteristics that made the school successful. I also described the exact words and or phrases stated by the participants. This too provided an even richer description of what made this school successful.

This source by source, analysis provided an opportunity for me to make notes or comments to capture what had occurred from the data that had been gathered. Merriam (1998) described it as allowing yourself to capture “your reflections, tentative themes, hunches, ideas, and things to pursue that are derived from the first set of data” (p. 160).

I followed Merriam’s suggested guidelines in order that the comparisons being made would inform me how to proceed with collection of the next set of interview, observation, and document review data. This allowed me to identify patterns and show repeated findings that led to the development of overarching themes and the supporting themes in order to answer the study’s research questions.

#### *Data Management*

For the purpose of retrieving specific pieces of data, codes were assigned to categories to be described. Merriam (1998) defines coding as “nothing more than assigning some sort of short hand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (p.164). For the purpose of identifying direct quotes and involvement of the principal, teacher, student, or parent, codes were assigned as follows: interview (I); observation (OBS); document review (DR); principal (P); teacher involvement (T); student (S); and parental (PT). As each participant made reference to class size, its code was (CS).

In order to help me understand new information presented from participants, I went back to participants at the conclusion of the scheduled interview, to ask follow up questions. These were questions that were generated from ideas, or hunches that came from me, in order to seek further clarity and understanding of any responses coming from participants. The further questioning was done by, analyzing, and synthesizing, collected data in order to generate an increased knowledge of the study's findings. After data had been analyzed it was written in narrative form to provide information and knowledge to the readers.

### *Theme Development*

When analyzing data for systematic comparisons, emerging themes were noted from the interviews, observations and review of documentation. According to Berg (1989) "the theme is a very useful unit to count" (p. 112). He continued to point out that a theme in its simplest form is a "simple sentence or a string of words with a subject and a predicate" (p. 112 & 113). Berg also emphasized that themes are located in a variety of places in most written documents and the researcher needs to state in advance the places that will be searched. I was looking for themes from paragraphs, sentences, phrases, key words, and direct quotes. I was also looking for themes that emerged from notes taken during observations and documentation review. These themes assisted me in answering each of the subordinate research questions under analysis in order to describe the overarching and supporting themes to the reader.

These smaller units of data were recorded on forms developed by me in order to identify overarching themes collected from interviews involving each category of participants. I also used the same form, developed by me, as a way to list the overarching

themes, and the supporting themes, that emerged from the principal, teachers, students, and parents on the subordinate research questions. To assist the reader with a clearer understanding of the overarching and supporting themes, the data are illustrated in matrices according to each subordinate research question and data collection method. Appendix F is a representation of what the form looked like.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggested that “themes provide explanations for how or why things happen” (p. 234). They further suggested that researchers needed to ask themselves which themes go together. By relating themes they continued to point out, helps the researcher build toward a rich, full, and detailed description of events taken place.

It was further indicated by Rubin and Rubin that, “combining information from different interviews, the researcher would create descriptive themes that no individual interviewee mentioned” (p. 235). However, they continued to point out, “sometimes people will repeat their own themes to emphasize them, or they may tell a story to underscore a theme” (p. 235). I looked for places in the interview where interviewees tried to emphasize major points or bring to my attention the major point they wanted me to focus on. Concepts I recorded from interviews, observations and documentation review, were considered themes based on the number of times the concept was discussed, or observed, along with the amount of emphasis that was placed on the concept. This analysis assisted me in identifying emerging themes (from raw data) to answer each research question.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) indicated that there might be times when there appears to be inconsistencies across interviews. This may happen when two interviewees give a

conflicting version of things that have occurred. They continued to note that the researcher may have to choose between what was said “weighing the quality of evidence, the nature of the interviewees’ memory, and evidence of slant to sort out which version is more credible” (p. 88). Rubin and Rubin further indicated that the researcher may decide to present both versions because “they help to explain the nature of the conflict and are strongly held and believed by the interviewees” (p. 88). Therefore, by presenting both points of view they indicated the researcher would be more credible by showing that the researcher investigated why the interviewees gave different views as to what occurred. I followed the guidelines of Rubin and Rubin by presenting information as presented by participants and then I triangulated the observation data and document review data, with the interview data in order to develop emerging overarching and supporting themes. I looked to see if data from interviews, observations, and documentation was aligned with the school mission statement, goals, and standards. As each interview transcript or the field notes from each observation and document was being read, I constantly reviewed the purpose of the study in order to maintain focus.

Along with using the constant comparative method to develop themes and descriptions, I also used content analysis for all interviews, observations and document reviews. In order for this data to be analyzed the information was condensed and made systemically comparable to analyze data for overarching themes. Therefore, I simultaneously analyzed the content for meaning in order to identify a key word, phrase, or direct quote that might tell a story that I would put in narrative form. The overarching themes were then identified for the purpose of describing in details the reasons why this small elementary school reached School of Distinction status.

### *Triangulation*

Triangulation occurred from collection of themes of interviews, notes from observations, and review of documentation. According to Patton (1990) “interview data can be greatly affected by the emotional state of the interviewee at the time the interview takes place” (p. 245). He discussed how observations provide a check for what is reported in interviews, and how the interviews “permit the observer to go beyond external behavior to explore the internal states of persons who have been observed” (p. 245). Document analysis according to Patton “provides a behind-the-scene look at the program that may not be directly observable and about which the interviewer might not ask appropriate questions without the leads provided through the document” (p. 245).

Multiple sources of data were used because no single source would provide a thorough perspective of data collected. As Patton (1990) pointed out, “The use of a combination of interviews, observations, and document analysis, allows the fieldworker to use different data sources to validate and cross-check findings” (p. 244). Marshall and Rossman (1989) also suggested that using a combination of sources increases the credibility as the strengths of one particular source may add to the weakness of another source.

### *Data Saturation*

Data saturation as stated by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) involved practical and theoretical considerations when considering stopping the data collection stage of a case study. Time and budgetary constraints along with other factors represented the practical consideration. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to four criteria to determine when it was appropriate to stop collecting data as representing the theoretical considerations. The first

area was the exhaustion of sources. This involved sources that have been recycled and revisited many times and no new information is gained. The next area was saturation of categories. This involved continued data collection procedures and getting tiny increments of new information in comparison to the effort expended to get them. The third area listed was emergence of regularities. This area involved the researcher determining that consistencies in the data developed had represented each construct. The last area listed was over-extension. This related to “the sense that new information being unearthed was very far removed from the core of any of the viable categories that had emerged (and did not contribute usefully to the emergence of additional viable categories)” (p. 350).

I stopped collecting data when saturation of themes had been thoroughly described. Therefore, after all questions, hunches, and ideas had been addressed with the selected participants, observations made, and documents analyzed, and I continued to get the same or similar responses with no new leads to add to the study, I stopped collecting data.

### Implications

This study should be regarded as a discovery of key characteristics of a school that reached a high achievement for students. Through the interviews, school and classroom observations, and review of school documentation, this descriptive study serves as a guide for the readers to examine findings and, later transfer them to other settings. It was also my intent to provide research findings to assist the readers in maximizing the role of data in their school for the purpose of making instructional school improvements. School administrators can use results to establish a work environment for

staff and students where success and excellence and positive expectations are communicated. It was also my belief that lessons learned from this school would help other schools accelerate ways to improve education.

### Summary

This qualitative design was used to investigate how a small rural elementary school reached School of Distinction recognition. The significance of the study was to develop a rich detailed description of the school and identify overarching and supporting themes investigated related to: (1) principal leadership; (2) teacher involvement; (3) class size; (4) student achievement; and (5) parental involvement, along with any other characteristics that were found in the data.

This study relied heavily on the voice of the investigator to describe the things that were happening in this school. As primary investigator, I described to the readers, first hand occurrences. The findings are presented in a manner that will enable the reader to make decisions about conducting a similar study, or to improve their educational programs. Exact words of the participants are used to emphasize main points.

The setting was an elementary school (grades pre-kindergarten to fifth grade) in a rural northeastern North Carolina county. This school was selected because of the high performance in reading and mathematics on the North Carolina End-of-Grade tests. The participants consisted of the principal, selected teachers, students, and parents from grades 3, 4, and 5.

Data collection procedures consisted of interviews, observations, and review of school documentation. Data analysis procedures consisted of data triangulation to

compare key words, phrases, or direct quotes to identify overarching and supporting themes.



## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to describe one rural elementary school's experience in becoming recognized as a School of Distinction. The overall research question guiding the study was "How did a small elementary school in rural northeastern North Carolina become a School of Distinction?" The following subordinate questions guided the data collection in this study: (1) In what way does the principal's leadership contribute to the school's success?; (2) In what ways do the teachers' involvement contribute to the school's success?; (3) Does class size contribute to success?; (4) What happens in this school to promote student achievement?; (5) In what ways are parents involved in supporting their child's education?; and (6) What other characteristics contribute to this school's effectiveness?

Data collection occurred during the months of July through October of 2002. Data collection procedures consisted of interviews, observations and review of school documents to gather information on the research question. The data collected were organized around the study's domains to develop themes that added to a deep, rich, detailed understanding of what made this school successful.

Data were gathered using the research questions and follow-up prompts on the following domains: (a) principal's leadership; (b) teachers' involvement; (c) class size; (d) student achievement; and (e) parental involvement. This chapter provides a detailed description of the results of the study, the research methodology, data analysis, report of the findings, which includes the supporting findings and themes from data triangulation, and the summary of the findings.

## Overview of Results

There have been no other studies that specifically looked at characteristics of schools recognized as Schools of Distinction based on the North Carolina ABC standards. The principal; third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers; selected students; and selected parents were interviewed. They gave their perceptions as to reasons the selected school reached School of Distinction status. Data were also gathered from participant observations, classroom observations, and document reviews to identify reasons for the school's recognition. Data collected indicated that the principal, teachers, class size, students, and parents indeed contributed to promoting student achievement that led to the school's recognition.

Each category of participants added different levels of perception to the study. While the principal, teachers and parents had similar perceptions regarding the school's recognition, the students had different perceptions. The students were not in conflict with the adults they just saw things differently. The principal and the teachers, all with different levels of experience, personal biases and instructional expectations worked collaboratively to ensure the success of all students. For this reason, quotes and interpretative commentaries are provided within each data collection source to assist the reader with participant perceptions, and findings from observations and document review. These findings are presented according to the study's domains, and are comprised of themes that emerged from multiple data sources. Overarching themes and supporting themes that emerged from the three data sources are described according to each domain in order to provide reasons the school reached School of Distinction status.

### *Principal's Leadership*

Data indicated that the principal's leadership was important to the success of a school. The overarching leadership themes that emerged indicated the principal's ability to: (1) seek funding; (2) support staff development initiatives; (3) encourage staff and students; (4) communicate with staff and parents; and (5) demonstrate concern for students' welfare.

### *Teachers' Involvement*

Data indicated that the teachers' involvement at the school made a definite impact in promoting student achievement thus leading to the school receiving School of Distinction recognition. The four overarching themes that emerged consisted of the teachers' ability to: (1) teach state standards; (2) demonstrate hard work and dedication; (3) communicate with others; and (4) care for students.

### *Class Size*

Data indicated that class size was an important contributor to the school receiving recognition due to students receiving individualized attention. The three overarching themes that emerged consisted of: (1) teachers individualizing instruction; (2) students being in close proximity of the teacher; and (3) distractions being at a minimum.

### *Student Achievement*

Data indicated that student achievement was best promoted when a variety of resources and strategies were utilized. Seven overarching themes emerged and consisted of: (1) the A+ Program; (2) the Star Student Program; (3) a cooperative staff; (4) the Project Acceleration; (5) the instructional program; (6) the Comprehensive Management System; and (7) the communication among stakeholders.

### *Parental Involvement*

Data indicated that parental involvement made a positive impact the school. Three overarching themes included: (1) being involved with school activities; (2) assisting with homework; and (3) communicating with school staff.

### Research Methodology

#### *Interviews*

A descriptive case study design was used to describe the school and develop comprehensive answers to the overall-guiding question: “How did a small elementary school in rural northeastern North Carolina become a School of Distinction?” Information was gathered through interviews, observations, and review of documentation to describe the characteristics that led the school to achieve distinction status. Results are presented as overarching and supporting themes organized around the study’s domains.

Data analysis was conducted according to methods described by Berg (1989), Merriam (1998), Patton (1990), and Rubin and Rubin (1995). At the completion of each interview, I transcribed the collected data. The overarching themes are the major themes that emerged from each data source. Also emerging from the data were themes identified to illustrate support for the overarching themes. To help the reader understand the themes, the data are illustrated in matrices according to each subordinate research question and data collection method. Data were coded for content and theme categorization. At the completion of each observation and review of documents, data were also coded for content and theme categorization. Triangulation of data from the three data collection methods and across participants’ transcripts was used to confirm themes identified by me throughout the analysis steps.

Data triangulation as described by Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) was used to strengthen the credibility of the study and to help reduce bias that might result from relying exclusively on any one data collection method. Although the data collected from the school will not allow for general transferability of the findings, it will provide others with a rich and deep examination of a variety of characteristics and will provide a detailed description of the themes that led to one school's recognition.

Prior to writing this document, I conducted a review of the literature using a listing of characteristics for successful schools. This listing consisted of the following key words and phrases: (a) high-performing, (b) student achievement, (c) leadership, and (d) elementary schools. Based on the literature review, the following characteristics emerged, and the data collected were categorized into domains that contributed to the academic success of a school and led to the development of this study: (1) principal leadership; (2) teacher involvement; (3) class size; (4) student motivation; and (5) parental involvement. Refer to Figure 1 in Chapter 1, page 10 for a visual of School of Distinction characteristics.

To ensure the credibility of the study, every effort was made to address all interviews, observations, and documentation reviews with total openness and fairness. Every attempt was also made to be as objective as possible and in reporting the exact words as told to me by the interview participants. I reported only those things directly observed by me while shadowing the principal, observing the selected classrooms and other school activities, and reviewing the pertinent documents. In addition, every effort was made to make the narrative readable and enjoyable.

### *Interview Procedures*

The interviews were conducted using the interview protocol established with my co-chairs and committee members, based on procedures established by McCracken (1988), and Patton (1990). Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the school system's superintendent, the principal and the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Confidentiality of the interviews was reviewed with all participants. I followed a written guide as suggested by Berg (1989). All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed by me. After transcriptions, I secured all tapes in my possession to ensure confidentiality. Specific data from the interview participants were categorized by content and theme, according to repeated responses of key words, phrases or direct quotes and then placed into the appropriate study domain.

A total of 22 individuals were interviewed from the following categories; the principal, teachers, students, and parents. The teachers, students, and parents were associated with the study focus grade levels, 3, 4, and 5. The principal identified the parents who participated. The teachers identified students who participated. All teachers from grades 3, 4, and 5 were interviewed. These were persons the principal and teachers felt would be willing and capable of articulating responses to the research questions, and who were also associated with grades 3, 4, and 5. In order to gain a rich detailed account regarding the participants' perception of how their school reached a high level of success, specific research questions were asked of them. These questions were used to provide a detailed description of the themes that contributed to the school's success. Participants were also given the opportunity to discuss any additional information not addressed through the research questions.

My intentions were to continue providing rich descriptions for communicating a holistic picture of what makes the school successful by presenting and describing additional experiences that were introduced by the participants who were interviewed. This holistic picture provided a clearer lens through which to view the participants' environment.

I sought to identify themes in each domain by looking at repeated words, phrases, statements that were highly emphasized by participants, or direct quotes that emerged from the data collected. This was done through data triangulation in order to identify themes that contributed to this school's success.

### *Description of Participants*

A description of participants is provided to assist the reader with background information of the individuals who shared their experiences and perceptions.

Confidentiality according to Berg (1989) "means an attempt to remove from the research any elements that might indicate the subjects' identities" (p. 138). For the purpose of this study, participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. The primary participants in this study consisted of the school's principal, teachers who taught third, fourth, and fifth grades; and third, fourth, and fifth grade students and parents who had children in those same grades. The number of years of professional experience, grade level, age, and race/ethnicity of the principal and nine teachers are presented on Table 1.

#### *School Staff.*

Mr. Nelson, who is a 47-year-old white male, is principal of the selected school and a native of this small rural community. He has been with the school system for 24 years and has been principal of the school for 16 years.

Table 1

Professional and Personal Data of Principal and Teachers

Participants/Grade Level	Yrs.	At SS	Total Yrs. Exp.	Age	Race/Ethnicity
<b>Principal</b>					
Mr. Nelson		16	24	47	W
<b>Third Grade Teachers</b>					
Mrs. Atwater		16	23	49	W
Mrs. Carson		14	14	53	W
Mrs. Thompson		6	29	50	W
<b>Fourth Grade Teachers</b>					
Mrs. Anderson		6	10	35	W
Mrs. Farmer		9	9	30	W
Mrs. Rivers		13	13	35	W
<b>Fifth Grade Teachers</b>					
Mrs. Edison		24	24	48	AA
Mrs. Harrison		29	29	52	AA
Mrs. Staton		16	26	49	AA

Note. At SS stands for years at the selected school.



The teachers involved in the study consisted of 3 black and 6 white females ranging from 30 to 53 years of age. There were no male teachers in the grade levels studied. Mrs. Atwater, Mrs. Thompson and Mrs. Carson are third grade teachers. The average teaching experience for the third grade teachers is 22 years. Their years of teaching experience range between 14-29 years.

Mrs. Farmer, Mrs. Rivers, and Mrs. Anderson are fourth grade teachers. The average teaching experience for the fourth grade teachers is 10 years. Their years of teaching experience range between 9-13 years.

Mrs. Staton and Mrs. Edison are fifth grade teachers. Mrs. Harrison is the fifth grade special education teacher. The average teaching experience for the fifth grade teachers is 26 years. Their years of teaching experience range between 24-29 years.

#### *Students.*

Students who participated in the study are as follows: third grade, Veronica, Renee, and Robert. Fourth grade students were Timmy, Chuck, and Alice. Fifth grade students were Samatha, Valeria, and Larry. The students involved in the study consisted of 4 males (2 black and 2 white) and 5 females (3 white and 2 black). A total of 9 third, fourth, and fifth grade students were interviewed. Their ages ranged between 8 to 11 years old. Table 2 represents data on grade level and race/ethnicity of students who participated in the study.

#### *Parents.*

A total of 3 parents were selected to participate in the study. Mr. Allen, a parent has a son in the second grade and one in the fifth grade. He is a white 38-year old

Table 2

Student Data Information

Student	Grade	Race/Ethnicity
Renee	3	W
Robert	3	AA
Veronica	3	AA
Alice	4	W
Chuck	4	AA
Timmy	4	W
Larry	5	W
Samatha	5	W
Valeria	5	AA

business consultant working in financial management. Mrs. Wilson, a black female is approximately 35 years old and, has a daughter in the fourth grade. She is a homemaker and very involved with her daughter's education and attending school activities. Mrs. Henderson, a white female, is 41 years old and, has a daughter in third grade. She is also a homemaker and very active with the PTA and other school activities. She volunteers twice a week and assists teachers in the classroom with tasks identified by the teachers. Mrs. Henderson was the only parent who had a child participating in the study.

### *Observations*

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) suggested that the researcher should write as many of the observer's comments as possible as the data is collected. They further indicated that observations should stimulate critical thinking about what the researcher sees and allows the researcher to be more than a recording machine.

To get a better flavor for what was happening in the school, a one-day shadowing was conducted with the principal. A total of 18 teacher observations, 1 observation at a staff meeting, a PTA meeting, and an assembly program was also conducted. In an effort to further document information in the data collection phase, a journal of my observations was kept to better record my own thinking, feelings, experiences, and perceptions of the observation process. These field notes were also coded for content and theme categorization into the study's domains. This content and theme categorization was done by comparing key words, phrases, or what I thought was occurring while observing the behavior of school staff, students, and parents during selected school activities.

### *Document Review*

Permission was obtained from the principal to view documents and make any copies that would add information to the study. Documents included administrative letters and memos, committee minutes, student assessments, and the school improvement plan.

A document according to Merriam (1998) and Patton (1990) allows the researcher to increase her knowledge about the study being conducted and it also contains valuable information and insights into the phenomenon being studied. Patton also suggested that document analysis gives a “behind-the-scenes look at the program that may not be directly observable and about which the interviewer might not ask appropriate questions without the leads provided through the document” (p. 245). To provide a better interpretation of activities revealed through the documents, I constantly went back and forth among the data collection sources to further document that occurrences were or were not taking place at the school. This was done in an effort to ensure continued trustworthiness and credibility.

### *Data Analysis*

Data from the three data collection sources: interviews, observations, and document review, were analyzed. After I transcribed the recordings from the interviews, I began to categorize data into smaller units to further analyze for content and emerging themes. I constantly compared words, phrases and direct quotes in order to identify patterns and emerging themes. The recurring themes allowed me to build on the strengths of each data collection source and to compensate for weaknesses of another source. The smaller units of data were categorized into the study’s domains: (a) principal leadership;

(b) teacher involvement; (c) class size; (d) student achievement; and (e) parental involvement. Based on these domains, overarching themes and their supporting themes were identified as reasons the school received distinction status.

According to Merriam (1998), “data analysis begins with the first interview, the first observation, and the first document read” (p. 151). I followed Merriam’s guideline and began analyzing data after each interview, observation, and documentation review. This allowed me to write in my journal thoughts or hunches for which additional questions had emerged. The immediate interaction with participants, observations, and document review allowed me to report data triangulation for a clearer interpretation of my study for the reader. The interaction also allowed me to identify patterns and show repeated findings that led to the development of emerging themes in order to answer the study’s research questions. These repeated findings developed into overarching emerging themes that were supported by similar themes that emerged from the study.

#### Data Management

For the purpose of retrieving specific pieces of data, codes were assigned to the categories being described. For data analysis that could not be categorized into any of the domains that developed or that the study was based on, other codes were assigned as needed. Data that did not add any substance to the study was excluded from the analysis and the reason[s] for its exclusion was detailed and documented.

During the interview notes were made of new information presented by the participants. At the conclusion of the interview, follow-up questions were asked of the participants to provide a more detailed description for the reader. After data from

interviews, observations, document review, and researcher's notes had been gathered and analyzed, I began writing the results that were organized around the research questions.

### Triangulation of Data

In my attempt to understand how this school reached distinction status, I conducted interviews with key participants, observed the staff's, students' and parents' behavior and reviewed school documents. Each participant described in the interview their perception of reasons the school had become successful. However, I observed different school activities and reviewed school documents in order to collect additional data to add to the credibility of the study.

The three data collection methods assisted in establishing the credibility of the overarching and supportive themes. In addition, the documentation gave me a behind-the-scene look of events that had already occurred and it also gave a look at the future plans of the school. Due to the use of the three data methods, I was able to report a more complete picture of the type of things happening in the school. A more complete and thorough picture of the overarching themes along with the supporting themes that were identified in the study are discussed in the themes and supporting findings from data triangulation section beginning on page 148.

### Theme Development

While analyzing data for systematic comparisons, emerging themes were recorded from the interviews, observations and document review. Berg (1989) pointed out that a theme in its simplest form is a "simple sentence or a string of words with a subject and predicate" (p. 112 & 113). He also emphasized that a theme is a very useful unit to count. Berg further indicated that themes are located in a variety of places. Rubin and Rubin

(1995) suggested that “themes provide explanations for how or why things happen” (p. 234). Therefore, I looked for themes from paragraphs, sentences, phrases, key words, and direct quotes of the interviews. I also looked for themes that emerged from notes taken during the observation and documentation review. These emerging themes were then categorized as overarching and supporting themes into the study’s domains to help answer the research questions in order to provide explanations for the things happening in the school.

Smaller units of data were recorded on forms that pertained to each research question as discussed by each category of participants. The data from the forms later assisted in the development of matrices indicating the results of the study. By identifying themes I was able to build a rich detailed description of events that occurred at the selected school.

To further identify themes, I looked for comments the participants focused on as major points they wanted heard. The concepts that were recorded from interviews, observations, and documentation review were considered themes based on the findings from key words, phrases, highly emphasized statements, or direct quotes.

The constant comparative method was used, along with content analysis to identify overarching, emerging themes and descriptions for all data collected. The analyzed data was condensed and made systemically comparable for further analyzing of themes. The data were analyzed in order to identify a key word, phrase, or a direct quote to put into narrative form to describe characteristics of this small elementary school.

## Report of the Findings

### *Demographics of Selected School*

Based on the monthly attendance reports submitted by the school system's 5 principals, the school system serves approximately 2,014 students (as per September 12, 2002 figures). Students are served through a pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade alignment. With a budget of a little over \$15 million, an instructional staff of 190 is employed. There are 3 elementary schools, 1 middle school, 1 alternative school and 1 high school. The school system is fully accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The community surrounding the school is made up of families from diverse backgrounds in regard to race and income. The county has a population of approximately 10,000 residents.

The selected school has a pre-kindergarten through fifth grade alignment. It is located in a small rural community that has only a few small businesses and no major industries. Based on the school principal's second monthly report, for the 2002-2003 school year, the school had an enrollment of 273 students. Race/ethnicity is as follows: 59% White; 38% African American; .01% Asian; .01% Hispanic; and .01% Multi-Racial. There were approximately 40 students in each grade. There are approximately 3-to-5 students with special needs per classroom. About 55% of the students receive free or reduced-priced lunch. The school is the recipient of Title 1 Compensatory Education federal funds, and is classified as a Title 1 school-wide project. According to The Elementary and Secondary Act (1965) the free and reduced lunch qualification must be above 50 % in order to qualify for this funding. Under Title 1 Compensatory Education Funds, participating schools serving 50% of its total enrollment from low-income



families can become a school-wide Title I program funded to expand the flexibility and quality of education to all students.

The original building that houses a few classrooms of the selected school, was constructed in the late 1950s to serve students from elementary to high school. Since 1963 the school has undergone different grade level configurations. Construction began in 1997 and the school became a brand new facility. Connecting wings from the new facility were added to parts of the original structure to create one larger facility. In 1998, the school was once again reorganized to house the present configuration with grades pre-kindergarten through 5. Upon entering the main entrance at the front of the building, a brightly decorated bulletin board displays the outstanding achievements of students and staff for the month. Each grade level is located in a pod that has a workroom/conference room. Each classroom has two entrances--one from the main hallway and the other from the outside. The automated media center has a large circulation area with an adjoining MacIntosh computer lab. The computer lab is operated with a fulltime media/teacher assistant. The art room is equipped with counter space especially designed for elementary children. The wide hallways allow students to move through the building without being crowded. The large playground has age appropriate colorful equipment for each grade level. This school appeared to provide a clean, inviting, safe and orderly environment to promote high quality teaching and student learning.

#### *Discussion of Interview Findings Categorized by Research Questions*

The following section of this chapter identifies the findings from the interviews. These interviews were categorized by each subordinate research question and by each group of participants. This section is formatted to provide a thicker, richer, detailed

description of how each participant responded to research questions. Therefore, data were reported through specific descriptions and interpretive commentary. Themes that evolved across each category of participants describe characteristics that contributed towards the school's recognition. The results are written in a narrative format describing the participants' perceptions.

To help the reader identify participants' responses the following codes were used (I-interview transcript), followed by letters and a number that identify the participant and grade level they represent (P-principal; T-teacher; S-student; and PT-parent), followed by a number representing the month the data collection occurred, and finally the page number of the quote being referenced from the transcript. Later in this chapter specific data from the interview section will be triangulated with data from observations and document review in the report of triangulated findings beginning on page 149, to provide a more holistic picture of what the school looked and felt like.

*Research Question 1: In What Way Does the Principal's Leadership Contribute to the School's Success?*

*Principal's Response to His Leadership Style.*

The principal stated, "I feel that my leadership contributions consist of being a flexible leader, assisting teachers with curriculum matters and being supportive" (I/P/7/1). He stated that he would always try to find money for curriculum materials and staff development activities when teachers made a request. He went on to say that all teachers should benefit from staff development activities and that he would allow as many teachers to attend, as his resources would allow. Teachers also made decisions

regarding staff development activities that were attended away from campus or those conducted on site.

The principal repeatedly emphasized that he believed in supporting and encouraging his staff. He indicated that if he had teachers who wanted to pursue their National Board Certification or an advanced degree, he would support them in their efforts, through early release time or words of encouragement. He continued to point out that he would always encourage teachers to do their best with the students they instruct everyday. He constantly communicated to the staff how parents expected them to give their children the best education they could provide. He also praised them for all that they did, but continued to encourage them to do their best and to encourage their students to try and do their best.

Throughout the interview, the principal stated that he was a firm believer in following the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, and he required all of his teachers to use it as a planning guide. It was further indicated that following the Standard Course of Study helped everyone stay focused on the curriculum. The principal summed up his reason for ensuring that the North Carolina Standard Course of Study was being used by stating, “Since the state holds us accountable we have to make sure we are addressing the state standards in order to reach the goals we desire. These teachers have experience teaching these standards. They have been here for a long time and they know what it means to be held accountable. Therefore, we need to follow the standards in the document that the state has prescribed for us” (I/P/7/2).

During a telephone conversation with the principal on April 10, 2003, I asked him how he maintains an experienced staff at the school. He had this to say:

I remember when I had to hire a lateral entry teacher or a provisional teacher. My whole staff worked to support those teachers. That support may have been something as small as covering that teacher's class one afternoon a week for the last thirty minutes of school because the teacher [lateral or provisional] had to drive one and one-half to two hours to a college or university to take courses to fulfill lateral entry or provisional requirements, in order to obtain a clear teaching license. Or, it may have been just a word of encouragement. Even with the courses they have to take our local county has a policy to reimburse teachers who have to clear lateral or provisional requirements. This reimbursement policy is also used for any teacher or teacher assistant obtaining an advanced degree or seeking additional certification in their teaching area. They aren't reimbursed the full tuition, but they appreciate the reimbursement that they receive. We even pay them a stipend when they are involved in planning and participating in professional development during the summer months. And then we trust our teachers like the professionals they are. We try not to conduct a lot of after school staff development because the teachers have worked hard during the day and they are tired. We plan as much during the workdays as possible. Sometimes we have to release them [the teachers] during the regular school day and hire a substitute for the classroom. I don't look over their shoulders. I let them do their work. We don't have a strict dress code policy, and I think that helps too. And then these folks stay with us. Reasons for leaving would be to relocate or go to another school within the district due to a decline in enrollment at this school (I/P/4/Phone Call).

In conclusion, the principal indicated that he possessed different leadership characteristics that contributed to the school's success. He felt that his ability to be creative and resourceful with funds when it involved the purchase of supplies and materials that would enhance the instructional program. Another contribution was to support, encourage, and maintain an experienced staff. This was accomplished by providing support to teachers obtaining a clear teaching license, or seeking advanced degrees or certification, and treating his staff as professionals. His next contribution was to be supportive of decisions involving the curriculum and staff development initiatives. Finally, he felt that his ability to encourage his staff and students, communicate with the staff and parents were characteristics that were already effective, but will continue to look for ways of improving on the way he communicates with others.

*Teachers' Response to the Principal's Leadership Contributions to the School's Success.*

When the teacher participants were asked questions about the principal's leadership, all of the teacher participants expressed that the principal's leadership contributed to the school's success because of his supportive nature. They supported their statements by indicating that whatever instructional material they found that they thought would enhance the instructional program, and if funds were available, the principal would do what he could to get the needed resources. If funds were not available, he would always seek other avenues.

Mrs. Atwater commented that she felt the principal's leadership didn't consist of looking for different types of instructional programs or staff development activities for the staff. He left those decisions up to the staff and then he would support them on their

decisions. Six of the nine teachers indicated that the principal also demonstrated his support by attending campus and off campus staff development sessions with his teachers when his schedule permitted. Two of the 9 teachers further indicated that, they would let him know about a consultant that they would like to bring to the school, and he supports their decision. They continued to point out the trust and empowerment the principal gave them in making instructional and staff development decisions. All teacher participants were in agreement that the principal held them accountable for the jobs they performed. This accountability was also viewed in the school improvement document. Instructional strategies were listed and the person(s) responsible for implementing the strategies were also included.

Four of the 9 teachers indicated that the principal encourages them to pursue advanced degrees and certification. They also stated that he encourages teacher assistants to return to school to obtain their teaching degrees. Mrs. Staton remarked regarding his support and encouragement:

“When you look at research that ask new teachers in particular why they are leaving the profession, the number one reason seems to be lack of support. You can ask any teacher or support staff here and they will tell you, we may not get everything we want here, but Mr. Nelson definitely supports us” (I/T5/8/4).

It was stated by 6 of the 9 teachers that the principal is a good communicator. They indicated that the principal constantly shared information and kept them informed of state and district level policies, procedures, testing, and curriculum changes. They continued to provide examples of his communication skills by stating that he sends letters home to parents letting them know about events that are occurring at the school. During

grade level meetings, he communicated the importance of using the disaggregated testing data to focus on continuous improvement. The communication file of the school renewal plan had a variety of sample memos that the principal wrote to his staff. Four of the 9 teachers commented that he writes memos almost everyday and ends them by thanking the teachers for all the hard work that they do. They indicated that that made them feel appreciated and the appreciation that the principal gives them trickles down to the students.

All 9 teachers stated that, the principal's expectations are very high for the staff and students. However, Mrs. Atwater stated, "It's not his leadership that motivates us to do what we do, but it's more from inside of us. I think that if we had a bad principal, we would still be motivated to do what we do. He does have an impact on how the staff works but we would make the growth in spite of his leadership" (I/T3/8/1). Three teachers indicated that when a problem occurs with one of the tested grade level areas, the principal didn't bring anything to the table that told them how to solve the problem. However, he would let the teachers take the lead on developing strategies to solve the problems involving the curriculum state tested areas, and then he would support their decisions.

Seven of the 9 teacher participants indicated that Mr. Nelson allowed them to be innovative as far as trying new ideas. All teachers agreed that he empowers them to make decisions on what will impact their classrooms, or what will make an influence on student performance. "He's not as involved with the curriculum as a classroom teacher would be," stated Mrs. Anderson, "but he constantly preaches the North Carolina Standard Course of Study" (I/T4/9/1).

In summary, the principal was resourceful in securing funds to enhance the instructional program. He was supportive of staff development opportunities that were initiated by his staff. He encouraged his staff and students to always do their best. Finally, the principal was viewed as an effective communicator.

*Students' Response to Principal's Leadership Contributions to the School's Success.*

All student participants indicated that the principal's leadership contributed to the school's success. The students did not view the principal's contributions in the same manner as the other category of participants. Every student believed that addressing discipline problems and making sure that everyone was on their best behavior was a necessary component for any school's success, and they felt that the principal made this happen. The students also indicated that they enjoyed having Mr. Nelson participate in school activities with them. Samantha commented that, "He's the principal and when he takes the time to participate in an activity with us, we know he cares about us. He also helps us get the school supplies we need for class. When he comes in our classroom, he takes notes about what we are doing, and sometimes he just comes in to say, I like what you are doing boys and girls, keep up the good work" (I/S5/9/1).

In summary, the students perceived the principal's contribution as one that addressed discipline problems. Most importantly, they saw him as a principal who would get involved in student activities with them, because he cared about them. The students also liked it when he praised them for working hard in school.



*Parents' Response to Principal's Leadership Contributions to the School's Success.*

The parent participants indicated that the principal's leadership definitely contributed to the school's success. They felt that he tries to keep everyone on the same goals and the same track. It was also unanimously communicated by the parents that, the principal, supports the teachers in achieving the school's goals, and he encourages the teachers to keep the parents informed of the curriculum. The parents continued to point out that the principal wanted everybody going in the same direction, and he constantly communicated the goals of the school during every PTA meeting.

Mrs. Wilson had a similar point of view concerning the principal's leadership contributions. She stated that the principal and the teachers communicate with parents about the curriculum during parents' night and at PTA meetings and through parent memos. This communication was observed during the October PTA meeting/book fair night. Mr. Allen stated, "If parents can't attend Parent's Night or a meeting when curriculum information is being shared he would provide the same information with the parents who were unable to attend" (I/P5/8/1). Mr. Allen continued to point out that the principal tries to make the curriculum available and accessible to parents at all times. As a parent, "I don't always agree with the curriculum the school uses and I let the principal know this, but I still support the curriculum because that is what's being communicated by the principal and teachers" (I/P5/8/1).

All the parents agreed that Mr. Nelson encourages the students during assembly programs and from time to time, makes encouraging announcements over the intercom. They further agreed that he is also concerned about the students' welfare, concerned

about the teachers, and makes decisions based on the well being of the children. Mrs. Wilson stated, “It appears that whatever the teachers decide, he is behind them 100% as long as it benefits the children, and to me that says support and leadership are definitely demonstrated” (I/P4/8/2).

Overall, the parents also viewed the principal as showing appreciation and encouragement to his staff. They also say that he is an effective communicator who cares about the students.

In summary, participants expressed the principal’s the following comments to describe the support of the staff in contributing to the school’s success. The principal indicated his support was demonstrated through funding and assisting teachers with curriculum and instructional resources. The teachers described his support by empowering them to make decisions on what will impact the classroom and student performance. The students indicated that they felt the principal’s support because he took care of the discipline. The parents indicated that he is a good communicator who supports his teachers. While many themes were expressed and emerged concerning the principal’s characteristics that contributed to the school’s success, overarching themes emerged that contributed the most towards the success of the school. The themes identified through the interviews indicated the principal’s ability to: (1) seek funding; (2) support staff development initiatives; (3) encourage staff and students; (4) communicate with school staff and parents; and (5) demonstrate concern for students’ welfare. The overarching themes along with the supporting themes that emerged from participants on the principal’s leadership will be thoroughly described in the section on themes and supporting findings from data triangulation beginning on page 150.

*Research Question 2: In what ways do the teachers' involvement contribute to the school's success?*

*Principal's Response to Teachers' Involvement.*

When asked about the teachers' involvement in contributing to the school's success, the principal stated, "My teachers are very knowledgeable involving policies, and curriculum and instruction. They're probably the most knowledgeable and highly trained professionals involving policies and regulations on how to meet the needs of all students, especially special education students" (I/P/7/2). Throughout the interview, the principal continued to emphasize that the teachers plan together weekly to discuss strategies for instructional delivery that will try to meet the needs of all the students' ability levels. He continued to discuss the dedication and commitment of his staff in working with the students, parents, and each other to provide the best education for every student. He indicated that the teachers are at work on time and they are not afraid to work beyond their scheduled hours. He also took pride in repeating how the staff uses the North Carolina Standard Course of Study document to prepare students for state tests. He took further delight in stating that the staff also communicates the standards to parents.

He further stated that, "My staff doesn't always agree with me or with each other regarding decisions made at this school" (I/P/7/2). He smiled and chuckled when he said, "However, when it involves making sure that our students are successful, we put aside our differences and focus on the students" (I/P/7/2). He went on to state that his teachers were advocates for every child at the school, not just the ones they taught. He constantly indicated that his teachers took the school's mission and philosophy statements quite seriously by stating that they believed all children can learn. This was demonstrated

through the encouragement the teachers gave their students. The teacher let the students know that they believed in them, and they demonstrated their support to the students by taking time to assist them when they were having difficulty understanding skills being taught. He concluded by stating, “My teachers don’t just say that, they put it into action” (I/P/7/2).

In conclusion, the principal indicated that an important teacher contribution consisted of their knowledge and effective use of the North Carolina Standards. He emphasized that the teachers are very dedicated to their students and their profession. The final contribution was their ability to communicate with parents.

*Teachers’ Response to Teachers’ Involvement.*

The teacher participants responded to their involvement by indicating that they are hard workers, have high expectations of their students, and they care about their students. All teachers mentioned that they push their students to do more rigorous and challenging work because they know their students’ ability levels. Teachers also indicated that the students still have fun in the midst of meeting high and challenging expectations. One teacher commented that, “because we know the students’ ability levels, we push them to do their best” (I/T5/8/3). Mrs. Staton stated, “I teach my students to believe in themselves, and I let them know that I believe in them” (I/T5/8/3). Teachers also indicated that teachers don’t make large amounts of money in their profession. Therefore, the job that they perform everyday is due to their love for teaching. Mrs. Staton further stated, “I make myself available to them to give extra help, even if it means giving up my planning period to re-teach small groups, an individual, or the whole class” (I/T5/8/3).

The teachers strongly indicated that they used the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and their pacing guides when planning instruction. They further indicated that they taught what they are being held accountable for, and they are held accountable for making sure that the students are successful with the standards at all grade levels. The teachers were in agreement when they stated if you are going to be measured by the standards of the state then you teach the standards. They indicated that you do whatever it is that you can do to help the students reach the desired goals. Mrs. Staton stated, “I let the students know that I am held accountable for making sure they succeed in my class, and therefore they have to be held accountable also” (/T5/8/4).

The teacher participants were in unanimous agreement that attending workshops and conferences introduces strategies that might help them to make learning more meaningful, interesting and exciting for their students. Three of the 9 teachers indicated that they learn different strategies and techniques through planning and collaborating with other co-workers. They continued to emphasize that utilizing a variety of strategies, resource materials, best practices, and instructional strategies taken from conferences and co-workers is important when trying to increase student achievement.

Each teacher was very complimentary of all the teachers in the school by saying that they have very good, dedicated, qualified, and highly motivated teachers at this school. I asked a follow-up question wanting to know their reasons for speaking so highly of the other teachers. The number four responses were: (1) due to the small size of the school everyone gets to know what everyone else is doing; (2) they had been working with each other 5 years or more; (3) they communicated; and (4) they celebrated each other’s successes. They [the teachers] felt that based on their experience at the school,

they had the ability to communicate with the parents and each other. Mrs. Rivers indicated that, “Our communication process is good and we try to reach all stakeholders, however, we can always work on making it [communication] better” (I/T4/8/2).

I asked the teachers a follow-up question in April 2003 to find out reasons for them remaining at the school. Four of the 9 teachers live out of the county and the commute time one-way ranges from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes everyday. The remaining 5 live in the county. Four of those 5 are natives of the county, and 1 has been living in the county for 25 years. The teachers indicated that they remain for the following reasons: (1) the small class sizes; (2) support from the administration; (3) students want to learn; (4) little to no behavior problems; (5) supportive parents; and (6) 5 of the 9 indicated that this is home.

In summary, the teachers contributed to the school’s success by following the standards outlined by the state. They indicated that their dedication to the students, their ability to communicate with others, and their profession, was extremely important. Finally, the teachers indicated that students wanted to know that they cared about them.

#### *Students’ Response to Teachers’ Involvement.*

The students viewed the teachers’ involvement a little differently than the other categories of participants. They didn’t talk about accountability, standards or staff development activities. The students indicated that when they are having trouble understanding their class work, the teachers provided lots of extra help before classes started in the morning, during class time and during lunch. The students elaborated and stated that the teachers give practice tests to assist them in becoming better test takers. According to the students, once the teachers found out the specific skills that they were

having problems with, the teachers would re-teach those skills. The students also remarked that the teachers would let them know that they cared about them and that they wanted them to be the best that they could be. Three of the 9 students repeatedly commented that the teachers always encouraged them by telling them that they could do the work, but they have to always try a little harder.

According to the students, some of the teachers would even teach them how to study and take notes as they read. They gave students personal attention when they didn't understand what the teachers were teaching. They further stated if students were out of school for a while because they have been sick, the teachers would help them catch up on those things they had missed. The teachers always said nice things about their work, and they taught so that the students could understand it. Timmy commented, "They are always telling us how proud they are of us. That makes us want to work even harder" (I/S4/9/2).

In conclusion, the students indicated that the teachers used a variety of instructional strategies that assisted them in understanding the concepts. One student commented, "They push us and tell us that we can do the work, even when we think we can't. They believe in us" (I/S5/10/1). The students also felt that the teachers communicated with their parents. Finally, the students agreed that the teachers at the school cared about them.

#### *Parents' Response to Teachers' Involvement.*

The parents stated that the teachers at the school were caring teachers and do a wonderful job of communicating their expectations and informing the parents about the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and the End-of-Grade tests. The 3 parents

interviewed indicated that the teachers were a vital part in contributing to the success of the school. It was also stressed among the parents, that when they referred to the school's success, they first thought of students' success. But they also revealed that the students' success would not be possible if it was not for the direction and guidance they received from the teachers.

The parents also indicated that the teachers were leaders because of the meetings they planned for them to provide information concerning their children. They also felt that they provided leadership to the school because of the way they work with each other. Students see this type of behavior and they try to imitate it. They also felt that the teachers were dedicated to the students, and, they provided a lot of praise and encouragement for all students. They also noted that the teachers communicated effectively with the children, and treated them with respect. They all agreed that from time to time you might encounter an insensitive teacher who lacks the ability to effectively communicate with parents and students, but felt that it was very rare at this school. They reach out to the students and parents and they do a great job of communicating. It appeared from this group that the teachers encourage the students and they worked together to make sure the students were successful at the school.

All parents were in agreement that the teachers at this school cared about all of the students. They continued to point out that the teachers challenged the students, and they helped them to become independent thinkers and learners. They also indicated that the teachers worked with the students on how to be mentors for other students.

The parents also shared with me similar views concerning the teachers' involvement. They stated that the teachers shared copies of the North Carolina Standard



Course of Study for each child's grade level at the beginning of the school year. The parents felt that this was helpful in letting all the parents know the scope of what the children would be involved with for the school year. They further indicated that they enjoyed the teachers taking the time to share the North Carolina Standard Course of Study with parents because then they were able to follow and work on objectives at home with their children. It also allowed them to help reinforce the same objectives at home, what the teachers were doing in class.

Mr. Allen's perception of the teachers' contribution to the schools' success was the idea that the teachers really take the time to get to know each of their students. He went on to state that, "They get to know the community the students come from. I think it is good for a child when his teacher gets involved in that child's community and home environment" (I/P5/8/2). According to Mr. Allen, another contributing factor is that "The teachers work hard to develop relationships with the parents. I also see the teachers working with each other to determine what the needs of the students are, so they can address them" (I/P5/8/3).

Parents perceived the teachers' involvement, as being dedicated to the students and working to reach all ability levels. Parents also credited teachers with being effective communicators. Parent participants indicated that the teachers cared about and encouraged the students to do well in school.

In conclusion, there was agreement among participants that the teachers' involvement was a critical characteristic in contributing to the school's success. A more detailed explanation of the overarching themes that emerged concerning the teachers'

involvement as it related to the school's success will be discussed in the section on themes and supporting findings from data triangulation.

*Research Question 3: Does class size contribute to success?*

The positive effects that class size has had on the success of a school were documented by a well-known study conducted by Glass and Smith (1978). Maier, Molnar, Percy, Smith, and Zahorik (1997) conducted a later study that also indicated that class size has a positive impact on student achievement and the school's success.

*Principal's Response to Class Size.*

When the principal was asked about his perception concerning how class size contributed to the success of the school, he emphasized the importance of having small teacher to student ratio. He stated, "Class size has definitely contributed to our success" (I/P/7/3). The principal informed me that class size was very important to the staff and parents at the school. He also indicated that when he does the scheduling for the next school year, he tries to have classes averaging between 13 to 18 students. He emphasized that this small class size was especially important in grades 3, 4, and 5 since they are the grades that require students to take the state End-of-Grade tests. He summed up the importance of class size by stating, "I don't care who you are the smaller the class size, the better the opportunity is for that teacher to do a better job for the students to prepare them for End-of-Grade tests" (I/P/7/3).

In conclusion, the principal indicated that he felt class size definitely contributed to the recognition the school received. He felt that due to the student- teacher ratio, teachers do a better job of working with students because they are able to give more individualized instruction and attention. Finally, he indicated that because class size is so

important, he tries to schedule classes with 13 to 18 students in grades 3, 4, and 5, since those are the grades the state tests.

*Teachers' Response to Class Size.*

The teachers, when asked about how class size contributed to the success of the school stated that class size does help a great deal. They felt a small class size is critical to student achievement because students get to thoroughly engage in and complete more classroom activities with a minimal amount of distractions. Four of the 9 teachers indicated that they could arrange their rooms in cooperative groups and still have space to facilitate even smaller group instruction without noise level disruptions. The overall discipline is also better. They further indicated that students benefit from more individual attention when you have a smaller class. However, 2 of the 9 teachers stated that they believed they could still be successful with a large class, but having smaller numbers certainly enabled them to go to each child and give individual attention especially if the students do not understand the material.

One teacher had strong feelings concerning class size. She stated that, "Class size was very important especially during the time scheduled during recess or Comprehensive Management System" (I/T3/8/4). CMS as it was referred to, was time when students could return to class just to get extra help from the teacher. This was a way of scheduling students through one of the arts, guidance, media, and physical education classes each day to provide common planning time for teachers. During this time if a student is in an art class and needs to receive help from the regular classroom teacher, he or she is allowed to return to that teacher's classroom as long as he or she has the teacher's approval to get assistance. Mrs. Staton commented, "I don't mind giving up my planning

time because children definitely need and benefit from the individual attention” (I/T5/8/4).

When asked the follow-up question of what they considered to be an ideal class size, the teachers were in unanimous agreement that they considered 18 or less to be an ideal class size. They indicated that having a class this size enabled them to give attention more often during the class period.

According to 5 of the 9 teachers, having a small class size also allowed them to have the students help each other. Even though all the teachers agreed that a small class size is very important, one teacher commented, “We can’t always have a small class size, so we have to work with what we get and still try to be effective” (I/T3/8/4). The teachers felt that having peer tutors was important because the students at times, learn more quickly from having their peers assist them. They continued to remark on the importance of utilizing students as peer tutors. In a small class, this can be done with minimal distractions.

In summary, the teachers felt that smaller class sizes certainly contributed to the success of the school. They indicated that they had more time to work with students needing extra assistance. They also commented that students helped each other and were able to engage in more classroom activities. The teachers further indicated that the varying classroom activities enabled them to address the needs and learning styles of all students. Finally, teachers remarked that having small class sizes allowed them to make individual contact with each student more often during a class period to give extra help if needed.

*Students' Response to Class Size.*

All the student participants felt that class size definitely contributed to their success. They indicated that by being in small classes they were able to help each other and their teachers were able to give lots of individual assistance. Larry remarked, "he would prefer to be in a class of 18 - 20 and he felt that he would still be able to get help from his teachers because they help everybody" (I/S5/10/2).

Students further indicated that in a small class, they get the opportunity to serve as peer tutors. They indicated that it was "cool" being a tutor. I asked a follow-up question concerning how well their peers accepted their help. Their responses were positive. They indicated that today you may be the tutor, and tomorrow you might be the one being tutored by someone else in another subject. Six of the 9 students indicated that they enjoyed working in cooperative groups because they got to hear the opinion of others. The three fifth grade students indicated they have fun working in groups, but they preferred to do their work independently. I asked why, and two responded that they didn't like getting the same grade as everyone else and the other student indicated that she just preferred doing her work alone.

In summary, the students perceived class size contributions to be very important in their success. They remarked on the individual attention they received from the teachers and the help they got from the other students. They were also excited about their participation in additional classroom activities such as working on the computer, or participating in projects. They further stated that the teachers were able to monitor their assignments more closely, thereby providing assistance when needed. This they indicated

was a big plus to their recognition. Above all, the students stated that small class sizes contributed to their success because the behavior problems and distractions were few.

*Parents' Response to Class Size.*

The parents responded favorably in support of small class sizes. They all indicated that a small class size is very important because the teachers get to know the students' ability levels. Teachers would then be able to address the students' needs. Mrs. Henderson stated that, "Teachers are also able to observe the students closer, and they are able to see where a student needs individual help a lot sooner, when classes are smaller" (I/P3/8/2). Overall, the parents felt that a smaller class size allowed teachers to give students more personal attention. They indicated that as parents, they were fortunate that their children were in classes that had 15 to 18 students. They believed that due to the class size, the students are involved in more classroom activities and all students get a better opportunity to participate.

Mr. Allen stated that, "Teachers in smaller classes get to have a relationship with each child and they get to know each child's needs better" (I/P5/8/3). All parents agreed that the small classes at this school allowed the teachers to do more with the different learning styles of the students. Mr. Allen summed up his statement by saying, "I just feel that the small class my child is in allows him to get more attention and therefore, his needs are met" (I/P5/8/3).

Mrs. Wilson commented that, "If the class is too big, a lot of distractions occur" (I/P4/8/2). She continued by stating that, "Due to the small class my child is in, the teacher spends little time on behavior and more time on teaching" (I/P4/8/2). She indicated that her child's needs would be better served in an ideal class size of 12 to 15

students. I asked a follow-up and, Mrs. Wilson summed up her comments by saying, “I feel the teacher holds their attention better, and is able to accomplish more”(I/P4/8/2).

Parents indicated that class size contributed to the school’s recognition. They felt that the teachers could give students more individualized attention. They also indicated that room arrangement contributed, because students would stay on task better due to the teachers being constantly near them to give immediate feedback. The parents were also in agreement with students regarding being involved with more cooperative groups, and few behavior problems existing.

In summary, there appeared to be very strong agreement among the participants’ responses pertaining to class size and how class size contributed to the school’s success. Teachers repeatedly remarked that with a small class they are able to give more individualized instruction to students who may be struggling, and need a little extra time and assistance. A more detailed explanation is provided on the overarching themes that emerged to assist the reader with reasons for why small class sizes contributed to the overall school’s success. The description is located in the section on themes and supporting findings from data triangulation.

*Research Question 4: What happens in this school to promote student achievement?*

*Principal’s Response to Promoting Student Achievement.*

In responding to characteristics that promoted student achievement, the principal quickly stated, “We are an original A+ school and I like the A+ schools’ concepts” (I/P/7/5). He explained that in an A+ school, the entire school adopts a way of teaching and learning which is focused around the use of integrating the arts into the academics. He also spoke of the excellent guidance department at the school. According to the

principal, the counselor is also the sponsor of their Beta Club. He explained that the Beta Club is for fifth grade students.

The availability of computers according to the principal also promoted achievement. He continued to inform me that the students were allowed to use the computers daily, whether in the computer lab or the classroom. He also shared that the teachers used the computers to help reinforce instruction. He felt that the use of computers had definitely assisted in promoting student achievement.

The principal also spent an extensive amount of time talking about the vital role the PTA played in promoting student achievement. His concern was similar to that of the teachers and parents. He stated that only a handful of parents were active with the PTA and those parents assisted with fundraisings that were used to sponsor activities for teachers and students.

The principal identified the Comprehensive Management program as another factor that promoted student achievement. He talked about teachers getting together during this time to plan instruction, discuss strategies as to ways to enhance areas of instructional weaknesses, meet with parents and participate in grade level staff development. Students are involved in media, physical education, drama/music, or art during this CMS time.

The principal pointed out that promoting student achievement was not just dealing with the teachers, but it also included the bus drivers, the custodial staff and the lunchroom staff. He emphasized that all employees at the school were an important part of making sure the students achieved. The teacher assistants and the custodian would also attend the A+ training institute during the summer to help promote student achievement.



It was also indicated by the principal that the school did not have many discipline problems. He indicated the additional time that would have been spent on discipline was used on instruction that promoted student achievement. The principal summed up his views on discipline by stating, “I thoroughly believe that a well disciplined school has a better chance of increasing student achievement as opposed to a school that has a lot of discipline problems” (I/P/7/5).

In summary, the principal indicated that the entire staff became involved to effectively promote student achievement. He also felt that the Comprehensive Management System contributed because it provided an avenue for scheduling teachers and allowed common time for planning. The availability of computers at the school and the involvement of an active PTA also contributed to the school’s success.

*Teachers’ Response to Promoting Student Achievement.*

The teachers indicated similar views as the principal when questioned about student achievement. The teachers were in agreement that supportive activities at school, such as A+, Star Student and Project Acceleration and at home (parental support) promoted student achievement. However, the teachers highlighted providing individual instruction also assisted in promoting student achievement. The teachers stressed that their expectations and the state’s expectations were clearly articulated to the students and parents. There was unanimous agreement among teachers indicating that students need to receive daily praise and encouragement for what they do. Each teacher indicated that they cared about their students and expressed this through smiles, hugs, or just giving encouraging words, because they believed in their students and wanted them to be successful. They also indicated that the principal empowers them to make instructional

decisions. Mrs. Edison stated, “That lets us know that he trusts us” (IT5/8/3). They were all in agreement concerning how the concept of the A+ program is designed to address the multiple intelligences, and they structure their style of teaching accordingly.

As with the principal, the teachers strongly endorsed the role of the parents in promoting student achievement. According to the teachers, parents assisted students with homework assignments, projects, and provided schedules for them to follow. They went on to say that when parents assisted with reading assignments, it was always a plus for the students and parents. Mrs. Atwater summed it up when she said, “I think these characteristics are some of the main reasons that contributed toward student achievement, and that is the fact that our students want to achieve, the teachers expect them to achieve, and the parents wanted their children to achieve” (I/T3/8/6).

All teachers talked about the Star Students’ program. Each one indicated that at the end of each 9 weeks grading period, parties were held for those students who had been star students. This was the teachers’ way of letting the students know that they appreciated them for what they did. Mrs. Staton stated, “This goes back to Mr. Nelson ending every memo with a thank you for the hard work that we do. That makes us feel good to know that we are appreciated. That says to us that he is not in that classroom doing what we are doing, but he realizes that the school wouldn’t be where it is if he didn’t have us to give to the students what they need in order to be able to put us where we are. It’s like a chain reaction. He instills into us how important it is to achieve, and we in turn instill this into the students, letting them know just how important it is, and the students, are the ones who are really making the achievement” (I/T5/8/7). Teachers were in agreement that the Star Student Program was a great incentive for the students.

Each teacher shared her belief indicating that student achievement also involves more than just structured classroom activities. Student achievement also involved those little extra things, like CMS, and the plays the students participated in helps to promote achievement. The teachers indicated that CMS also provided time for them to be involved in ongoing “mini” staff development trainings. Therefore, on those times they were not available to provide tutoring assistance for the students. Teachers were in agreement that the A+ program was an exciting avenue for students to demonstrate talents that otherwise would go unnoticed. These types of activities helped as far as developing leadership skills in the students.

The teachers indicated that Project Acceleration indeed contributed to the school’s success. Teachers also indicated that they tutored students in the after-school tutoring program. Some teachers tutored 2 days per week other teachers tutored 3 days. Teachers also informed me that the purpose of Project Acceleration was to remediate students’ areas of weaknesses on skills that were weak to help them become areas of strengths. The students who participated in this program were students who scored below level III on End-of-Grade tests.

All teachers talked about the Personalized Education Plans that were also developed for students who scored below level III on the End-of-Grade tests. As a grade level team, teachers met with the parent during their CMS time to develop strategies and a plan of action to best meet the needs of the student. If parents were unable to attend during CMS time, afternoon conferences would be scheduled. Mrs. Atwater remarked, “It’s sad that some parents still won’t come for after school conferences to discuss and be involved in their child’s Personalized Education Plan” (I/T3/8/6). Teachers were in

unanimous agreement that their goals were to ensure that all students scored a level III or higher on the End-of-Grade tests and to help students be successful.

Mrs. Carson added, “I believe an important factor that helps to promote student achievement is the fact that everyone is working together. We have the support from our principal, and we definitely go by the saying of ‘It takes a whole village to raise a child,’ because everyone does work together” (I/T3/8/4). Four of the 9 teachers remarked that they might not be able to reach a child, but there would be another teacher at the school who could show them something that would help them get through to that child because they have had that child before. They were all in agreement that everything does not work for every child. One teacher remarked, “Just having somebody else to go to and say, what can you tell me about this child. I’m not getting through, what can I do to reach this child, that definitely promotes achievement” (I/T5/8/6).

Three teachers remarked that the staff felt like family. Staff members joined in the celebrations of births, marriages, graduations and other special occasions. Staff also joined in comforting each other and students who had lost family members, or encountered illnesses or other tragedies. Mrs. Rivers commented, “It’s not uncommon to see staff giving hugs to students or giving compliments to one another” (I/T4/9/4).

Teachers spoke with enthusiasm regarding the mentor program at the school. This involved every staff member in the school mentoring 4 to 6 students the entire school year. Staff members were assigned students at the beginning of the school year and mentored the same students all year. Staff talked with students concerning grades, behavior, doing well in school, and just encouraging them. Teachers indicated that staff members and students enjoyed this program.

The teachers felt there were many characteristics that contributed to student achievement at the school. They summed the contributions up by listing the A+ Program and Star Student Program as helping to develop talents and provide incentives to students respectively. They also felt that the Comprehensive Management System contributed because it allowed them to plan with their grade level colleagues. The principal was supportive and demonstrated care for his students. This caring characteristic was also noted for the teachers. The teachers continued to feel that Project Acceleration and all aspects of the instructional program contributed to the success. As has been reported in the previous questions, communication was viewed as a very important contribution.

*Students' Response to Promoting Student Achievement.*

The students spoke very positively when asked about their perception of what happens in their school to promote student achievement. They indicated that the principal and teachers care about them and everyone in the school encourages them to try harder. They tell us "You can do it" (I/S3, S4, S5/9,10).

Every student stated that they also felt that progress reports helped to contribute to their success. When the progress reports are sent home, parents treat it like it is the actual report card. If the grades are not good, the students indicated that their parents would take away privileges and make them work harder. The teachers would also be available to give them extra help during CMS time, along with the teacher assistants providing tutoring during the regular school day. According to the students, the after school tutoring that's called Project Acceleration was very helpful.

The students stated also that the A+ Program helped because whatever they did in their classrooms, they would draw about it in art, do activities about it in physical

education, check out a book about it when they went to the library, sing songs and act it out during music and drama. Each student spoke very favorably of the homework hotline. The homework hotline is a tool used by parents to make sure their child has completed all of their homework. The students also cited being able to use the computers in their classrooms and the computer lab to do assignments and projects as additional ways to promote achievement.

Students spoke more in favor of the Star Student Program than the teachers. They indicated that all students work hard on demonstrating good behavior, completing all work and trying to get on the honor roll or principal's list just to participate in the weekly recognition. Larry remarked that, "The Star Student Program helped me to do better in school because a lot of my friends were attending the Star Student parties, so I decided that I had to do better in school in order to attend the parties also" (I/S5/9/3).

In conclusion, all the students spoke very highly and fondly of receiving rewards and participating in the A+ and Star Student Programs. They indicated that they have to be on their best behavior and do all of their work in order to participate in the Star Student Program. They each agreed that this probably contributed the most toward student achievement. The students credited the principal and teachers also as being important contributors due to the caring manner the principal and teachers possessed. They saw their parents' involvement as receiving and responding to communication from the school.

*Parents' Response to Promoting Student Achievement.*

In responding to the same question on promoting student achievement, all the parent participants agreed that the Star Student Program helped to promote student

achievement. Mrs. Henderson reemphasized what the teachers had already said concerning this program, “This is based not only on achievement, but on behavior also. It brings respect for classmates and respect for the teachers” (I/P3/8/4). The parents felt that the principal and teachers were good at contacting them, being supportive, and caring about the welfare of the students. They each discussed how the teachers do their own personal rewards when students do well. Mrs. Henderson stated, “The little personal intricates that come from a teacher, you’d be surprised how much that means to a child” (I/P3/8/4). All the parents commented that these rewards let the students know that the teachers are encouraging them, and that they believe in them.

According to Mrs. Wilson, “Achievement came as a result of the teachers helping to build self-esteem in the students. I see the teachers working well together. The teachers see the potential in the students and they go after it. My experience with the teachers is that they go out on a limb for the parents and the students. There are a handful of parents who may feel otherwise, but that’s to be expected. No matter what you do, you are not going to reach everyone. But the majority of the parents will reach out to the teachers and try to find out how to make sure that their child is successful” (I/P4/8/4).

The parents’ responses indicated that rewards and incentives assisted in the students being successful. They also credited the entire staff as working together to meet the needs of the students. They viewed the principal and teachers as caring for the welfare of the students. They indicated that Project Acceleration and the entire instructional program assisted in the success. It was their perception that the communication with all stakeholders was very important.

In conclusion, participants' responses indicated similar activities such as the Star Student Program, A+ Program, and tutoring that promoted student achievement. It was my belief that these types of activities that occurred at the school had inspired the students to want to do their work, focus on good behavior, and focus on doing meaningful work. The principal, teachers and students were able to list more activities than the parents. Located in the section on themes and supporting findings from data triangulation will be a detailed description of the themes that emerged regarding student achievement.

*Research Question 5: In what ways are parents involved in supporting their child's education?*

*Principal's Response to Parent Involvement.*

When the principal was asked his perception to parental involvement, he commented that parents involved themselves in their child's education by attending PTA meetings, attending conferences, helping with homework, and just being supportive. He constantly remarked that the PTA had poor participation, and he would like to see more parents involved. At the conferences, parents were informed about the progress of their child and most of the time they had the support of their parents at the conferences. He continued to state that, "It is very important for parents and school personnel to communicate" (I/P/7/9). The principal elaborated on the fact that, if a conference had to be planned, the school personnel would try to schedule it during CMS, which was the teachers common planning time. The principal continued to explain that having a parent conference during common planning time allowed the entire grade level team to meet with the parent at the same time. The principal summed up by stating, "I think that



scheduling meetings with our parents during common planning time is a contributing factor to our success” (I/P/7/9). He further indicated that parents don’t always attend the conferences and the staff will be looking at ways to improve the attendance.

In summary, the principal indicated that parents should attend the PTA meetings, parent conferences, and just be supportive. He further stated, “Parents and school personnel need to communicate” (I/P/7/9).

*Teachers’ Response to Parent Involvement.*

The teachers were in unanimous agreement that all parents needed to be involved with their child’s education through attending meetings such as the PTA and just communicating with their child’s teacher. Teachers commented that, it’s usually the same parents attending the PTA meetings every year and it dwindles down to maybe a handful by the end of the year. They didn’t know if it was because the parents were too tired, lack of motivation, or didn’t care. They will come for fall festival, or other school activities, but they just won’t come on a regular basis to PTA meetings, and this is so important because of the curriculum updates that are provided during those meetings. The teachers strongly agreed that the curriculum update meetings also were designed to inform parents of classroom routines, instructional presentations and strategies, test taking strategies, and give their expectations for the students. Seven of the 9 teachers indicated that they sent weekly letters home concerning the child’s work for the past week. They would ask the parents to sign the work and send it back to school. Having the work signed by the parent was a way of informing the teacher that they were aware of how their child was performing on class work. Four teachers indicated that they kept a phone log by their phone so that when they received or made calls to parents, they could follow it up at a

later time. Another way of making sure that parents stayed involved was to conduct home visits. It was also noted that some of the teachers do some home visits, but not a lot. The teachers indicated that they would do a home visit if there were an urgent concern, and the parent couldn't come to the school. Another way teachers reached out to parents was through a survey. Twice a year teachers would send a school-wide general survey to parents asking for their input instruction, school climate, and communication. This was the teachers' way of soliciting information from parents on the types of things that were working well at the school, and the types of things that were not working well.

The teachers also acknowledged that parents receive a condensed copy of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study with explanations to the parents about testing, and the courses they would be taking. The grade level teachers shared the standards with the parents immediately following the PTA meetings. All teachers were in agreement that some parents used the information to reinforce material with their child, while some parents did not.

The teachers unanimously indicated that, parents needed to take the time to look through their child's notebook and check their homework. Many parents, according to the teachers, would call the homework hotline. They didn't let their children call. They called themselves to make sure that their child was doing the right assignments for homework. Mrs. Edison recalled an incident when a parent called her and said, "My child lied to me. He said he didn't have any homework, and I called that hotline and found out that he had homework. How do I stop him from lying about homework" (I/T5/8/7)? The teachers commented that the homework hotline keeps the parents informed, and parents depend on it.

In summary, the teachers felt very strongly that communication with the parents was very important and that the parents' understanding of the assignments was a necessity. The teachers felt that it was their responsibility to ensure that each parent was well informed and felt comfortable enough to communicate with them at anytime. Instruction via the homework hotline and the PTA were other important ways the teachers communicated with the parents after regular school hours, but many parents just didn't participate with the PTA.

*Students' Response to Parent Involvement.*

All students stated that their parents encouraged them to do their best and they would let them know the consequences if they didn't try to do their best. They also stated that their parents told them to always be on their best behavior. However, all students were in agreement that the involvement of their parents concerning homework was the most important contribution they made. Renee commented, "My parents don't play when it comes to doing school work or homework. They look at what I did in school that day, and they check homework every night" (I/S3/10/3).

In conclusion, the students indicated that the biggest contributing characteristic coming from parents is their use of the homework hotline. Students also stressed the importance of parents playing the role of encourager.

*Parents' Response to Parent Involvement.*

The parent indicated that teachers called on them when needed. They felt their big contribution to the school was being involved with the PTA. Parents further indicated that during the PTA meetings, the principal and teachers will discuss the goals of the school and the types of school policies and their procedures concerning student conduct or dress.

The teachers will discuss test-taking strategies and give suggestions as to ways parents can help children at home. Mr. Allen's perception of the PTA involvement was being able to get the school better equipment and extra resource supplies and materials to help educate the children. Even though parents are volunteers and assist with some school activities, they want to do more to assist with the instructional program. All parents expressed that, parent who work outside of the home, don't have free time to volunteer at the school but are able to assist their children at home. The parents also discussed the fact that volunteers were few and the volunteers who participated were basically the same ones that were always seen at school.

The parents who participated in the study were all supportive of the teachers and the administration. Each of the parents clearly articulated the role a parent should take in order to provide support for their child. A recurring theme that clearly emerged from the parent participants in contributing to their child's education was their involvement in a variety of school activities. It was evident that the parents realized the importance of maintaining communication with the school and their children. Mrs. Wilson epitomized the role of a parent as she stated that her role and the role of all parents should be to go and talk with their child's teacher at the beginning of the year. Parents need to talk with the teachers and let them know that they want to reinforce the work that the teachers are doing in school with their child at home. All parents were in agreement that parents should talk with their children about being respectful at school and always on their best behavior. They also felt that this was another way of letting their children know the importance of an education. Another contribution they all commented on was to always encourage their children to do their best.

Parents indicated that their involvement in the education of their child consisted of being supportive of their child's school activities, and volunteering at school. They too believed that communicating with the school staff was key to their child's education.

In summary of parental involvement, the responses of the principal, teachers, students and parents all strongly expressed the importance of parental involvement. According to the participants, parents also become involved when they follow the North Carolina Standard Course of Study that teachers had provided for them. It was also frequently communicated that parents assisted their children by encouraging them to do their best work and to be on their best behavior while in school. A narrative of the overarching themes along with the supporting themes that made an impact on the success of students and school staff will be described in the section on themes and supporting findings from data triangulation.

*Research Question 6: What other characteristics contribute to the school's effectiveness?*

This question was asked of each participant. This was their opportunity to add any information that they felt contributed to the school's success. When this question was asked, participants indicated that they had no other information to add. They further commented that they had addressed everything in the questions already asked.

Perhaps participants were talked out by this time and were ready for the interview to be over. Or, after thoroughly elaborating on each question, they just did not have additional comments that would add to what they had already stated.

### Observations

The following section of this chapter identifies observations that occurred during the study. Observations were a key component of data collection while addressing the

subordinate research questions. This section was developed to give the reader a more colorful description of participant behaviors along with my interpretive commentary during the observations. A part of this analysis process was determining if the behavior observed from the principal, teachers, students, and parents supported what was stated by participants during the interviews and to learn any additional information that might help answer the research questions.

As I shadowed the principal, conducted classroom observations, and attended selected meetings, I wrote many comments about my impressions. My intent was to look for types of behavior being demonstrated by the participants regarding things that were happening in the school that contributed to promoting student achievement, thus causing the school to receive recognition. I shadowed the principal for an entire school day and all teacher participants were observed twice throughout the months of July through October 2002 during the morning, and afternoon hours. My focus during each visit was to observe and document the principal's leadership style, teachers' instructional practices, the students' behavior in the instructional setting, and the parental involvement of parents participating in the child's education at school. During each visit I observed the principal's behavior, classroom arrangement, behavior of students, the teachers' instructional style and students' seating arrangements.

The results of the observations are written in a narrative format describing the behavior of participants and their environment. To help the reader identify participants responses the following codes were used (OBS-observation), followed by letters a number that identify the participant and grade level they represent (P-principal; T-teacher; S-student; and PT- parent) followed by a number representing the month the data

collection occurred and finally the page number of the quote being referenced from the observation transcript.

Later in this chapter specific findings from this section will be illustrated in the section on report of triangulated findings beginning on page 149 to provide additional support for interview and document findings. Triangulation of this data will be used to provide a more complete and detailed picture of how all stakeholders contributed to promoting student achievement.

### *Findings from Observations*

#### Shadowing of the Principal

Mr. Nelson began his school day around 7:15 in the morning. I also noticed that teachers were arriving about the same time. They were not required to report until eight o'clock. Upon arrival, the principal was engaged in administrative tasks such as handling phone calls and writing the day's announcements and then placing them in each staff members' mailbox. After the arrival of the office receptionist, I noticed her greeting students, parents, faculty and staff and answering the phone with a friendly smile on her face. As I read the announcements, he ended it by thanking the teachers for all of the hard work they do each day for students. Although he had staff members monitor students as they arrived, he became very visible at the main entrance greeting those students being dropped off by their parents and he then proceeded to the back of the building to be visible at the bus loop. He greeted parents and staff members as he met them in the hallway.

As I walked through the hallways with the principal, I noticed that he took time to acknowledge students who had been out of school due to sickness. He also praised

students for the way they were walking the hall. As students approached him to inform him of books they had read, he praised them for their accomplishment. The atmosphere at the school felt like belonging to a family. People were greeting each other in the hallways, giving smiles and cheery “good mornings.” I noticed teachers giving hugs to students, and students giving hugs to teachers. The smaller children who looked to be kindergarten or first grade were giving hugs to the principal. I received hugs and the students didn’t even know me.

While I was in the cafeteria, I noticed the child nutrition staff greeting students as they proceeded through the breakfast line. They too had smiles on their faces and let the children know that they were glad to see them. I also noticed the students saying thank-you as they received their breakfast tray, and getting back responses from the child nutrition staff such as, “you are welcome”, and “I hope you enjoy!”

Later during the day, I observed the principal participating in a grade level meeting and later discussing the purchase of computer software to be used with level I and II students, and the purchase of more challenging software for level III and IV students. As the principal continued to discuss the purchase of software and other instructional material, I did not once observe him telling the teachers what to order and the amount to be ordered. The grade level meeting continued with the discussion of the most effective way to utilize the services of a writing consultant who would be coming to the school in October. The principal informed the teachers during this grade level meeting that he would support his writing teachers on their decision to proceed with implementation of new writing guidelines. He worked on administrative reports that were



due and later conducted 5 unannounced classroom visits. These visits were brief, no longer than 5 to 10 minutes each.

### *Staff and PTA Meetings*

While attending a staff meeting and PTA meeting the principal talked about his vision, the mission and philosophy of the school. It is my belief that because of the mission and philosophy of the school and his vision he communicated with his staff, and parents, and these stakeholders did not lose focus of making sure all students worked to their fullest potential and were successful.

The staff meeting I attended began with the principal sharing memorandums and correspondences from the district office regarding policy and curriculum updates from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Discussions were conducted on information that was unclear. The principal involved staff members in the discussion by asking them to share information they had read or meetings or staff development sessions they attended. Before the meeting ended, the principal reminded them of the mission of the school. He also encouraged them to continue doing the most that they could for every child everyday. Finally, he thanked them for the hard work that they do for the students and to keep up the good work.

During the regular scheduled October PTA meeting, the fifth grade class presented a program entitled "Reading Roundup." This night was not just considered PTA, but also book fair and family night. Mr. Nelson took the opportunity to express to parents the importance of their children reading everyday. He also reminded them of the mission and philosophy of the school by indicating that all children can learn and the presentation on Reading Roundup was just another mode of instruction where students

experienced growth. Approximately 175 to 200 students, parents, and grandparents were in attendance for “Reading Roundup” night.

Being an observer at this event helped to reinforce responses from interview participants concerning the principal’s focused ability to remind parents of the school’s goals and mission. The principal informed everyone in attendance that night that students need to read everyday and that parents needed to provide time at home to read to their children and to also have their children read to them.

### *Classroom Observations*

The classroom observations occurred at different times during each visit. The focus of the first classroom observations were to become familiar with the participants’ surroundings, and to generate, “What if?” questions to be examined during the second observation.

Four of the 9 classrooms visited were arranged in semi-circles, and 5 were in cooperative learning groups with 3 to 4 students in each group. The number of students in each class provided a closeness that enabled students to cooperatively work with a minimal amount of distractions. Each class averaged 13 to 19 students. Each classroom had objectives written on the chalkboard during each visit. Students in each class were always actively involved in the classroom instruction.

Teacher participants constantly circulated throughout the classroom and monitored the students’ work. Due to the class size, teachers were always in close proximity giving immediate assistance to students who needed help. I also observed in Mrs. Staton’s class students wearing assistant’s badges to help other students. Students were well mannered and they raised their hands when they needed assistance or wanted

to answer or ask a question. Noise level was at a minimum, and students were provided more opportunities to ask teachers questions and each other.

During the classroom observations, teachers were providing relevant examples of the objectives being taught. They were consistently monitoring and providing feedback on the students' work along with providing opportunities for students to ask questions that assisted in increasing their level of understanding which led to success. They engaged the students in activities that focused on problem solving skills or higher order thinking skills. The observations further revealed that teachers used a variety of teaching styles to address the different learning styles. The different styles had students engaged in lectures, hands on activities, role-play, cooperative groupings and working independently. Some of my observations occurred during the beginning of a lesson and I noticed that the teacher would always begin with "Yesterday we talked about, or we discussed" (OBS/T5/9/2), and then they would give the objective for the day. An example of a daily objective stated by Mrs. Harrison is "Today we will identify the main idea of a paragraph" (OBS/T5/9/2).

As teachers brought the lesson to an end, they did a review of what had been discussed during the lesson. They asked questions of students pertaining to the lesson to determine their level of understanding. They would also ask students to tell one thing that they learned in class during that subject. After this was done, the teacher again stated what the overall objective was and stated what the lesson's assignment would be for the night. Teachers' lesson plan books were visible and they would refer to the plans as needed. I also noticed that during class activities, all teacher participants praised students for their accomplishment of a task. I noticed smiles coming from the teachers, nods of

approval, or verbal expressions such “I am so proud of you,” or I knew you could do it,” and “I like the way you worked together to solve that problem” (OBS/T4/9/1).

To summarize, classroom observations occurred at different times. Five of the classrooms visited were arranged in semi-circles and the other 4 classrooms visited, the arrangement was in cooperative groups. The room arrangement was organized to allow for students to work in cooperative groups. Each class observed ranged from 13 to 19 students. Teachers monitored the classroom providing immediate feedback to students needing assistance or giving a nod or pat on the back saying, “Good job.” Peer tutors were also assisting and distractions were few. Teachers got students on task very quickly upon entering the classroom. The objective for each lesson was written on the chalkboard. Teachers began the lesson with a review of the previous day’s lesson and ended the lesson with a review of what was taught for that day.

#### Documentation

The following section of this chapter addresses the research question through review of school documents. This section was developed to reveal to the reader what the different types of documents were saying concerning the characteristics of the selected school. It provides specific examples from documents as well as interpretive commentary. Later in this chapter specific examples from this document review section will be presented in the report of triangulated findings located on page 149. Triangulation of the document review, interviews, and observation findings will provide a thorough and complete picture of the types of characteristics happening at the selected school. What follows now are the results of document review.

## *Findings From Documentation*

### *Student Assessment*

Analyzing student testing data was a very important process for the principal and teachers, in determining the next steps to take toward continuous student improvement. The focus of continuous improvement consisted of the teachers analyzing the data by looking at the percent of students who were not mastering certain objectives and then re-teaching those objectives. The school clearly showed evidence of communicating student assessment results to all stakeholders. The data were used to make decisions concerning curriculum instructional improvements. School documents from the planning committee and curriculum and instruction committee demonstrated that the faculty, staff, and parents were given a detailed description of the achievement levels and ranges for the reading and mathematics End-of-Grade tests. Scale score ranges, were predetermined by the Public Schools of North Carolina Division of Accountability Services (2001), for all students taking the End-of-Grade tests. Appendix G1 through G3 provides a complete description for levels I, II, III, and IV along with the scale score ranges in reading. For grades 3, 4, and 5, the same descriptions for levels I through IV were used. The scale score ranges are the only differences that occur with each grade level.

However, the reader will notice no differences in ranges for third grade reading. The Public Schools of North Carolina Division of Accountability Services calculated a different scale score range for mathematics. However, Appendix G4, G5, and G6 illustrate more of an increase in the scale score ranges for mathematics from 1999-00 to 2000-01. The reader will also notice that the 2000-01 ranges for grades 3, 4, and 5 mathematics increased significantly. This increase was due to the mathematics test being

renormed for the 2000-01 school year (see Appendix G4, G5, and G6). The ranges remained the same from 2000-01 to 2001-02. Therefore, this school was recognized as a School of Distinction based on at least 80% of the students scoring level III or IV on the End-of-Grade reading and mathematics tests.

Table 3 illustrates the total number of students who took the North Carolina Reading End-of-Grade state test during a three-year period from school year 1999-00 through 2001-02. The table also indicates the number of third, fourth, and fifth grade students who scored on grade level (level III or IV) in reading during the same three-year period.

There appears to have been a decrease in the number of third grade students tested from school year 1999-00 to 2000-01. This decrease was a result of third grade retentions, student exemptions from testing, and students moving out of the school system. Students exempted from the reading or mathematics tests were students who were being served through the Special Education Program. The exemption was a result of a specific reading or mathematics learning disability that was written in the student's Individualized Education Plan. However the number of fourth grade students tested shows an increase from school year 1999-00 to 2000-01 and from school year 2000-01 to school year 2001-02. This increase was a result of students moving into the school system and students no longer qualifying for reading test exemptions. The table also illustrates only those students who scored Level III and IV on the state reading test. The number of third grade students who scored below Level III are as follows: school year 1999-00, 8 students; 2000-01, 7 students; and 2001-02, 3 students. The number of fourth grade students who scored below Level III are as follows: school year 1999-00,

Table 3

Number of Students In Grades 3-5 Scoring Level III or IV on Reading From 1999-02

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Grade	No. Tested			Level III			Level IV			Total		
	<u>99-00</u>	<u>00-01</u>	<u>01-02</u>	<u>99-00</u>	<u>00-01</u>	<u>01-02</u>	<u>99-00</u>	<u>00-01</u>	<u>01-02</u>	<u>99-00</u>	<u>00-01</u>	<u>01-02</u>
3	54	50	36	19	23	10	27	20	23	46	43	33
4	48	35	48	22	19	19	10	11	21	32	30	40
5	54	62	44	18	24	23	16	31	19	34	55	42

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Note. Number of students in grades 3, 4, and 5 who scored level III or IV on the North Carolina End-of-Grade Test Accountability Program.

16 students; 2000-01, 5 students; and 2001-02, 8 students. The number of fifth grade students scoring below Level III are as follows: school year 1999-00, 20 students; 2000-01, 7 students; and 2001-02, 2 students.

Table 4 illustrates the total number of students who took the North Carolina End-of-Grade Mathematics state test during a three-year period from school year 1999-00 through 2001-02. The table also indicates the number of third, fourth, and fifth grade students who scored on grade level (level III or IV) in mathematics during the same three-year period. Grades 3, 4, and 5 mathematics achievement levels are the same levels as grades 3, 4, and 5, reading achievement levels.

There appears to have been a decline in the number of third grade students tested from school year 1999-00 to 2000-01. This decrease was a result of third grade retentions, student exemptions from the mathematics test, and students moving out of the school system. However, the number of fourth grade students tested shows an increase from school year 1999-00 to 2000-01 and from school year 2000-01 to school year 2001-02. This increase was the result of students moving into the school system and students no longer qualifying for mathematics test exemptions. This table represents only the students who scored Levels III and IV on the North Carolina state Mathematics test. The number of third grade students who scored below Level III are as follows: school year 1999-00, 11 students; 2000-01, 2 students; 2001-02, 4 students. The number of fourth grade students who scored below Level III are as follows: school year 1999-00, 8 students; 2000-01 there were no students who scored below Level III; and 2001-02, 3 students. The number of fifth grade students who scored below Level III are as follows: school year 1999-00, 16 students; 2000-01, 2 students; and 2001-02, 1 student.



Table 4

Number of Students In Grades 3-5 Scoring Level III or IV on Mathematics From 1999-02

Grade	No. Tested			Level III			Level IV			Total		
	<u>99-00</u>	<u>00-01</u>	<u>01-02</u>	<u>99-00</u>	<u>00-01</u>	<u>01-02</u>	<u>99-00</u>	<u>00-01</u>	<u>01-02</u>	<u>99-00</u>	<u>00-01</u>	<u>01-02</u>
3	58	50	35	28	27	17	19	21	14	47	48	31
4	48	35	49	28	19	29	12	16	17	40	35	46
5	53	66	43	24	34	18	13	30	24	37	64	42

Note. Number of students in grades 3, 4, and 5 who scored level III or IV on the North Carolina End-of-Grade Test Accountability Program.

During the school year 2000-01, this school was again recognized as School of Distinction. This time, 89% of its students scored level III or higher. However, for school year 2001-02, the school was recognized as a School of Excellence with 91.8% of its students scoring at level III or higher. This school moved from School of Distinction status (80% or better at level III or higher), to School of Excellence status (90% or better at level III or higher).

This means that since school year 1999-2000 through school year 2001-2002, the selected school had met or exceeded academic growth as determined by the Public Schools of North Carolina Division of Accountability Service (2001). Expected academic growth means that the students made one year's growth in one school year. Due to the school being recognized in 2001-2002 as a School of Excellence, the school exceeded its expected growth projection by 10%. The data also mean that there were more students reading and doing mathematics at grade level since 1999-2000.

#### *School Improvement Plan*

According to the school improvement plans, the school's mission and philosophy statements addressed the belief that all children could learn (see Appendix H). The staff expressed that it is their job to develop an educational environment that prepares students for success in an ever-changing world. The staff continued to emphasize that given the opportunity to explore the objectives of the curriculum through varied modes of teaching, they believe that all children were capable of experiencing growth in learning. Therefore, according to the school staff, and the principal's expectations of the staff to use the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, the achievement levels of the ABCs, and the No child Left Behind Legislation, the following

categories had been addressed in the school improvement plans for school years 1999-00 to 2002-03: (1) high student performance; (2) safe, orderly and caring school; (3) quality teachers, administrators and staff; and (4) strong family and community involvement. Since 1999, this document had been updated annually to continue its focus on school improvement and student achievement. From reviewing those school improvement documents, it was evident that strategies and timelines had changed. But the overall goal still focused on student achievement.

The school improvement plans showed evidence of teachers planning and collaborating with each other. This document revealed that teachers were involved in collaborating in the following areas: planning, curriculum and instruction, staff development, school climate, and communication. The school improvement minutes further indicated that the principal had empowered his staff to make decisions in the 5 areas previously stated. These minutes revealed that curriculum and instruction, staff development, and ways to have effective communication between school and the home appeared to be the focus. The minutes further indicated that the parents were active participants of the planning process at this school. Minutes and attendance were taken at each meeting. Minutes from these meetings showed that committees met on a monthly basis. Additional meetings were held if needed. Each committee had a chairperson and recorder and averaged 6 to 8 committee members. There was evidence of each committee establishing goals for curriculum areas needing improvement, aligning the curriculum, setting timelines, developing objectives and strategies and maintaining the appropriate documentation. The documents also showed that one of the principal's responsibilities was to report testing data and results to the staff during grade level meetings and regular

staff meetings. Staff had input as to the types of staff development that was needed for the staff in efforts to increase student achievement. Evidence of student achievement data was communicated through PTA meetings, local newspaper, newsletters, letters to parents, and faculty meetings. Results of surveys were a part of each committee. Teachers, parents, and students took part in responding to survey questions.

The school improvement document also showed that teachers were involved in off campus and campus-based staff development activities. It also showed that the teachers took on the role of conducting staff development sessions, along with being participants. Copies of all yearly budgets were included in the planning committee's file, and teachers help to make decisions concerning budget spending.

The planning, staff development and curriculum and instruction committees had copies of the End-of-Grade test results. The minutes revealed that each teacher was given a copy of the test results. Grade level results were disaggregated to determine areas needing improvement. Teachers felt that disaggregating student data assisted them in the identification of those students who needed remediation or other tools to prevent them from falling through the cracks. The grade level objectives were also aligned with the curriculum. Pacing guides were developed by the classroom teachers in an effort to effectively address state standards. Copies of curriculum standards were also developed to share with parents. This was done to better reach the desired results for students' learning and their achievement.

### *Committee Meetings*

The school had organized plans in place and accessible for all stakeholders. Those minutes listed the stakeholders who were present at the meetings and who were responsible for collecting and analyzing information on improving the school and the community. The minutes showed that each year the school revisited and revised its belief and mission statement. The minutes also showed that the committee focused on goals it had established for the school. A list of strategies was developed on ways to work with students scoring below level III. Strategies had also been developed to bridge the gap between level III and IV students.

### Report of Triangulated Findings

The section that follows describes the themes and supporting findings that address the overall research and subordinate questions by providing a description of characteristics within the study's domains that led to the school's recognition. Each domain is addressed in narrative form describing themes that emerged from multiple data sources. Appendices I1 through I5 illustrate the data sources and themes. Data are described through generic and specific examples from multiple data sources. Direct and supporting statements from the transcripts, observations, and document review are located throughout the narrative to provide specific, detailed description of the participants' perceptions of the characteristics that led the school to School of Distinction status. To help the reader identify participants' responses, data sources were assigned codes to identify the types of data sources. The following codes were used (I-interview transcript; OBS-observation; DR-document review) followed by letters and a number that identify the participant (P-principal; T-teacher; S-student; and PT-parent) followed by the

month the data collection occurred, and finally the page number of the quote being referenced from the transcript.

### Themes and Supporting Findings from Data Triangulation

The overall themes identified were organized according to the study's domains: (1) principal's leadership; (2) teacher involvement; (3) class size; (4) student achievement; and (5) parental involvement. The themes that follow describe the overarching and supporting findings and themes that emerged from data triangulation of the three data collection sources. These themes are presented in the order of study's domains. Only those statements, key words, phrases, or direct quotes that were repeatedly communicated by the participants, the behavior observed during the observations, and notes taken on document findings were described as the overarching themes and supporting themes that emerged from each domain. Each domain highlights multiple themes from data sources that contributed to student achievement and the success of the school.

#### *Principal's Leadership*

The first domain being discussed is the leadership style of the principal and how it contributes to the school's success. Leadership of the principal according to Griffin (1990) "usually emphasizes curriculum planning skills, knowledge of curriculum-related literature, and maintaining up-to-date understanding advances in curriculum material." He further indicated that the principal should be a motivator, morale builder, and a good communicator capable of making tough decisions to improve student performance. While similar characteristics emerged from the principal's leadership as described by Griffin, new findings emerged as characteristics of the principal's contributions. After analyzing

22 different interviews, a shadowing of the principal and review of school documents, the principal's leadership style took on a new meaning.

The following overarching themes emerged from data collected from responses, observations, and document review of the principal's leadership indicated his ability to: (1) seek funding; (2) support staff development initiatives; (3) encourage staff and students; (4) communicate with staff and parents; and (5) demonstrate concern for students' welfare. The data triangulation matrix on these overarching and supporting themes are located in Appendix I1.

### *Seek Funding*

The principal and teachers repeatedly indicated that the principal's leadership contribution was outstanding in being creative when it came to providing funds for instructional resources. While shadowing the principal, I had the opportunity to witness him discussing the purchase of computers and software with the computer lab assistant and three teachers. The principal informed the media assistant and teachers that the state budget had not been submitted to the district office yet, but he encouraged them to put together their request and submit it to him. Included in the principal's budget reports were line items from federal, state, and local funds earmarked for staff development and instructional supplies and materials to enhance the instructional program. After listening to responses of teacher participants, shadowing of the principal, and reviewing the principal's budget reports, I am of the opinion that the principal demonstrated how he prioritized resources to support the learning environment. In reviewing the curriculum and instruction minutes and the school improvement plan, the principal, was responsible

for making sure that the North Carolina standard's document was purchased for all instructional and support staff.

### *Support Staff Development Initiatives*

Another leadership characteristic that emerged was the manner in which the principal supported his staff's initiatives concerning the instructional program. It was the perception of the principal and teachers that the principal involved his staff in making decisions regarding implementing ideas and strategies related to the instructional program. It was repeatedly communicated throughout the interviews when the teachers wanted to participate in or conduct campus-based staff development the principal accepted their recommendations and supported them. In reviewing the school renewal planning documents, reading, writing, and mathematics were the major focus of all staff development initiatives and his signature appearing on the staff development request forms indicated his support for teachers to attend. Six of the 9 teachers indicated that the principal not only supported their participation in staff development activities, he would attend with his teachers.

It appeared that the principal had developed a strong team among his staff, at the school. He had empowered people around him to help get the job done. This trust and empowerment was heard from the teachers concerning instructional and staff development decisions. I observed him during a grade level meeting being a participant during a discussion on the purchase of software and instructional material, and allowing the teachers to make decisions. I also observed him being informed by his writing teacher the decisions they had made concerning the implementation of the new writing guidelines.



Teachers also indicated that he would let them make decisions on the best ways to improve and solve problems with the instruction in the tested grades. He was supportive of teachers trying new and innovative ideas, as well as empowering them to make decisions on what will impact classroom instruction and student performance. I am of the opinion that due to the interactions that occurred during staff and grade level meetings, the principal and his staff respected and trusted each other's decisions. Referring back to Table 1, it could be noted that the experience level of these teachers might have contributed to the principal's ability to relinquish his authority in the decision making process concerning the curriculum. I am also of the opinion that he realized the strengths of his staff.

#### *Encourage Staff and Students*

The principal constantly communicated and encouraged his staff in whatever task they became involved in to do their best. Teachers indicated that the encouragement not only related to performing their job assignments but it involved their personal and professional growth as well. The teachers gave evidence of this when they referred to the principal encouraging faculty to pursue National Board Certification or a Master's Degree. They further indicated that he encourages teacher assistants to pursue their degree in education. During a staff meeting he encouraged the staff to continue to make sure that every child was successful everyday. Written at the end of a daily announcement I read on the day I shadowed the principal was a statement thanking the teachers for all the hard work they do for students each day. The parents also indicated that the principal supports the teachers in achieving the school's goals, and he encourages the teachers to keep the parents informed of the curriculum. I am of the opinion that the

principal knew that if he invested, encouraged, and supported the teachers he had, they would remain at the school. However, if no investments were made in the teachers, the principal would constantly have a turnover of new personnel. In examining the master schedule from school year 1999-00 through school year 2001-02, this school had one teacher to leave due to a decline in student enrollment. Teachers appeared to be happy at this school. Parents and students particularly indicated that the principal encouraged the students to always do their best each day. Parents stated that he would make statements during assembly programs or on the intercom prior to state testing that he and the teachers believe in them and to always do the best work that they can do. Students indicated they enjoyed the encouragement the principal gave them when he made visits to the classroom to let them know that he liked what they were doing and to keep up the good work. I am of the opinion that school personnel and students need plenty of encouragement so that they will continue to strive for success. It is the responsibility of the principal to become the cheerleader, motivator, and morale builder to help all stakeholders maintain a positive focus on, continuous school improvement.

#### *Communicate With School Staff and Parents*

Communication appeared to be an important skill that the principal possessed. Communication was constantly referred to by all participants as being one of the principal's leadership skills, with the exception of the students' responses. The principal constantly communicated the goals of the school along with his expectations to parents and his staff through memos, newsletters, letters to parents, staff meetings, assembly programs and the PTA meetings. Six of the 9 teachers indicated that the principal constantly shared information and kept them informed of state and district level policies,

procedures, testing and curriculum changes. This was also observed during a staff meeting and a fourth grade, grade level meeting I attended. Teachers continued to give examples of his communication skills by stating that he sends letters home to parents letting them know about events that were happening at school. The communication file of the school renewal documents had a variety of sample memos that the principal had written to staff and parents. The parents praised the principals for his ability to communicate with them during school activities and keeping them informed through parent memos. Also during the shadowing, he communicated with parents, school staff (including bus drivers), and students.

#### *Demonstrate Concern For Students' Welfare*

Throughout the teachers' interview it was communicated that the principal was concerned and cared about the welfare of the students. It was shared with me that if the principal were made aware of a child being in need of clothing or school supplies, he would seek ways to give assistance. I was informed through the teachers, that often times he had purchased items for students in need with his personal funds. Teachers also indicated that the principal would look at the total picture when it involved the well being of the students. He would look at the background of the students, and their home environment. He would counsel with the students and then give them plenty of chances to demonstrate appropriate behavior.

It was also revealed from the interviews with the teachers and parents that the principal had an open door policy in which he was willing to listen to all sides of a problem. The teachers indicated that he carefully weighed all sides of a concern and then came up with a decision in which the school personnel, parents, and students could

accept. His decisions were always based on putting the needs of the students first. As I walked through the hallways with the principal I noticed that he would praise students by saying, “I like the way you are walking down the hall” (OBS/P/8/2). Or, if a child stopped him to let him know how many books he had read, he would say, “Keep up the good work” (OBS/P/8/2). Or, if he saw a child who was absent from school, he would say, “I’m glad to see you back at school today. Hope you’re feeling better” (OBS/P/8/3).

### *Teachers’ Involvement*

The second domain being described was the ways the teachers’ involvement contributed to the school’s success. Rosenholtz (1989) conducted a study in which she described teachers in a stuck school. She indicated that teachers in stuck schools were not involved with school-wide goals, teacher isolation occurred, there was limited time for teachers to learn from one another, teachers were not sure about the curriculum and how to teach it; and most of all they were not committed to their jobs or the school.

I observed that this school did not fit the characteristics identified by Rosenholtz. The principal expressed his appreciation towards his staff in discussing the hard work, dedication, and commitment that his staff exhibited in providing a quality education for the students. Teachers at the school were not afraid to arrive early or stay well after school hours making plans for their students.

The overarching themes that emerged from the data collection sources of the teachers’ involvement consisted of their ability to: (1) teach state standards; (2) demonstrate hard work and dedication; (3) communicate with others; and (4) care for students. Appendix I2 illustrates data triangulation matrix of themes regarding how the teachers’ involvement contributed to the school’s success.

### *Teaches State Standards*

Wiggins and McTighe (1998) indicated that due to the achievement of desired learning, standards are needed to inform and give shape to those responsible for educating children. They continued to emphasize that, “We are guided by national, state, district, or institutional standards that specify what students should know and be able to do” (p. 7).

The teachers at the school showed evidence of Wiggins and McTighe (1998) comment regarding being guided by standards. Using the North Carolina Standard Course of Study was constantly communicated from the principal, teachers and parents. The principal and teachers were in agreement that if the teachers were going to be measured by and held accountable for making sure the students were successful according to state standards, then they were going to make sure the standards were thoroughly taught. I reviewed a document that the teachers provided for the parents involving the state standards for their child’s grade. The version of the standards they presented to the parents was not the cumbersome document provided by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. The version parents received was given to them to give further assistance to their children when they worked with them at home. The teachers had pacing guides that they had developed according to the subject area standards. I noticed that the pacing guides were on their desks attached to their lesson plans. The standards were also written as objectives on the board to let students know what was to be expected of them for that class.

According to the Southern Regional Education Board (2001) “states need to make sure teachers and principals know the standards and develop instructional strategies to

help students master their required content skill” (p. 23). The selected school went beyond the principal and teachers knowing the standards. They also wanted the parents involved in using the standards. During the PTA meetings, each grade level was responsible for providing information to parents regarding the standards that the students would be learning during the school year. I noticed that parent attendance was low during the presentations, but the teachers continued to share grade level standards and expectations with those in attendance.

The selected school staff as communicated by study participants appeared to be very strong supporters of not only following the state’s standards, but raising standards and expectations to promote increased student achievement. The study participants felt that teaching the standards not only held them accountable, they felt it’s just the right thing to do for students, and all students are held to the same standards. The standards may be addressed differently to students needing special accommodations, but the fact remains that the standards are the same.

#### *Demonstrates Hard Work and Dedication*

The principal and study teachers indicated that they felt the school staff was highly trained and motivated professionals who worked to ensure that no child is left behind. The hard work and dedication of the staff was observed during the observations. Teachers were arriving early and preparation began. There was a caring feeling at the school. The caring was demonstrated as the teachers worked hard to create an atmosphere for higher expectations of the students. Students indicated that they would provide individualized assistance to them as they arrived in the morning and continued providing this assistance throughout the day when time allowed. Also, teaching according to

different multiple intelligences were utilized to ensure the students level of success. Evidence of this was observed in classrooms as teachers varied their methods of instruction from lecture to hands on activities, to role-play. The teachers at the selected school were very involved in helping to make decisions concerning the best ways to promote student achievement. This was evident through committee minutes that illustrated strategies teachers were trying to develop in order to meet the needs of all students. The teachers' hard work and dedication was truly an indication that the school was moving in the direction of achievement.

The teachers indicated that they encouraged their students, and would often let them know that they believed in them. This was evident while observing the interaction between the teachers and students as the teachers provided time for extra assistance, or did probes or gave an extra few seconds of wait time for students to respond to questions. Teachers also indicated that they take the school-wide goals very seriously and feel that they should be held accountable to ensure that the goals of the school and state standards are being effectively addressed. Evidence of this was noted during the interviews with participants. They take the North Carolina Standards very seriously and plan with their co-workers on different strategies for teaching the goals and objectives. The parents also indicated that they felt the teachers' commitment to teach the standards, because of time the teachers give in preparing for curriculum nights. Evidence of this was demonstrated by the questions parents were asking when copies of the standards were being shared and discussed with them during PTA meetings.

The parents also indicated that the teachers were leaders, they were dedicated to the students, and they provided words of praise and encouragement for all students. They

also expressed the point that the teachers treated the students with respect. Parents were extremely pleased with the manner in which the teachers challenged the students and helped them to become independent thinkers and learners. Teachers also worked with students on how to be mentors to other students. During one of the classroom observations I noticed students wearing assistant's badges and they were helping other students. I asked a student with a badge what was happening and she explained to me that student assistants were allowed to assist other students needing help once they had completed their work. She continued to explain that the assistants had to demonstrate to the teacher that they had a thorough understanding of the skills before they were allowed to assist others.

It was indicated by the students and parents that the teachers would go the extra mile for the students because, they cared about them. I observed teachers working with students one on one or in small groups during lunch or the teachers' planning period. It was a mutual feeling among the teachers, that if they did not give early intervention and support to the students as assistance was needed, the students would not be successful when it came time for them to be tested. Their total commitment to their jobs and the school is reflective in the success of the school's recognition. On the day the principal was shadowed, I observed teachers arriving between 7:15 and 7:30 a. m. They were not required to officially report until 8 o'clock. On another occasion, I observed teachers still at school between 4:30 and 5 o'clock in the afternoon. After witnessing this, I could understand why the principal spoke with pride concerning his staff when he said, "I think if you're going to be successful, there's no such thing as only working the school hours,



because I have some teachers who demonstrate this, and our success is reflective of their contributions” (I/P/7/5).

### *Communicate With Others*

It is my belief that having the ability to effectively communicate was a major contribution in the success of the school. The teachers indicated that because they are divided into pods they did not get to communicate on a regular basis with all staff members. However, they communicated with and planned instruction with the people in their pods. They felt that one of their strengths for success was their ability to communicate with each other and the parents. Communication was constantly expressed by the parents, as being an important contributor to the school’s success. Three teachers shared copies of phone logs, and notes with me showing the extra steps they took to keep parents informed. The communication process was further discussed when parents expressed that they have received call or notes from their child’s teacher due to academic or behavior concerns. The parents also indicated that the teachers do a wonderful job of communicating their expectations and informing them about the North Carolina Standards and End-of-Grade tests.

On a different occasion, I observed teachers calling parents at the end of a class session to discuss a student’s progress. They credited the teachers with their ability to communicate during parent conferences, curriculum update meetings, or just sending home a note concerning their child’s progress. Copies of sample progress reports, phone logs and handwritten notes were included in the communication’s file for the school. The principal, teachers, and parents commented that all activities at the school provided an environment for bringing stakeholders together to share thoughts and ideas.

### *Care for Students*

After being in the selected school between the months of July through October, I had the opportunity to observe the caring that existed between the staff and students. The atmosphere at the school was one of belonging to a family. Evidence of this was the way that staff members were greeting each other in the hallways by giving smiles and cheery “good mornings” or “hello.” I noticed teachers and students giving each other hugs. What appeared to me to be kindergarten and/or first grade students gave the principal and me hugs also. The child nutrition staff also provided warm smiles as students entered the cafeteria. Students politely thanked the child nutrition workers upon receiving their breakfast tray and the responses of “you are welcome, or “I hope you enjoy your breakfast were said with pleasant voices and smiles back to the students. The teachers frequently conveyed to me that they had stayed in the profession, not because of the money, but they remained because of what they do for the love of their students. The students and parents also felt this caring trait emerging from the teachers. They repeatedly commented that the teachers cared about the students and encouraged them to always be the best that they could be. One student commented, “We like doing our best work because our teachers care about us, and when we do well, our teachers are happy, and that makes us happy” (I/S5/9/3).

All parents were in agreement that the teachers at the school cared about all of the students. They emphasized that the teachers demonstrated this concern through helping students become independent thinkers and learners. This was very observable during the classroom visits. Teachers were engaging students in problem solving activities and higher order thinking skills activities such as having them explain why they solved the

problems the way they did, and what would happen if other methods were used. These types of activities were being done with the assistance of computers and lots of other resource manipulatives to reinforce instruction. The students appeared to be having lots of fun while engaged in learning.

### *Class Size*

The third domain examined the impact that class size had on student achievement. In addition to the characteristics of the principal and teachers that contributed to the school's success, class size contributions must be understood in order to comprehend its significance. These class size contributions, therefore, must be discussed to fully grasp its importance at the school.

Three overarching themes that emerged from data collection sources on class size domains, consisted of: (1) teachers individualizing instruction; (2) students being in close proximity of the teacher; and (3) distractions being at a minimum. Appendix I3 illustrates the data triangulation matrix of overarching and supporting themes that emerged from the domain regarding class size.

### *Teachers Individualizing Instruction*

Receiving individual attention appeared to be one of the major focuses relating to small class sizes. The principal tried to ensure that small class sizes were maintained in grades 3, 4, and 5 since those were the tested grades. Evidence of this was the class rosters' that were located in the teachers' handbook for the present 2001-02 school year. Teachers indicated that students benefited from the extra one-to-one or the individualized assistance they provided. While conducting observations, I noticed that class sizes varied between 13 to 19 students. As one, fifth grade mathematics teacher circulated throughout

the classroom she began working with students individually who were having problems with fractions. This type of teacher behavior was observed throughout the classroom observation. Teachers were able to get to students having difficulty quickly, and spend more time giving them assistance. The teachers also indicated that varying classroom activities enabled them to address the needs and learning styles of all their students.

Students felt that in a small class teachers had more time to work with the students who did not understand the material. Students indicated that the teachers called the students one at a time to their desk, went to the student's desk, or went to a corner of the room and worked with the student. Students were also engaged in helping each other. Teachers indicated that a small class size allowed students to tutor other students during the class period. There are times however when students learn more quickly from the assistance provided by their peers. Students indicated that being a tutor was "cool." They emphasized the point that their peers accept their help because the one being tutored today may be the one who tutors another day. In one fifth grade classroom I observed students assisting other students. They were wearing an assistant's badge.

Parents indicated that students were at an advantage in small classes because of the personal attention they received. Parents were in favor of a small class size because they felt that the small class size allowed the teachers to get to know the students' ability levels. This would then allow teachers to prepare instruction based on the different those ability levels. It was the consensus of the principal, teachers, and parents that small class sizes were needed to effectively promote student achievement.

### *Students Being in Close Proximity of the Teacher*

Teachers, students and parents often emphasized the importance of the teachers being in close proximity of the students. According to the participants, teachers could monitor students more closely, thus allowing time to provide immediate feedback. Due to the room arrangement, teachers could also facilitate and engage students in more classroom activities. Four teachers stated that they could arrange their classrooms to promote closeness and have students working cooperatively, yet still have space to facilitate even smaller group instruction. Although 4 teachers commented on the room arrangement, I observed that 5 of the 9 classrooms were arranged in cooperative learning groups with 3 to 4 students in each group. The students were working with a minimal amount of distraction. The students were actively involved in classroom instruction. The teachers also provided extra time and immediate attention to those students having difficulty with assignments. It was also difficult trying to identify students with special needs, because it appeared that all students' needs were being addressed immediately. These 5 classes averaged 13 to 19 students in each classroom.

The students appeared to enjoy being in cooperative groups. They would quickly move about the room to get with their group members and became actively engaged in the assignment. At times the teachers may have been involved with another group, but due to the closeness in that classroom they appeared to know what was going on in the other groups. Parents especially commented on teachers being able to do close observations of the students' work and immediately corrected incorrect responses. Parents indicated that teachers being in close proximity of students allowed the teachers to hold their attention better, therefore, students would stay on task and there would be

less behavior problems. I never observed behavior problems. Teachers seemed to move in close proximity of potential distractions and students would immediately get back on task.

#### *Distractions Being At A Minimum*

Discipline problems were never mentioned by, the principal or teachers, as being a concern at the school. However, the students and parents felt that being in small class sizes would mean that a minimum amount of distractions would occur. Parents felt that there would also be less behavior problems. Students indicated that they enjoyed working in cooperative groups. However, two of the fifth grade students indicated that they preferred to work independently because they did not like receiving the same grade as everyone else in the group, and the third student indicated that she just preferred to work alone. While getting into the groups or leaving the group after completing the task, noise was never an issue. However, if the noise level got too high, teachers used different forms of non-verbal communication to get their attention. These non-verbal expressions included the teacher raising her hand, standing still and not speaking, and one teacher held up three fingers, and the students immediately got quiet.

During a fifth grade classroom observation, I observed students giving assistance to other students. Those students giving assistance to other students wore an assistant's badge. One student informed me that everyone takes a turn in being an assistant. Even during the movements taken place and the talking of the students helping each other, level of noise was still low.

The distractions that I observed were minor distractions such as a child humming while drawing, or one cooperative group discussing their project, while another

cooperative group was assigning tasks to group members. These distractions did not appear to be a concern with the teacher or the students. Noise level was low and everyone was actively involved in instruction. Behavior problems were also noticed to be at a minimum level. When such problems occurred, the teachers never stopped instruction. They would look at the student or move in close proximity to the student and the behavior stopped.

### *Student Achievement*

The fourth domain described the types of things happening in the school that promoted student achievement. Based on Goodlad's (1984) nationwide research, he stated that, "learning appears to be enhanced when students understand what is expected of them, get recognition for their work, learn quickly about their errors and receive guidance in improving their performance" (p. 111). After analyzing the collected data it was determined that a variety of themes emerged from participants, observations, and document review concerning the types of things that happen in the selected school that promoted student achievement.

The domain on student achievement presented seven overarching themes that emerged from the data collection sources. These themes consisted of: (1) the A+ Program; (2) the Star Student Program; (3) a cooperative staff; (4) the Project Acceleration; (5) the instructional program; (6) Comprehensive Management System; and (7) the communication with all stakeholders. Appendix I4 illustrates the overarching and supporting themes matrix that emerged from data triangulation on characteristics that promoted student achievement.

### *The A+ Program*

The A+ program is a program that incorporates the fine arts into the academics and the academics into the fine arts. The principal explained how the regular classroom teacher and fine arts teachers worked together to plan thematic units. He gave an example of fourth graders studying Indians in their social studies class. He continued by stating the fine arts teachers and regular classroom teachers will plan activities to reinforce instruction from the regular classroom.

The music/drama, and physical education teachers provide the same type of reinforcement only they incorporate the curriculum through music, drama, and physical education. There are also different types of instruction that occur in the fine arts classes that are reinforced in the regular classroom. The students stated that the A+ program helped because whatever they did in their classroom, they would draw about it in the art class, do activities about it in physical education, check out books about it when they went to the library, sing songs and act it out during music and drams. This consistent level of reinforcement contributes to the success of the school.

The principal and teachers further indicated that due to the A+ program, students have demonstrated surprising talents in the fine arts. The entire faculty and staff attend an A+ training institute every summer to gain strategies on how to instruct students through the multiple intelligences. These talents according to the principal and teachers didn't show up when the students were taught reading, math, and writing. Fifth grade students had the opportunity to demonstrate these talents during the October PTA meeting when the fifth grade class presented a program entitled "Reading Roundup." This program was organized using the A+ concept of music, art drama, and reading. The principal and



teachers indicated that the A+ program gave students another avenue of showing how successful they could be without being totally immersed in the academic.

### *The Star Student Program*

The Star Student Program was very important in promoting student achievement according to parents and students. One parent commented that the Star Student Program not only promotes achievement, but it also places emphasizes on demonstrating good behavior. The parent summed up by stating, “It brings respect for classmates and respect for the teachers” (I/P3/8/4). The parents indicated that the rewards and incentives this program offers assists students in being successful. The Star Student Program is a weekly recognition for students who have followed the rules, had all their homework, their behavior is good, and then at the end of the 9 weeks grading period students are rewarded for having maintained a certain number of stars. As a reward, these students get to participate in a Star Student Party and receive certificates. Also any student having made honor roll or principal’s list 3 out of 4 times during the school year are rewarded with a field trip at the end of the school year. One student commented, “The Star Student Program really helped me to do better in school because a lot of my friends were attending the Star Student parties and receiving certificates at the end of the 9 weeks grading period and I wanted to receive the same rewards, so I decided that I had to do better in school in order to attend the party” (I/S5/9/3). At the Star Student Party, food, games, and prizes, are enjoyed by all students in attendance.

Within the 9 weeks grading period, students have to have accumulated 6 or more stars in order to go to the Star Student party. A fifth grade student indicated that the activity is held by grade levels and there may be 25 to 30 students who attend the party at

the end of the 9 weeks grading period. But, if you do one thing wrong another student remarked, “the teachers will take your star from you and you have to wait until the next week to try to earn another one” (I/S5/9/2).

Since students in grades 3, 4, and 5 exchange classes, the teachers get together at the end of every week to determine if a student had been on his/her best behavior and turned in all homework and class assignments. In other words, students had to come to class ready to work. Each teacher keeps a list of the students in each class for example 5-1; 5-2; or 5-3. Every time that class comes to the teacher’s class and some one misbehaved, or didn’t have their assignments, the teachers would turn to their list and mark the student’s names off the list. Next, when the teachers met at the end of each week, those students who had their names marked off in just one teacher’s class would not receive a star for that week. The teachers indicated that this incentive program was a great way of motivating students towards success.

#### *A Cooperative Staff*

All participants expressed having a cooperative staff as being a characteristic that helped to promote student achievement. The school staff participants indicated that teachers taking time to plan together is critical in achieving student achievement. The teachers analyzed and disaggregated End-of-Grade test data together in order to find out the best way to identify staff development to help them meet the needs of their students. They discussed different types of modifications of instruction for students and how to best serve them. The principal indicated that the entire faculty and staff (bus drivers, custodial, and child nutrition) shared a vital role in helping the students achieve at the school. Teachers emphasized the importance of their support staff. They indicated that

there might have been times when one of the support staff members could reach a student by encouraging him/her to strive to be the best student they could be, just by talking to them and letting them know that they care for them. This involvement consisted of reading to them, being a mentor, or just encouraging them. The feeling among participants was that everyone worked together at the school to ensure the students' success. Mrs. Carson indicated, "I believe an important factor that helps to promote student achievement is the way we work together" (I/T3/8/4). She went on to emphasize the support that the teachers receive from the principal by allowing them to make decisions concerning the instructional program. She concluded by saying, "He trusts us" (I/T3/8/4).

Five of the 9 teachers remarked that from the professional staff to the nutritional and custodial staff everyone at the school worked together. Three teachers spoke of being a part of a family at the school, by giving hugs to students, complimenting one another, celebrating happy occasions and giving comfort during sad ones. As an observer, I felt this "family feeling" throughout the entire school. I also felt this feeling on the day I shadowed the principal. Staff members were greeting each other in the hallways, giving smiles and cheery hellos. Students were giving teachers hugs and teachers were giving students hugs. Occasionally students who looked to be kindergarten or first grade would give the principal hugs. I also received hugs from some students.

The teachers also elaborated on the mentor program they had for students. This involved every staff member in the school having at least 6 students to mentor all year long. The staff would meet with the students occasionally just to talk with them about their school day, encourage them to do well, strive to keep good grades and good

behavior, or just to say we believe in you and have a good day. Gifts were even given to them on special occasions such as birthdays and holidays, just a little token to say keep up the good work. The teachers indicated that they saw a big change in a lot of their students as a result of the mentoring program and everyone working together. The school improvement plans listed all categories of school staff as being responsible to assist in promoting student achievement.

The culture at this school appeared to be a sense of everyone working together to continue raising expectations of all students and then to teach them accordingly. These key stakeholders worked together to accommodate and reach the needs of all students in each grade. The principal and teachers felt that they did a great job of providing opportunities for the staff to work together, but the piece that they indicated missing was having more parents and students being actively involved in establishing plans for the future of all students at the school.

#### *The Project Acceleration Program*

Project Acceleration was a term the school system began using in November 1999. Project Acceleration according to the principal and teachers is an extended day tutoring program. Students who were identified as performing below grade level were encouraged to attend this extended day tutoring. During the after school shadowing of the principal I stopped in one of the tutoring sessions and asked how the tutoring was being conducted. I was informed that teachers tutored the students on areas where the students were having difficulty with certain skills during the school day. The teachers would also pre-teach the next day's lesson to give students a head start on understanding the next day's skills. I was further informed that pre-teaching also ensured that the students

would be actively involved in the next day's lesson. According to the principal, beginning tutoring earlier in the year gave students the assistance when they needed it, instead of waiting until later in the school year. He further stated that the upcoming school year (2002-2003) would provide students with after school tutoring before the second grading period. This program was also listed in the school improvement plans as a strategy to work with students who scored below a level III on the End-of-Grade state reading and mathematics tests.

### *The Instructional Program*

Student achievement and improving the quality of the instructional program appeared to be a big focus at the selected school. The instructional program offered a variety of tools and strategies to promote student learning. Such programs involved A+, Project Acceleration, and the Star Student Program. Another key component of the instructional program was the development of Personalized Education Plans for students who had performed below a level III on End-of-Grade reading and mathematics tests. As a grade level team, teachers, along with the parents, developed strategies for the students who scored below level III and the Personalized Education Plans followed the students to the next grade. Sending the Personalized Education Plans to the students' next grade level, allowed teachers to know very early the skills that students who scored below level III needed extra remediation or re-teaching in certain skills.

The selected school was equipped with state of the art technology that helped to create a learning environment that would meet the needs of all students. The principal and teachers indicated that all subjects taught and tested were aligned with the state's curriculum. An alignment also existed with state policies on curriculum, student

assessment, and textbooks. The instructional program involved all stakeholders in the planning process. Teachers worked collaboratively with each other to develop instructional strategies that focused on assisting all students in becoming successful with instruction.

While many tools were used to enhance the instructional program, the staff was very pleased with the impact that the A+ Program had upon student achievement. Every summer the principal, teachers, and teachers' assistants attended a training institute on how to effectively continue implementing the A+ Program. To continue emphasizing the involvement of all stakeholders, members of the custodial staff also attended the A+ training.

After listening to many interview participants share their perception of the types of things happening in their school to promote student achievement, I gathered that their overall instructional goal was to improve the academic achievement for all children. The teachers' involvement also consisted of helping students to be on grade level by scoring level III or higher on End-of-Grade reading and mathematics tests.

#### *The Comprehensive Management System*

The principal, teachers, and students indicated that Comprehensive Management System (CMS) contributed toward promoting student achievement. The principal saw this system as a way to provide an avenue for scheduling the teachers and providing grade level common planning time. The teachers responded that they were able to plan with their grade level team, and participate in ongoing "mini" staff development trainings. Planning took the form of thematic units, and participating in mini staff development sessions. They also expressed how important CMS was when planning

parent conferences. This was time when a parent could discuss concerns about their child with the grade level team. Students on the other hand, viewed CMS as time their teachers would provide extra assistance to individual students. It was also during CMS time that teachers would provide extra tutoring assistance to individual, or small groups of students.

### *The Communication With All Stakeholders*

Communication was a very important characteristic in promoting student achievement at the school. Participants felt that the lack of communication would not have allowed them to be successful. The teachers contributed to the successful communication process of the principal because he always kept them informed of state mandates and changes. According to the teachers, he constantly communicated with his staff about where they were in terms of academic growth. He would always communicate the goals they needed to reach. It was also noted that teachers communicated with other staff members when planning for instruction and other school activities. The teachers also communicated with parents and kept them informed of curriculum changes and how the changes affected their children. During the September and October PTA, I observed teachers in grades 3, 4, and 5 giving parents an overview of the standards for their grade level, along with suggestions on how to reinforce the objectives from the standards while working with their child at home. The adult participants commented that having open lines of communication was key in being a School of Distinction.

The review of documents revealed that communication also occurred in the form of administrative letters/memos, newsletters, submission of information to the local newspaper, and school meetings. Even though communication appeared to be effective at

the school, all participants, with the exception of the students who had no response, indicated that it could always be improved upon to make communication even more effective. Communication however, continued to be a challenge for the staff. Information was always sent to the homes regarding state or local policy changes and curriculum changes. However, it was the feelings of the school staff participants to make as much of the information being sent to the parents as user-friendly as possible.

### *Parental Involvement*

Parental involvement was the final study domain and had three overarching themes that emerged from the data collection sources. The themes included: (1) being involved with school activities; (2) assisting with homework; and (3) communicating with school staff. Appendix I5 illustrates the matrix overarching and supporting themes that emerged from data triangulation on ways in which parents supported their child's education.

### *Being Involved In School Activities*

All participants indicated that the parents should be involved with the PTA as a way of supporting their child's education. It became evident that due to the different types of information being presented at the meetings, it was imperative for parent attendance. Critical pieces of information at the PTA meetings as stated by the principal and teachers included discussions on the school's goals, policies and procedures, curriculum updates, test-taking strategies for the students, and ways to help their child at home. In review of the documentation from the planning, curriculum and instruction, and communication committees, plans were made to share, and explain, standards and expectations during open house and PTA meetings. Parent conferences were also



considered to be an important contribution in the success of the students' education. Parents volunteering were another contribution that emerged in supporting a child's education. Perhaps when a child sees a parent volunteering at school, it lets the child know that the parents feel that their child is important and they want to be involved in their education. The concern that emerged from this theme was the lack of participation of parents.

#### *Assisting With Homework*

Parents, assisting with their child's homework was definitely a theme that emerged from the student and parent participants. The homework hotline was a tool used to assist parents in making sure that their child had the correct assignments. It was the perception of the students that the parents' biggest contribution was to encourage them to always to do their best in school.

#### *Communicating With School Staff*

Communication from school to home, and from home to school was another critical theme that involved parents in the education of their children. Parents interviewed indicated that the school staff provided opportunities to keep parents informed about events happening in the school. A concern did occur as to ways to get parents involved and communicating with the school staff. It was indicated by teachers and parents that there would always be a handful of parents from every classroom who would communicate with the school personnel frequently. The concern was how to get other parents involved in, especially parents of students having special needs, and other parents who were not as supportive when it involved communicating with school personnel for the benefit of the child.

Teacher and parent participants briefly discussed surveys the school staff would send home in order to solicit responses from parents regarding their perception of school activities and parents' involvement. The surveys were sent home twice a year to get input from the parents as to ways the school staff can improve on the instructional program or other school concerns. The staff would take the results and begin identifying strategies with the assistance of parents, to improve on areas of weaknesses that were indicated from the survey. The staff also looked at the areas of strengths in order to develop strategies as to how to make the strengths even stronger. Parents indicated that they felt by completing the surveys, their voices were being heard as far as involvement at the school.

#### Summary of Findings

This qualitative design was used to describe how a small rural elementary school reached School of Distinction recognition based on the results of the North Carolina End-of-Grade tests. The setting was an elementary school (grades pre-kindergarten to fifth grade) in a rural northeastern North Carolina county. The investigator served as the primary measuring instrument in describing the characteristics that were occurring in the selected school. The study was designed to develop a rich, detailed description of the school and identify themes related to the following study domains: (1) principal leadership; (2) teacher involvement; (3) class size; (4) student achievement; and (5) parental involvement.

The principal, teachers, students, and parents gave their perceptions concerning the ways different categories of people, and class size contributed to the success of the school. Interviews, observations, and review of school documents were critical data

collection methods used in helping to describe how the selected school achieved distinction status. Data analysis procedures consisted of data triangulation to compare key words, phrases, or direct quotes to give credibility to emerging themes identified from data sources on each of the subordinate research questions.

The principal's major contribution was to be supportive of the decisions made by the teachers concerning instructional delivery. Teachers noted the importance of using the North Carolina Standard Course of Study to ensure that the standards the students were being held accountable for, were the standards that were being taught. Participants also noted the importance of planning time to align the curriculum, develop pacing guides and to collaborate with each to address other curriculum issues and concerns.

One hundred percent of the participants strongly agreed that the school's small class size definitely contributed to the school's success. There was broad support for maintaining class sizes of 13 to 19 students across groups interviewed.

The participants voiced strong support for a variety of contributions that happened in the school to promote student achievement. The school used a variety of instructional resources and materials to enhance and promote student achievement. However, tutoring during the school day and after school (Project Acceleration) was noted as the greatest contribution. The Star Student Program was identified as the program that provided students with the incentives to increase student achievement. Teachers were available to provide students with individual or small group tutoring during CMS time.

Finally, parents cited their specific contribution as supporting the PTA. However, there was much emphasis coming from the principal, teachers, and parents concerning the lack of support of parents being involved with the PTA. It was during these meetings that

parents were informed of all instructional aspects of the school and they [the parents] were provided with guidelines as to how to best help their children succeed. Participants across groups also indicated that the parents' most important contribution was assisting their children with all phases of work being sent home. Participants also felt that parental involvement was very critical to the success of the students. The entire school staff and the parents were actively involved in collaborating with each other to promote continuous student achievement. It was also indicated by the principal, teachers, and parents, that although they have tried to provide a quality, educational learning environment for the students, there is always room for them to improve on everything that they are doing.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the present study is to describe one rural elementary school's experiences in being recognized as a School of Distinction. To achieve this purpose, data were collected and analyzed around the five domains identified in the literature review as contributing to school success: (1) principal's leadership, (2) teachers' involvement, (3) class size, (4) student achievement, and (5) parental involvement.

The results presented in this study both confirm and add to research findings previously described in the review of literature. I have included a discussion of the findings to document how I drew the conclusions from the data. In addition, limitations of this study, implications and recommendations for practice, and recommendations for future research studies are described.

#### Discussion of Findings

The findings reported in this chapter are based on data collected from the principal, teachers, students, parents, observations of activities I attended at the school, classroom observations, and a review of selected documents. The methods used to gather data consisted of semi-structured interviews, observations, and document reviews conducted during the months of July through October 2002. This section offers a discussion of the findings as they relate to the study's purpose. The findings are written in a narrative format to provide a rich detailed description of the school.

### *Finding 1: A Supportive Principal*

The data gathered in this study supported the domain identified in the literature review relating to principal leadership. The data indicated that strong instructional support from the principal assisted in the school's high achievement on End-of-Grade tests that led to School of Distinction status. Evidence that repeatedly surfaced during the data gathering process regarding the principal's support included the following examples: (1) the ability to secure funding for the instructional program, (2) supporting and empowering his staff, (3) communicating with all stakeholders, and (4) maintaining an experienced staff.

It was the perception of the principal that having the ability to secure funding for the instructional program contributed to the school's recognition status. The researcher's review of the principal's budget reports showed evidence of budgeted monies from federal, state, and local funds earmarked for instructional supplies, materials, and staff development activities. The principal's support for the instructional program was apparent to the students as Larry pointed out, "He helps us to get things that we need" (I/S5/10/1).

Glickman (1991) defined the principal of a successful or high-performing school as "not only the instructional leader but the coordinator of teachers as instructional leaders" (p. 7). Schmoker (1999) found that leadership at the school level has to include teacher leadership. He continued to state that it was the rare principal, however intelligent or committed, who could take a faculty and single-handedly communicate, create, and realize the vision of higher achievement. The data revealed that the principal not only empowered his staff, he supported them. An example of the principal's empowerment

and support came from teachers, as they repeatedly commented on their decisions the principal supported concerning the instructional program and staff development activities that would make a positive impact on instruction and student achievement.

Data from teacher interviews and document review further revealed that the principal not only supported their participation in staff development activities, he would attend them when he could. “He often participates”, remarked Mrs. Carson (I/T4/9/2).

The principal also empowered his teachers by allowing them to make decisions regarding the instructional program. This empowerment was evidenced by teacher comments during their interviews. Danielson (2001) suggested that, “school leadership requires the capability to develop, communicate, and put into place a vision for school improvement that marshals the energies of disparate members of a staff around common goals” (p. 26). The principal’s actions supported what Danielson suggested as he [the principal] demonstrated empowering the staff, and communicating with all stakeholders through newsletters, assembly programs, staff meetings, or PTA meetings the vision for all stakeholders to promote student achievement.

Students believed that addressing discipline problems and making sure that everyone was on their best behavior was a necessary component of the school’s success, and they felt the principal made this happen. Larry, a student, had this to say, “He [the principal] straightens up the kids when they act bad, because he [the principal] wants everyone to do well in school. Overall behavior here is pretty good” (I/S5/10/1). Robert, another student stated, “He [the principal] makes sure that students behave so the teachers can teach” (I/S3/10/1).

The teachers and parents also perceived the principal as a person having good communication skills. Evidence of the principal's communication skills was documented through teacher and parent comments, observations, and review of the communication file. These sources revealed that communication occurred through joint planning, staff development, staff meetings, and during PTA meetings.

Comments from the principal, teachers, parents, and review of the communication section of the school improvement plan, also indicated that the principal communicated state standards to parents during PTA meetings. This action also supports and communicates to parents the school's instructional focus. The principal at the selected school monitored the goals and objectives by requiring the teachers to provide him with copies of their pacing guides and lesson plans.

Mrs. Harrison stated that, "He has an open door policy in which each staff member can always go to him and discuss whatever things they feel like they need to discuss with him" (I/T5/9/1). This was evident as he communicated high expectations and maintained a high focus on teachers emphasizing the state standards during staff meetings. Mrs. Edison had this to say concerning the principal's communication with teachers and staff, "He communicates to us in grade level and staff meetings that he expects us to follow the state curriculum guide" (I/T5/8/1).

The principal's ability to maintain an experienced staff also assisted in promoting student achievement. The principal accomplished this by providing instructional and professional development support for the teachers. The principal indicated that he maintained his experienced staff by treating the teachers like the professionals they are, and valuing and respecting their opinions regarding school issues. For example, he



provided support and encouragement to teachers, involved parents in the overall school program, and assisted teachers in meeting licensure requirements. The principal demonstrated continued support for his teachers by encouraging them to grow personally as well as professionally. Evidence of this came from the teachers as they commented about the encouragement he gave to the faculty to pursue National Board Certification and/or a Master's Degree. The teachers also commented that the same support and encouragement was given to his teacher assistants to pursue their degrees in education. Based on teacher comments and class schedules, it appeared that the principal supported his staff to enhance the instructional program.

In conclusion, the principal empowered his staff and did not dictate what they should do or how things should be done regarding the instructional program. He did, however, hold them accountable for results, this indicating he monitors student progress. All teacher participants made comments about the support the principal gave them. It appeared from their comments that he attempted to create an environment that promoted a partnership between the principal and the staff. He clearly attempted to develop a professional and collegial relationship with the staff.

#### *Finding 2: Teachers' Involvement In The School's Success*

The data gathered in this study affirmed that teacher involvement in the school's decision-making process contributed to the school's success. This involvement was demonstrated through (1) professional development, (2) teacher flexibility in the strategies they used, (3) collaborating with all stakeholders, and (4) communicating with each other and parents.

Danielson (2002) emphasized the importance of teacher growth being closely related to pupil growth. She stressed the point that “successful schools take professional development seriously; they do not assume that initial levels of preparation will sustain teachers throughout their careers” (p. 35). Carr and Harris (2001) defined professionalism as; “Each advocate continues to acquire knowledge in best practices in teaching and the learning process, so as to improve learning opportunities for all students” (p. 135).

The principal viewed staff development similar to Danielson (2002)), and Carr and Harris (2001) regarding professional growth of teachers. The principal stated, “When the teacher grows, her students grow” (I/P/7/2). He continued to share with me that he supported the professional growth of his teachers by encouraging them [the teachers] to attend professional development activities. I observed that staff meetings were more than business meetings. At times, the staff meetings consisted of sharing and participating in professional development activities. Mrs. Harrison’s comment is an example of how professionalism takes shape during a staff meeting:

“Sometimes we go to workshops that may not pertain to another staff member, or for some reason it didn’t fit in the person’s schedule to attend. We have persons at this staff meeting who will come back and not only share their experiences, but share materials and the training they received. This is also our way of keeping everybody informed” (I/T5/8/2).

According to Willis (2002), the professionalization of teaching should include teachers participation in school-wide decision making, direct relationships to teachers’ practice, ongoing participation in professional development activities, and curriculum-based to the extent that it helps teachers facilitate maximum student achievement.

Teachers' comments indicated that the principal supported their judgment by empowering them to make instructional and staff development decisions. The principal's signature on the professional development forms was also evidence that he supported staff development activities that teachers would be attending. Minutes from committee meetings supported comments from the teachers regarding them [the teachers] being empowered to make decisions when trying new and innovative ideas, as well as decisions on what will impact classroom instruction and performance. Evidence of this was found in the school planning minutes as teachers disaggregated End-of-Grade tests data to make decisions concerning steps to take to promote increased student achievement. According to comments from the principal and teachers, and committee minutes, teachers were involved in a myriad of meetings and training sessions.

Teachers continued to demonstrate their involvement in the school's success as they [the teachers] provided parents with a copy of their child's grade level state standards. The standard's document, the teachers presented to parents during curriculum meetings, or whenever a parent requested one, was a modified version of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study document. Parents were provided with standards information to make them aware of what their child would be studying throughout the school year.

Data gathered from interviews, observations, and school documents revealed that teachers were actively involved in collaborating with each other. Collaboration was demonstrated as teachers planned with other teachers and teachers planned with parents to create a learning environment that promotes student achievement. Mrs. Rivers' comment supports her views on collaborating with others, "It helps to hear how other

teachers are teaching and the types of strategies they are using in their classrooms” (I/T4/9/1). Mr. Allen’s comment supported collaboration by stating, “I think the teachers work well with each other in determining what the needs of the students might be” (I/P5/8/2).

Additionally, teachers communicated with parents and each other. Evidence of the communication was documented through teacher and parent comments, observations, and review of the communication file. The teachers communicated with parents by phone, written or electronic memos, or through face-to-face contact. In reviewing the school’s communication file, I had the opportunity to review teachers’ sample phone logs, copies of progress reports, newsletters, administrative announcements to teachers and parents, and articles taken from the local newspaper regarding announcements, honor roll lists, special events, and other celebrations happening at the school. Teachers also organized informational meetings for parents to acquaint them with the standards and discuss how they [the parents] could become involved in the instructional program by assisting with the reinforcement of certain standards at home. According to Epstein (1995) teachers and students at all grade levels want parents to be “more knowledgeable partners about schooling and take active roles in assisting communications between home and school” (p. 703). They further stated that when teachers “involve parents as a part of their regular teaching practices parents increase their interactions with their children” (p. 289).

In conclusion, teachers contributed to increased student achievement by making decisions regarding professional development activities that would have a positive impact upon the instructional program; having flexibility in the strategies they used to teach the state standards; collaborating with the principal, parents, and each other; and having the

ability to communicate with all stakeholders. These contributions further assisted the school in being recognized as a School of Distinction.

### *Finding 3: Class Size*

Class size was perceived by all the participants in this study as a major contributor to the school's success. The data gathered in this study identified teachers' ability to (1) individualize instruction; (2) students being in close proximity of their teacher; and (3) fewer distractions as benefits of a small class size. Class size varied in grades 3 through 5 from 13 to 19 students. It was revealed through participants' comments and review of End-of-Grade tests' data that having a small class size promoted increased student achievement. Research conducted by Maier, Molnar, Percy, Smith, and Zahorik (1997) corroborated the findings in this study. According to Maier et al., a reduced class size can be expected to produce increased academic achievement. They also cited in the same study that the major benefits from reduced class size are obtained as the size of the class is reduced below 20 pupils. Finn, Gerber, Achilles, and Boyd-Zaharias (2000) indicated that class size has a positive impact on student achievement and the school's success when the class is reduced below 20 students. They also emphasized that spending 3 or 4 years in small classes in grades k-3 has an enduring effect for at least 5 years after the intervention. It was apparent from the review of the school improvement plan and school budget reports that having small class sizes beyond grade 3 was important to the staff at the school. The budget documents, and the minutes from the planning committee revealed that the principal and teachers made a conscious decision to use Title 1 and Small School/Low Wealth funds to employ additional teachers to reduce class size, and to hire teacher assistants at the fourth and fifth grade levels to provide students with extra

remediation during the regular school day. Farber and Finn (2000) found that fourth grade students who had experienced being in small classes through the third grade were more engaged in learning as opposed to their counterparts who had experience with full size classes and teacher assistants.

According to comments from the interviews and personal observation, a smaller class size allowed the teachers to do more individualized teaching, and be in close proximity of the students. I did not observe any teachers sitting at their desk during instruction. They were circulating about the classrooms giving individual assistance to students as needed. Classrooms were arranged in semi-circles, and five were in cooperative groups to promote cooperative learning, and students were serving as peer tutors. However, the teachers continued to monitor class activities and provide assistance to students as needed. The adult student ratio was even smaller due to teacher assistants assisting in grades 4 and 5. Instead of 1 to 16, it became 1 to 8. The low adult to pupil ratio (1-8) provided additional opportunities to students who were struggling to understand how to complete their work on different skills for the objective of the day. Participants spoke positively concerning the benefits of having a small class size and the individual attention it allows. Mrs. Anderson had this to say in support of small class sizes:

“By giving this immediate, individual, or small group assistance helps students to master the skills before we move on to new ones. Being able to work with students individually or in smaller groups has really helped our End-of-Grade test scores” (I/T4/9/2).

My findings conflicted with those of Hanushek (1998). Hanushek concluded that reducing class size should not be expected to produce better student performance. However, based on my findings from the participants in this study that small class sizes were important for student achievement. Also, based on the End-of-Grade tests results, one could point out that having a small class size may have contributed to student achievement. The principal felt that class size was important at each grade level, but a small class size was especially important in grades 3, 4, and 5, since they were included in the state-testing program for accountability.

The study also revealed that the smaller the class, the fewer the distractions created by students not being on task. With this number of students in a class, I did not observe any discipline problems. What I did notice was teachers quickly moving towards students who may have been potential distractions. Teachers did not stop teaching, they moved in close to the student[s]. I was of the opinion that this was a way of maintaining high time on task. Fewer disruptions and distractions permitted the teachers and the principal to focus more time on instructional delivery and student achievement and less time on discipline.

According to the findings in my study, there was a strong relationship between small class size and increased student achievement. The principal's, and teachers' comments supported the literature review findings that indicated that student performance on the End-of-Grade tests improved when class sizes were reduced below 20 students.

#### *Finding 4: Programs That Contributed Toward Student Achievement*

A variety of incentive programs were identified as contributing towards student achievement. Although the research conducted by Goodlad (1984) is almost 20 years old, DeBacker and Nelson (2000) supported Goodlad's position regarding the intent of incentive programs. Goodlad indicated that, "learning appears to be enhanced when students understand what is expected of them, get recognition for their work, learn quickly about their errors and receive guidance in improving their performance" (p.111). The data in this study indicated that the unique combination of several support programs had a significant impact on student achievement and provided students with recognition for their performance. The principal, teachers, and parents cited the A+ Program, Star Student Program, Project Acceleration, and Comprehensive Management System (CMS), as programs that assisted the students in achieving goals and objectives.

The A+ Program assisted teachers in integrating the fine arts into academic content areas through use of the multiple intelligences. According to Gardner (1993), the implication of the Theory of Multiple Intelligence is that learning and teaching should focus on the particular intelligences of each person. Campbell (1997) suggested that teachers promote self-directed learning in students when there were different learning modalities being utilized. Greenhawk (1997) took the position that teachers should teach students about the theory of Multiple Intelligence then provide opportunities for the students to reflect on the intelligence or intelligences that assisted them in understanding the activity. Teacher comments indicated that utilizing the multiple intelligences during daily lesson presentations assisted them in addressing the different learning styles of the students.



All participants stated that the Star Student Program offered students a way of being rewarded for their good behavior. Each group of participants spoke in favor of the incentives that the Star Student Program offers. The students are eligible to participate in the Star Student Program based on academics or good behavior within a nine weeks grading period. This program provided the incentives and recognition students needed in order to celebrate success.

Project Acceleration, an after school tutoring program, was designed not only to tutor students on weaknesses, but also to pre-teach concepts of the next day's lesson. This program allowed the students to prepare for assignments and preview concepts and skills outlined in the next lesson. Project Acceleration also provides extrinsic and intrinsic motivation for students. DeBacker and Nelson (2000) indicated that providing individual assistance to students helped them to better identify goals to be achieved. They emphasized that students who made a connection between goals and learning received intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Kamins and Dweck (1999) suggested that extrinsic motivation is enhanced through reinforcement, positive feedback, and verbal praise.

The Comprehensive Management System (CMS) is a method of grouping student activities into longer blocks of time to provide common planning time for teachers. The CMS provided an avenue for scheduling fine arts teachers while providing grade level common planning time. Teachers also utilized this block of time, when needed, to provide tutoring or re-teaching skills to students who were having difficulty with assignments.

CMS provided time for teachers to be involved in ongoing "mini" staff development sessions at school. During this time teachers would also schedule parent

conferences to discuss any concerns about the child, or to include the parent in designing a Personalized Education Plan for the students who scored below level III on End-of-Grade tests. Mr. Allen had this to say concerning scheduling parent conferences during CMS time:

“I think it’s a wonderful idea to have all the child’s teachers sit around the table at one time to discuss concerns about the child. However, I have concerns for those parents who need to be present, but can’t because they work out of the county” (I/P5/8/4).

It was observed and documented from interview comments throughout the study that the principal and the teachers communicated and worked collaboratively to develop strategies, provide individual assistance, and provide additional resources to ensure the success of all the students. It is my belief that the unique combination of these programs, are designed to offer recognition, incentives and remediation. Based on the data sources gathered from the study, I am of the opinion that most students at the school have the opportunity to participate in one or all three of these programs and that these programs provided the incentives, recognition, and remediation that promoted increased student achievement.

#### *Finding 5: Parental Involvement*

The data gathered in this study affirmed the research of Griffith (1996) regarding parental involvement as being an integral part to the success of a student’s academic performance. Parental involvement included parents attending PTA meetings, helping with homework, and assisting with fund-raisers or the fall festival. All participants indicated the importance of parental involvement. Parents further indicated that their

involvement consisted of reinforcing work at home that their children will be doing during the school year.

Parents believed that responding to the school's surveys was another way of providing input to their child's education. According to parent comments, participating in the surveys gave parents the opportunity to point out areas of strength, and weakness regarding the school. Fullan (2000) suggested schools that are effective, search for ways to develop relationships with parents and the community. He continued to point out that student achievement increases when school-to-home relationships are developed. Horn and Chen (1998) indicated that student achievement is increased when parents become actively involved in their child's education. According to research studies conducted by Mattingly, et al. (2002) regarding parental involvement, more evidence is needed to determine if parental involvement makes a positive impact in student achievement. The views of the parents in this study concerning active parental involvement support the findings of Fullan (2000), and Horn and Chen (1998). According to the data presented in this study, parental involvement is needed to promote increased student achievement.

#### *Finding 6: Care For Students*

An analysis of the data revealed that the staff created a caring environment to show students they wanted them to be successful in school. Caring for students was unanimously communicated throughout the interviews and observed by the researcher. The atmosphere at the study school felt like belonging to a close family. I observed that people were greeting each other in the hallways, giving smiles and cheery "good mornings." I noticed teachers giving hugs to students, and students giving hugs to teachers. The smaller children who looked to be in kindergarten or the first grade were

giving hugs to the principal. I received hugs and the students did not know me. Boyer (1995) described how a school's environment has to be appropriate for an elementary school in order to contribute toward student achievement. He further described a community for learning as "a place where staff and students, along with parents, have a shared vision of what the institution is seeking to accomplish" (p. 15). Goodlad (1984) indicated a similar finding from his research that "the school is to be in the eyes of the parents and students, a nurturing, caring place" (p. 62). Mrs. Henderson had this to say concerning the school's family environment, "The teachers care" (I/P4/8/2). Mrs. Wilson also supported the school's family environment by stating, "They [the teachers] treat the children with respect" (I/P3/8/1).

Danielson (2002) also indicated that students needed to be treated with respect and dignity. She further stated, "Students may be young, but they are every bit as human as the adults at school, and should be treated as such" (p. 17). Teachers also demonstrated care for students by providing support for them [the students] during hardship cases. Mrs. Harrison supported concern for the students' welfare with the following comments, "Often times we have student hardship cases here. We buy whatever is necessary that the child needs to be successful at school. We do it from the heart" (IT5/8/5).

As I walked through the hallways with the principal, I noticed that he took time to acknowledge students who had been out of school due to illness. He also praised students for the way they were walking down the hall, and other accomplishments they told him about. According to DeBacker and Nelson (2000), this type of verbal praise serves as an extrinsic motivator and encourages students to want to be successful.

This family atmosphere and praise continued in the cafeteria. The child nutrition staff also contributed to the environment by greeting the students as they [the students] proceeded through the breakfast line. They had smiles on their faces and they let the children know that they were glad to see them. An atmosphere of politeness emerged as students were saying thank you as they received their breakfast tray, and getting back responses from the child nutrition staff such as, “you are welcome”, and “I hope you enjoy your breakfast!” These observations are consistent with Danielson’s (2002) research that emphasized the important role which members of the support staff plays in the students’ school experiences. She further indicated that the support staff “help keep the school running while serving as additional adult role models for students” (p. 85).

Each child at the school has a faculty or staff member as a mentor. The mentors included all professional and support staff members at the school. There was not a scheduled time for the mentoring to occur. Faculty and staff members periodically met with students they were assigned to. Mentors would meet with students in the mornings before classes began, during lunch, after school, or passing each other in the hallways. Mentors also met with students during holidays and special occasions such as the child’s birthday. The purpose of the mentor was to meet with the students occasionally to talk about the students’ school day, encourage them to do well, or just to say we believe in you and to have a good day. This person also served as the students’ role model and friend.

Based on the data analysis, observation and response to interview questions, I found the school environment to have a warm, welcoming, and caring atmosphere. The sense of caring demonstrated at the school contributed to the school’s success.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to describe characteristics that led a small rural elementary school to be recognized as a School of Distinction based on the results of the North Carolina End-of-Grade tests. The study revealed a number of possible reasons that contributed to the school's success. Supportive principal, teacher involvement, class size, variety of instructional programs, parental involvement, and care for students were identified as contributing to the school's success. Based on the findings within this study, the following conclusions add a description of how student achievement is promoted. Also drawn from the conclusions are implications and recommendations for practice, and recommendations for further studies.

### *Conclusion 1: A Successful School Staff Maintains an Instructional Focus*

During the interviews, observations, and data review, the principal, teachers, parents, students and staff maintained a continuous focus on improving the quality of the instructional program. The principal's primary focus was to support the needs of the students and staff through instructional funding, to articulate the importance of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study to his staff, parents, and students, to support and empower his staff, to maintain an experienced faculty, and to communicate his vision to all stakeholders. The teachers were focused on professional development opportunities, collaborative activities with other colleagues, and instructional lessons aligned with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study.

The principal, teachers, and parents maintained a strong focus on the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and communicated this to all stakeholders. The North Carolina Standard Course of Study guided the teachers in planning for instruction and

preparing the students for the End-of-Grade tests. Focusing on instructional standards was supported by the research of Wiggins and McTighe (1998). They suggested that standards are needed to inform and give shape to those responsible for educating children. They continued to emphasize that, “We are guided by national, state, or district, institutional standards that specify what students should know and be able to do” (p. 7). Schmoker (1999) also indicated that it is “paramount that educators select, and then provide a clear, simple set of standards for every teacher who corresponds richly with the assessments by which educators and the communities will judge the progress” (p. 74). The principal and teachers ensured that the standards they [the teachers] were held accountable for, were taught.

In my review of school renewal documents, analyzing state End-of-Grade tests data and disaggregating the data appeared to provide the staff with the focus they needed to plan instruction, and structure staff development needs. School renewal documents also revealed results of surveys that were sent home twice a year to solicit input from parents regarding ways the school staff could improve on and develop a better focus for the instructional program. Parent empowerment emerged through responding to school surveys. This allowed their opinions to be heard, valued, and implemented.

According to the data gathered in this study, the school staff was successful in achieving School of Distinction status because they had a focus on the instructional program. This focus consisted of the principal, (1) getting the resources and materials the staff needed to deliver instruction; (2) supporting and empowering the staff to make instructional decisions; and (3) maintaining an experienced staff to provide stability for the students. The focus of the instructional program was communicated to all

stakeholders regarding the standards that students would be held accountable for.

*Conclusion 2: In a Successful School, Communication Occurs Among All Stakeholders*

This study revealed that the ability to communicate to the parents and staff about the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and about the school's goals and objectives was critical to success. I observed the parents, teachers, and principal communicating with each other about the instructional program in various settings. Communication was emphasized across four of the five subordinate research questions. According to Epstein (1995), communication from school to home is crucial to a child's success at school. Having the ability to communicate with all stakeholders was noted as a major contribution in the success of the school community in working collegially to accomplish the goals and objectives of the school. It was evident through the extensive amount of school planning that occurred that communication was a two way process. Parents credited teachers with the ability to communicate during parent conferences and curriculum updates regarding state standards and other school related concerns. According to Carr and Harris (2001), communicating with all staff members and parents is crucial to a school's success.

In this study, communication was articulated as a major factor in the school's success across four of the five study domains. Data further indicated that communication with all stakeholders is needed. In an effort to promote student achievement, parents should become actively involved in their child's education.



*Conclusion 3: Collaboration Among Teachers, Parents, and the Principal Occur Often in Successful Schools*

Collaboration between the teachers, parents, and the principal emerged as an important element for student success at this school. I observed that the teachers worked collaboratively with each other to develop instructional strategies that focused on assisting all students in becoming successful during instruction. The principal built into the master schedule common planning time for teachers to engage in collaboration. Carr and Harris (2001) suggested that an educational climate is at its best when collaboration exists among school staff, families, and community members, all working together to support learners.

My review of the school improvement plans and committee minutes revealed that the faculty, staff, and parents were actively involved in collaborating in the following areas: planning, curriculum and instruction, staff development, school climate, and communication. In review of the school improvement minutes, it was indicated that parents participated in the planning process.

The sharing of ideas and classroom practices seemed to be a factor in promoting increased student achievement. It also appeared that the school staff made efforts through joint planning committees to involve parents in collaborating with school staff.

*Conclusion 4: A Successful School Staff has a Class Size Below Twenty Students*

Class size played a major role in the school's success. The principal, teachers, and parents indicated that classrooms with a small student-teacher ratio facilitated more individualized instruction and provided more opportunities for students to receive sustained feedback during challenging instructional tasks. Additionally, teachers

immediately addressed individual questions and assisted the students who were having difficulty with class work to ensure they had mastered targeted skills prior to introducing the next level of skills. Small class size also allowed the teachers to closely monitor student behavior, promptly address inappropriate behavior, and maintain high time on-task for students.

This study corroborates the findings of Finn, Gerber, Achilles, and Boyd-Zaharis (2000); Glass and Smith (1978); and Maier, Molnar, Percy, Smith, and Zahorik (1997) indicating that a reduced class-size can be expected to produce increased academic achievement. Teachers with smaller classes have the opportunity to give more individualized instruction to students more often during the class period.

*Conclusion 5: A Variety of Complimentary Programs Led to School Success*

A variety of complimentary programs led to the school's success. While many strategies were used to enhance the instructional program, the impact that the A+ Program and Project Acceleration had upon student achievement was most effective. The A+ Program is a program that incorporates the fine arts into the academics and the academics into the fine arts. The A+ Program further assisted teachers in integrating the fine arts into the academic content areas through use of the multiple intelligences. Gardner (1993) stated that learning and teaching should focus on the particular intelligence of each person. Through the use of the A+ model, educators made decisions about teaching and learning that contributed to students' success.

Project Acceleration is an extended day tutoring program. It also provides time for teachers to engage in pre-teaching the next day's lesson to give students an

opportunity to participate more during instruction. The remediation and pre-teaching that Project Acceleration provided appeared to assist in contributing to the school's success.

The Star Student Program is an incentive program used to recognize students who have followed the rules, completed all of their homework and behaved well. Due to the recognition and incentives provided through The Star Student Program motivates students to do well in school in order to participate in the recognition activity. Mrs. Hendrix, a parent, had this to say in support of the Star Student Program, "It brings respect for classmates and respect for the teachers" (I/P3/8/4). Parents further indicated that the rewards and incentives the program offers assisted the students in wanting to be successful. There appeared to be unanimous agreement that the program was a great incentive for the students.

The Comprehensive Management System (CMS) not only provided common planning time for teachers, but also allowed them to utilize this block time to offer individual assistance to students. Tutoring or re-teaching of difficult skills was offered to students who were having difficulty with assignments. During CMS time, grade level teachers were available to meet with parents to discuss instructional concerns regarding their child.

The overall instructional programs, A+ Program, Star Student Program, Project Acceleration, and CMS contributed in promoting increased student achievement. It appears that this successful school had incentives and enrichment programs to complement the instructional program.

*Conclusion 6: A Successful School Has Strong Parental Involvement*

Parental involvement in the student's academic program provided a strong framework for individual students and the overall instructional program of the school. Partnerships between parents, teachers, and students strengthened the academic program and facilitated high student achievement. Researchers have shown that parental involvement has a positive impact on students' achievement. Rosenholtz (1989), Epstein (1992a, 1992b, 1995), Epstein and Dauber (1991), and Griffith (1996) have indicated that parental involvement has a positive impact on a student's achievement, and is an integral part of the academic success.

Data gathered from interviews and document reviews revealed that critical information pertaining to the school's goals, policies and procedures, curriculum updates, and test taking strategies are discussed with parents during PTA meetings. Data also indicated that parents who are actively involved with their child's education by visiting the school, the teachers, and assisting with homework, increased student achievement.

*Conclusion 7: A Successful School Has a Nurturing Staff*

Throughout the collection of data, participants stated and demonstrated that they cared about the students. This caring family environment was felt and observed on several occasions when I entered the building, walked the halls, and entered the classrooms. Each child at the school has a faculty or staff member as a mentor. This gave each child an adult at the school. The mentor encouraged the students to do well in school. This mentoring program seemed to be an important part of the school's success. It provided time for an adult to become a friend and encourager to a child. It is my belief that some children may not experience this type of encouragement at home. Therefore, to

increase student achievement, and to promote lifelong learning, children need to know that they have adults encouraging and believing in them.

*Conclusion 8: A Successful School Has A Stable Staff*

The data gathered revealed that teachers had longevity at the same school. The principal indicated that the school's teacher turnover rate was extremely low. There were years that no teachers retired or resigned. In my opinion this created a bond among the teachers, staff and administration. It appeared that the teachers had the experience and knowledge necessary to perform their duties in their assigned areas. Referring to Table 1 on page 88, the teachers ranged from 6 to 29 years of experience at the same school. This tenure at the school has allowed the teachers and staff to be aware of family and community situations that could impact student learning. It is my belief that teacher longevity and experience fostered trust, enhanced teacher professionalism, and collaboration that promoted increased student achievement. It could be noted that the teachers remained at the school for the following reasons: (1) they were treated like professionals, (2) they collaborated with their colleagues, (3) they were in a nurturing environment, and (4) they felt the support from the principal and from each other. Darling-Hammond (2003) indicated that the major factors which strongly influence why teachers leave specific schools or the education profession entirely are "salaries, working conditions, preparations, and mentoring support" (p. 9). Sargent (2003) suggested, "Teachers who feel connected to a school - who feel that their work is important and recognized - are more likely to remain vital, dynamic, and contributing members of the school community" (p. 47).

*Conclusion 9: Students Perceive a Successful School Differently than the Adults*

The data analysis for the present study revealed that the students' perception of the principal, the teachers', and the parents' involvement at the school was different than that of the adult participants. Maehr and Buck (1993), and Sarason (1995) suggested that school leaders should establish a motivating culture to actively engage all stakeholders in the learning process. They further suggested that the culture should reflect the three interdependent cultures of teachers, students, and parents. The students appeared to view the motivating culture differently than that of the adults in the study. The students were not in conflict with the adults they just had different perceptions than the adults concerning adult involvement of instruction at the school. They talked about the assistance the teachers provided when they [the students] were having difficulty understanding class work. The students spoke about extra help teachers gave them during lunch or CMS time. According to the students, when a teacher noticed that they did not understand specific skills, they would re-teach those skills.

Every student participant stated that the principal's contribution to the school's success pertained to taking care of discipline problems and making sure that everyone was on their best behavior. They also viewed the principal as participating in school activities with them. One student commented, "He's the principal and when he takes the time to participate in an activity with us, we know he cares about us." It appeared that the students appreciated the praise the principal gave them when he visited their classrooms. One student commented that when the principal would visit the classroom to observe them, he would say, "I like the way you're behaving, or working together, or listening to your teacher boys and girls, keep up the good work."

Students viewed parental involvement, primarily as parents encouraging them to always to do their best in school, and if they did not, there would be consequences. All students agreed that their parents' most important involvement was helping them with their homework. One student commented, "My parents don't play when it comes to homework. They look at what I did in school that day and they check homework every night." Solo (1997) stated that a child does better in school when the parent is more involved, because it sends a message to the child that school is important.

The only time the students had a similar response to the adult participants was regarding class size. The students indicated that teachers were able to give everyone individual help. It was the consensus of the students that small class sizes had few behavior problems and they preferred a small class size as opposed to a large one.

In conclusion, the students' perception of reasons why the school was recognized as having distinction status was different than that of the adult perceptions. Students identified the principal's ability to take care of discipline problems, having caring adults at the school, and having encouraging parents, as reasons for achievement.

#### Limitations of the Study

Caution should be taken in the interpretation of the findings due to certain limitations of the study. The principal selected the parents, and the teachers selected the students who participated in this study. It was evident through observations and interviews that the selected parents and students supported the principal, teachers, and the school policies. Additionally, the school's rural location limited the views provided by the teachers, parents, and students. Every attempt was made to report the exact words of the participants.

## Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Based on the study's findings, the following implications are provided for consideration for school districts with similar demographics:

1. *Implication:* When the principal is involved in the instructional program, there is an increased focus on the instructional program.

*Recommendation:* It is imperative for administrators in any school setting to be highly visible, involved, and supportive in all facets of the school's instructional program. High visibility and involvement in the school's instructional and extracurricular activities broadens the students' perception of the principal's role.

2. *Implication:* Providing staff development designed by teachers is important to the success of student achievement.

*Recommendation:* It is advantageous for administrators in any school setting to consider maximizing the use of staff development funds by prioritizing areas of need and seeking out local and surrounding area experts to provide quality training at a reduced cost. Selected staff members could attend regional and/or state conferences to provide turn-around training for the staff at-large. Finally, administrator and teachers should seek out alternative funding through state and federal grants.

3. *Implication:* Parental involvement is needed to promote increased student achievement.

*Recommendation:* When the school staff encourages parents to participate in all facets of the school's instructional program, an increase in student



achievement occurs. Positive impacts will occur when the administrator and teachers establish positive relationships with parents and the community at-large to elicit increased participation in the school's programs.

4. *Implication:* Communication among all stakeholders is needed to promote continuous student achievement.

*Recommendation:* Communication efforts among the schools, parents, students, and the community at-large have to be clear and concise. Administrators and staff are encouraged to use terminology and concepts that are easily understood. Scheduling flexible meeting times for parents would provide parents the opportunity to give feedback, ask questions, and establish ongoing lines of communication.

5. *Implication:* Flexible schedules and increased instructional time are needed to provide additional remediation time for students having difficulty mastering skills.

*Recommendation:* Schools are encouraged to continue to provide tutorial services to students who need additional practice and/or instruction in the content areas. Teachers and principals should consider parent work schedules and student transportation in designing a tutorial program.

6. *Implication:* Programs that recognize student success create a school climate that values success.

*Recommendation:* Explore different avenues for staff members to provide incentives to increase parent participation in PTA and other school related

meetings and programs. Help parents to understand that their presence and participation on school committees, volunteering in the instructional program, and engaging in general school activities contributes to promoting student success.

### Recommendations for Further Studies

The present study offers a rich, detailed description of how one selected school reached School of Distinction recognition based on the North Carolina Accountability Program. Additional studies can be conducted to examine the characteristics of successful schools. The following recommendations reflect the information provided by all stakeholders throughout the data collection process. These recommendations were generated from “what if” questions and concerns that emerged from the findings based on this study and a selected review of the literature. The recommendations are as follows:

1. *Recommendation:* Conduct additional studies to describe how small schools in rural areas promote continuous school improvement with limited resources.
2. *Recommendation:* Identify methods that get parents actively involved in their child’s education, and explore ways to increase parent participation at PTA meetings.
3. *Recommendation:* Investigate and describe the scope of instructional practices and educational activities teachers use to determine the most effective methods to promote high student success.

4. *Recommendation:* Compare the impact that research-based programs versus nonresearch-based programs have on small school and student achievement.
5. *Recommendation:* Describe how teachers in grades 3, 4, or 5 could maximize and take advantage of after school tutorial programs to ensure that all students are successful in school.
6. *Recommendation:* Examine the impact that a high teacher turnover would have on schools with less than 350 students.
7. *Recommendation:* Describe the perception of elementary school students regarding the role of adults in the school.