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A TEACHER'S JOURNEY IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND REFORM

by

Kristi Domrase

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
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# A TEACHER'S JOURNEY IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND REFORM

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Western Michigan University, 2013

Today America's schools are failing to prepare its students to compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge based economy. The work presented in this thesis addresses current and historical educational reform movements in the United States with an emphasis on why American reforms are failing to keep pace with other countries in preparing its new students for the new global economy. As a teacher in a persistently low achieving school the paper is a culmination of course studies, research, and personal experiences with the school improvement process and reform policies. What I discovered is that the current educational reforms in America such as accountability and competition are failing to bring about the whole systems reform needed to raise academic achievement in America's schools. American reformers need to begin to focus on initiatives that build capacity, cooperation, and trust among teachers, students, parents, and community members if they are to bring about the whole systems reform necessary to improve America's schools and ensure that students receive an education that will allow them to compete in the new global economy.

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Kristi Domrase

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## INTRODUCTION

School change and improvement is generally understood as a continuous process that schools use to ensure that all students are achieving proficiency in core subjects at high levels. The goals of this process usually provide a framework for analyzing problems, identifying their underlying causes and addressing these issues to achieve sufficient progress in student achievement. To meet the challenges of the new century, today the problems of educational reforms are gaining even bigger significance than ever. During the last decade numerous studies were conducted and books were written in the Nation and around the world about the need for more powerful student learning focused on problem solving, creativity, critical thinking and collaboration which were defined by the demands changing nature of new capitalism and contemporary democracies(Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2010; Sennett, 2006).

Today schools are changing very quickly, and not always for the best of students. I agree with Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley (2012) who argue that today "the idea of public education for the common good is being replaced by the insistence that anyone can provide public education, even at a profit, so long as it improves tested outcomes for individual students" (p. ix). As a practicing teacher of the ninth grade American History at a failing high school in Southwest Michigan, I believe that promoting school reform through testing is a limited approach to the idea of school improvement in the 21st century. The state has determined that my school is ranked in the bottom five percent of the state's high schools. The state uses several pieces of data to establish the order in which its high schools are placed academically. However, the MME/ACT standardized

test taken by all eleventh graders in Michigan is the main piece of evidence used for identifying a successful or failing school. Currently, the students' average score on the ACT portion of the exam is thirteen. This score plays a big role in determining my students' future academic and career opportunities. With the average score being well below what students need in order to gain access to many of the four year colleges in Michigan, the students' fate seems to be determined before they get out of high school. I have spent the last eleven years seeking the key to school improvement. I have poured over the data and researched the latest information on school improvement and reform all in an attempt to help my students succeed at school and in life.

By exploring the nature of school improvement in different contexts, this study will show that (1) systemic change is a complex process that will occur provided all stakeholders (teachers, administrators, policy makers, students, parents and community leaders) are united by the same goals; (2) current policies of measuring student academic achievement and assessing teacher effectiveness contribute to the dysfunction of the educational system; (3) the competitive nature of current educational policies damages the collaborative spirit, the ability of teachers and school officials to build trust among themselves, parents and students; (4) it is the time for policy makers to re-evaluate such educational levers as choice, accountability and competition and recognize that they create tension within schools and promote the "blame game"; (5) American school children would be served best if educators and reformers could learn to come to the table with a collaborative spirit and recognize each group has a role to play in ensuring that students receive a well rounded education in any school in America.

The following four chapters set out the evidence for my argument. They are based on a qualitative study which includes a combination of the review of national literature on school improvement in a retrospective aspect, analysis of international evidence of high student achievement, study of the interviews with educational administrators and the generalization of my personal experience as a teacher. This thesis is a culmination of the knowledge I have also gained through graduate classes, research I have conducted in the area of school improvement and reform, and most important, -- my real life experiences with the school improvement and reform process.

I start my Chapter one with refining the nature of school improvement and change. Here I also suggest a brief overview of international school reform and America's role in it. It is organized around investigating a new international research agenda on school improvement and high performance of students in different schools and systems. Chapter two is a historical overview of school reform in America and a retrospective analysis of reform movements since Sputnik era, with a special attention to how educational policy has impacted today's educational climate. Chapter three discusses how national reform and legislations has influenced Michigan's educational reform efforts at the state and local levels. Finally, in chapter four I offer some insight of my journey and personal perceptions on what I view as missteps on the part of policy makers and prospects for educational leaders for helping American school children reach their full potential.

## RESEARCH TOOLS

The study was conducted in a high school in Southwest Michigan. The student population was typical for an urban school district: almost one-hundred percent minority, over ninety percent receiving free or reduced lunch, and consistent low academic achievement. Less than five percent of our eleventh grade students received proficiency in the content areas of math, language arts, and science on the annual state Michigan Merit Exam (MME). Our student's average score on the American College Test (ACT) is 13, well below what is necessary to be accepted to state colleges. To add to this, the school is located within a community that is experiencing an economic downturn with high unemployment and crime rates.

When I arrived at the school my principal was in the process of creating a School Improvement Team. The team's task was to assess the current building climate, analyze student achievement data, and review current teaching practices. The next step for the team was to design and implement a School Improvement Plan aimed at improving all three of the above areas. Shortly after the school year began it was obvious to her that I was unrelenting when it came to finding a solution to improving the building climate and student achievement, so she asked me to become a member of the School Improvement Team. This is where my quest began. I embarked on an ongoing journey trying to define school improvement and later school reform. I wanted to know: exactly what did these two terms look like, feel like, and sound like?

## **Methodology**

My approach to this project in the beginning and throughout has been to throw myself into the school improvement process, first at my school and district level and then at the state level with a “learn as I go” attitude, with the goal to assess the problem, make a plan, reassess, problem solved. I have discovered that school improvement is a much more complex process than I had imagined. Even more important is the fact that teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members do not have a shared understanding or working knowledge of the school improvement process or school reform. In order to help the students in my class, school, and district I needed to find the answers to the three following questions:

1. What is School Improvement?
2. What are the Barriers to the School Improvement Process?
3. What are the Components that Promote Successful School Improvement? or School Reform?

This is a mixed methods study, with an emphasis on qualitative approach.

**Qualitative.** My first step in my journey of discovery was to immerse myself in all the recent and historical literature on the topic. I conducted a literature review and a document study to analyze various viewpoints on school improvement discussed by national and international experts in the field of school reform. I also analyzed my experiences of attending School Improvement and School Reform conferences around the country. In addition, I conducted interviews on the subject of my research with leaders from the Michigan Department of Education in the areas of School Improvement and the states latest Coordinated School Health reform movement. Finally, I have generalized my

observations of having been personally involved in the school improvement process over the past ten years at my building and school district level. My experiences have helped to shape my views on the components that promote successful school improvement and the barriers faced by schools.

**Quantitative.** The study also employs the analysis of statistical data on school improvement. This data includes both the analysis of published statistical research on school improvement and school reform movements in the United States, and a quantitative analysis of survey results to raise academic achievement in the country. In doing my research, I also analyzed student academic achievement data from various sources to determine if the main goal of these movements were being achieved at the state and national level. I reviewed several surveys to determine if there were common threads in the barriers that prevented higher student academic achievement through school improvement or reform.

### **School Improvement and School Reform Definitions**

Though generally speaking, the term “school improvement” understood as a component of the term “school reform”, through the course of my research it became obvious to me that although these terms are used interchangeably they have two very different meanings. I have constructed two definitions for these terms for the purpose of this study. On the one hand, school reform will be used to refer to legislation, mandates, and programs enacted by the state and federal government with the objective of increasing student academic achievement at the state and national level. And on the other hand, school improvement will be used to refer to the plans, programs and strategies implemented in the local school districts and buildings in response to legislation and

mandates passed at the federal level in order to increase student achievement at the local level.

## CHAPTER I

### AN OVERVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL REFORM AND AMERICA'S ROLE IN IT

#### **The Nature of School Improvement and Change**

The first thing I discovered when I began this journey in school improvement is that everyone I spoke to about school improvement has their own idea of what school improvement is. It occurred to me that how a person perceived school improvement depended on their relationship with the school system. When speaking to teaching colleagues about school improvement, their description of school improvement was that it was something they talked about in staff meetings from time to time. The majority of the teachers I spoke to did not realize the importance of the school improvement process and that it is their opportunity to have a voice in changing their school's student achievement, climate, and culture. Administrators, on the other hand, treat school improvement as a task. The task is to complete a plan once a year and submit it to the state, and then the plan sits on a shelf gathering dust for the remainder of the year. In recent years the ability of teachers and administrators to gather and analyze student achievement data has expanded to the point that a click on a computer screen will give them all the information they need to determine academic areas of weakness. A disconnect, however, seems to occur between the two groups when it comes to implementing a plan of action for improvement.

The state and federal governments are concerned with one thing when it comes to school improvement and that is, are the student prepared to work in the new 21<sup>st</sup> century

knowledge based economies. The experts seem to agree that there are five characteristics that can be observed in effective schools that result in improved student achievement and school transformation (Brinson and Morando, 2009, p.4). Effective schools are: safe and orderly, have a climate of high expectations for success for all students, have a clear and focused mission, have an active and engaged principal focused on academic performance, and make it a point to frequently monitor student progress (Hess, 2004, p. 28). The problem is not in determining what the characteristics of effective schools are; the problem is making it happen in all schools. Successful school improvement begins with a shared vision or purpose of what a school wants their students to know and to be able to do. The school builds upon this shared vision or purpose and creates a curriculum that is well-conceived, coherent, and sequential (Ravitch, 2010, p. 231).

Finally, successful school improvement happens when talented educators come together and identifies the academic and social needs of their students, create an action plan to address these needs, and then implement the plan with fidelity. While all this is going on, the leadership's role is to keep the focus on the key question of teaching and learning (Hess, 2004).

Today the wealth of a nation and its ability to compete in the global market place is dependent upon the educational level of its citizens. In December of 2010 the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) released the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores. The Program for International Student Assessment or PISA is a standardized test, given every three years, to fifteen year old students from around the world. The test measures the student's ability to apply their knowledge in math, reading, and science to real life circumstances.

Countries use the test scores to determine their student's college/career readiness and preparedness to enter the global economy. The world, on the other hand, utilizes the scores to rank individual countries educational systems as it relates to competing in the global market place.

In 2009, 470,000 students, who represented 65 countries and educational systems from around the world, participated in the test (In Ranking, U.S. Trail Global Leaders, 2010 p. 1). The scores revealed that even though American students showed a slight increase in math and science they still are lagging behind their counterparts in countries such as Canada, Finland, and South Korea. In fact, of the 65-participants America found itself once again ranking somewhere in the middle in all areas. Furthermore, OECD analysis suggests, "that fifteen year olds in Korea and Finland are on the average two-years ahead of their American peers in math and science (U.S Department of Education, 2010, p. 1). On the day the test scores were released Arne Duncan, the United States Secretary of Education, stated, "We live in a globally competitive knowledge based economy, and our children today are at a competitive disadvantage with children from other countries (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p.2)." He further went on to explain, "that is absolutely unfair to our children and that puts our country's long term economic prosperity at risk" (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 2). Adding insult to injury, America has dropped from being ranked number two in 1995 in graduation rate to number thirteen in 2008 (In Ranking, U.S. Trail Global Leaders, 2010, p.1). What do countries like Finland who consistently score at the top have that America does not? How does their educational system differ from American? In this chapter I plan to explore the

differences between the United States educational system with Finland's system and if what is working for Finland is possible to replicate in the United States.

### **Educational Reform in Finland and the United States: Testing, Accountability and Competition**

Today Finland is the most educated nations of the world. Remarkably, unlike their Asian counterparts who historically find themselves on top academically through long hours of study, homework and rote memorization. Finland has managed to achieve the same status through less time in school, assigning less homework, and stressing creative play. How do the American policies of high stakes testing, accountability, competition, and teacher preparation compare to the Finnish way? Are there lessons that America can learn from what Finland has done to build a world class education for all its citizens?

Unlike the United States where school districts, schools, and students are graded and ranked based on standardized test, Finland has no standardized test. Instead they rely on the professionalism and training of their teachers to assess their student's academic progress. The only high stakes test taken in Finland is the matriculation exam given to students their last year of high school. The exam assesses the student's understanding of the mandatory national core curriculum and determines if the student is ready to continue their studies at an institution of higher learning (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 31). In Finland, "teachers are expected to use their professional judgment both widely and freely in their schools" (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 7). Unlike the United States, teachers in Finland are trusted and have control over the curriculum, student assessment, school improvement, and community involvement in their schools (Sahlberg, 2011 p. 7). Because teachers in Finland do not feel the pressure of making sure their students pass the next high stakes

test, they are free to focus on teaching and learning. Whereas in the United States, the pressure placed on teachers for their students to pass the test has changed the focus in the classrooms to test preparation. Recent reports released by countries around the world who have embraced a policy of high stakes testing suggest that teachers under these conditions actually redesign their teaching and basically teach to the test (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 67). The evidence further suggests that teachers also change their methods and emphasize memorizing and drilling in place of in depth understanding and knowledge (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 67). Pasi Sahlberg stated, in Finland “we prepare children to learn, not how to take a test,” (Hancock, 2011, p. 2).

With the passage of "No Child Left Behind" and then "Race to the Top" the idea of holding teacher and administrators accountable for student learning has become solidified in the educational policy of the United States. In contrast, during a recent visit to the United States Pasi Sahlberg, Minister of Education for Finland explained to an audience at the Teachers Collage of Columbia University, that “there is no word for accountability in Finnish” (Partanen, 2012, p. 3). Instead Finland chooses to focus on the idea of equity and trust as main drivers of educational policy.

In Finland education is seen as the great equalizer in society, while the United States still struggles to close the achievement gap among minority student populations. Beginning in the 1980s Finland’s educational policy has focused on making learning expectations the same for all students a priority and have seen the gap between high and low achievers disappear (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 48). However, America’s policy to address the achievement gap has been to allocate more money to struggling schools, send in educational consultants to address the low achievement, and allow states to take over

persistently low achieving schools thinking they can do a better job. It is time to for American educational policy makers to face the facts. The quality of education a child receives in America does depend upon where a child lives, their access to health care, proper nutrition, and preschool education. Finland did not create an equitable educational system through educational policy alone. The country also created national policies that ensured equal and free access to preschool, health care, psychological counseling and student guidance (Partanen, 2012, p. 4). In order to meet the level of equality seen in the Finnish educational system America needs to reexamine their national policies and begin to create policies that can begin to level the playing field for all children entering America's schools. These policies should also ensure that once a child in America enters school they will have the opportunity for the same educational experience despite where they live or their socioeconomic status.

Another factor leading to the success in Finland is that they have been able to create a culture of trust. "The culture of trust meant that education authorities and political leaders believe that teachers, together with principals, parents and their communities, know how to provide the best possible education for their children and youth" (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 130). On a recent visit to Finland Diane Ravitch (2011) reported that teachers have great latitude in designing curriculum for their schools and share a great degree of autonomy. She further explained that teachers and principals reported that the "secret of Finnish success is trust" (Ravitch, 2011, p. 1). America, on the other hand, suffers from a top down educational management model where competition instead of cooperation and collaboration is stressed.

In Finland there is no list of best schools or teachers (Partanen, 2012, p. 3). However, ask any teacher in America, what time of the year do they dread most? The overwhelming response would be when their state releases their schools standardized test scores. Under the current competitive nature of the Race to the Top legislation America's schools are labeled from best to worst based on these test scores. This "race to the top" mentality has pitted one school against the other in a constant competition for students, resources and federal funding. On the other hand, in Finland education is considered to be for the public good and national policies have created an atmosphere of collaboration and friendly rivalry, not competition and race to the top (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 126). Cooperation among schools and teachers is encouraged to ensure that all children in Finland have the opportunity for a high quality education.

Finally, in Finland teaching is considered to be a noble profession and teachers benefit from a high level of public trust. Teachers are given great autonomy to do their jobs and collaboration and cooperation is encouraged. The exact opposite is true today in America, in fact, teacher in many cases are vilified and blamed for all of society's ills. Teachers are subjected to market based top down management and have little if any voice in reform initiatives that are implemented in their schools. The Finnish reform model shows that "consistent focus on equity and cooperation—not choice and competition—can lead to an educational system where all children learn well" (Sahlber, 2011, p. 9).

The main lesson I believe American educational reformers can learn from the Finnish is the concept of equity. America should begin to focus on leveling the playing field for all children entering their schools. The idea that in one of the wealthiest nations

in the world the quality of education a child receives depends on where they live or their socioeconomic status is unacceptable.

## CHAPTER II

### NATIONAL REFORM

The founders of America believed it was important to educate the citizens of the United State because education was the only way to safeguard a democratic society. Thomas Jefferson, one of America's founders, believed that the only way to preserve individual liberty was to educate the citizens. Jefferson envisioned America as a great nation of farmers educated and informed enough to participate in the new idea of democracy. I do not think the founders ever imagined how educational reform would become the determining factor in the economic success of the United States on the global stage. Since its founding American educational reformers have made every effort to ensure that the American educational system is second to none. However, in today's global society America finds itself falling farther behind its competitors. The issues of modern educational reforms have become especially problematic which is connected with decreased academic competitiveness of high school graduates on a global scale.

Today the United States is ranked fourteenth in reading, seventeenth in science and twenty-fifth in math out of the thirty-four countries that participated in the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (OECD, 2010a). American fifteen-year-old students are currently being out performed by students in Finland, South Korea, Canada, and Australia. The United States Education Secretary, Arne Duncan considers this to be "an absolute wake-up call for America" (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Duncan goes on to explain, "We live in a global competitive Knowledge based economy, and our children today are at a competitive disadvantage with children from other

countries” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). However, this is not the first wake-up call that American educational reformers have received over the past decades. In this chapter I will examine the development of educational reform during the past five decades since the Sputnik era to show the warning signs that the United States educational system was in trouble. More specifically, I will identify trends of educational reform movements that grew out of these times of alarm.

### **National Defense Education Act**

Americans received a wake-up call in 1957 when the Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite, Sputnik. This was during the height of the Cold War and Americans lived in fear of communism and the Soviet Union. For the most part before the launching of Sputnik the education of America’s youth was a local affair and the federal government played a minimal role. The American Government was now faced with the fact that the Soviet Union had just launched a satellite into space and there was apprehension that the Soviet’s education system was superior and that they would produce the next generation of scientists. President Eisenhower and congress began to rethink the federal government’s role in education. Congress passed the National Defense Education Act in 1958. The passage of this Act signaled a change in the attitude of the American government towards their involvement in education and can be seen as the first step towards national educational reform. The National Defense Act “provided fellowships, grants and loans to encourage the study of science, mathematics, and foreign language and funded school construction and equipment” (Ravitch, 2001, p. 44). Finally, reformers had achieved something they had been working years to accomplish; the federal government had assumed a role supporting education and began to see education

as key to national security and economic competitiveness. The launching of Sputnik can also be seen as a catalyst for two different views of school reform in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

First, in 1959 James B. Conant supported the comprehensive high school model in his report, *“The American High School Today.”* In his view, high schools needed to be larger in order to service the educational needs of all the youth within a community. In order for a high school to meet the criteria of Conant’s ideal comprehensive high school, it had to meet three tasks: 1. Provide a good general education for all pupils (all students were required to take courses in English, American literature, composition, and social studies); 2. Offer non-college bound majority electives and non academic courses (such as vocational, commercial, and work-study); 3. Academically talented students would be provided advanced placement in courses of such as math, science and foreign languages (Ravitch, 2001, p.45). Speaking about school improvement in his other bestseller, *The Education of American Teachers*, Conant insisted that ideal comprehensive high school has to provide strong liberal arts knowledge (Conant, 1963). Although some of Conant’s initiatives such as advanced placement courses are still utilized in high school today, his idea of large comprehensive high schools has been replaced by a smaller learning community reform model. The smaller learning community model focuses on making high school communities smaller and stresses relationship building among the students and staff members as a way to raise academic achievement. Also lost to today’s atmosphere of high stakes testing is non academic courses and vocational education. Schools are opting to replace these type courses with remedial classes geared at raising test scores. Very similar to Conant’s thoughts on school improvement were expressed at

that time by James Koerner who insisted on national standards and strong content knowledge of secondary students (Koerner, 1963).

On the flip side, the Ford Foundation took another approach to tackle what was being called during this time period the “crisis in the schools” (Ravitch, 2001, p.46). In all my research, the Ford Foundation’s *Comprehensive School Improvement Program* of the 1960s is the first mention of the term “school improvement” that I have found. This program funded communities in creating model districts for school reform and implementing innovative strategies such as: team teaching, teacher-devised curriculum, flexible scheduling, and school-university cooperation (Ravitch, 2001, pp. 46). The foundations also established the “*Great-Cities Grey Areas Program*” to assist urban school districts in creating remedial programs for the growing number of low income students (Ravitch, 2001, p.46). Many of these practices are still seen today in high schools around the country and are considered best practices in education. I view the *Comprehensive School Improvement Program* by the Ford Foundation as a precursor to the modern school improvement plans that are required of school districts and schools across the country today. The Ford Foundation requested that individual school reformers, communities or school submit plans to improve academic achievement based on the latest research in education and the student population they served in order to obtain funding for their initiatives. This mimics the current National School Improvement movement whereas; schools and districts are required to submit plans to the state to improve the academic achievement of their students. The current plans must be based on educational research and best practices and are used to retain Federal Title I dollars and

seek new funding through the School Improvement Grant program established by the Obama Administration.

### **Elementary and Secondary Education Act**

During the 1950s and early 1960s educational reformers continued to encourage the Federal government to take a larger role in the education of America's young people. Reformers argued that for America to compete on a global scale and maintain national security the federal government must become involved with education. They warned that without national intervention the American educational system and its students would continue to slip further and further behind other nations. In 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson strengthened the federal government's commitment to education when he added the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to his War on Poverty Legislation. The Johnson administration believed that the best way to end poverty in America was to educate its citizens. This same sentiment is echoed today by educational reformers. In Fact, in his State of the Union Address in 2010, President Obama stated, "In the 21st century, the best anti-poverty program around is a world-class education" (Full Speech Transcript, Obama, p.6). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was designed to provide funds to school districts who serviced a high number of economically disadvantage students. Reformers during the 1960s argued that that students from low-income homes required more educational services then those from well off households. A major element of Act included the introduction of a preschool program for low income children called Head Start. The main goal of the program was to level the educational playing field by making sure students from low income families were as ready to begin school as their counterparts from prosperous households. Upon passage of the legislation

President Johnson stated, “for every one of the billion dollars that we spend on this program, will comeback tenfold as schools dropouts change to school graduates” (Schugurensky, 2002, p.1). Generally speaking, President Johnson’s educational programs, especially Teacher Corps resulted in serious federal attention to the issues of poverty and underfunded schools.

Funding for education of the federal level also changed in the 1960s. First of all, federal funding would no longer be done for the purpose of general funding; instead federal funding would be tied to national policy concerns such as poverty, defense, or economic growth (Schugurensky, 2002, pp.2). Next, in order to manage the new federal funds being sent to the states, State Departments of Education expanded and local schools and district became more dependent on them (Schugurensky, 2002, pp.2). These changes continue to drive funding and reform on the national level today. With each new Presidential administration comes the opportunity to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The new administration determines how funds will be allocated and the requirements that states have to meet in order to receive the funds. It is during this time period that school improvement or school reform begins to take shape and become part of the national agenda. Finally, educational reform and school improvement has become an issue that is debated by local, state, and federal governments along with philanthropists and university scholars.

### **A Nation at Risk**

America received another warning in 1983 about the decline of its educational system when the report “*A Nation at Risk*” was published (Boyer E, 1983). The report was created by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, a group brought

together by President Regan's Educational Secretary, Terrell Bell. Simply put, the report warned Americans that the country was in danger of falling behind other nations economically because of a declining educational system. The report warned Americans that "our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p.5). The Commission found inadequacies in content curriculum, student expectations, time spent in class, and teacher preparation.

Much of what they reported as being problematic in the educational system in 1983 educational reformers in 2012 still cite as problematic today. The report recommended stronger high school graduation requirements, higher standards for academic performance and student conduct, more time devoted to instruction and homework, and higher standards for entry into the teaching profession along with better salaries for teachers (Ravitch, 2010, p. 25). However, the Commission's focus on America's high schools made it appear as if all the problems resided solely with the high schools. In fact, if the Commission had taken a closer look, they would have discovered many of America's students were entering high school often lacking the basic skills and knowledge to be successful. Even with this flaw in the report, the recommendations made by the Commission made sense in 1983 and still make sense today (Ravitch, 2010, p. 29). The publishing of "*A Nation at Risk*" gave rise to the standards based movement of the 1990s. Educational experts realized the importance of beginning with what a student should know and be able to do, or the curriculum.

A series of very noticeable proposals on school reform and improvement was initiated by the Holmes Group which emerged at Michigan State University at the beginning of the 1980s and very quickly developed into national movement on school and teacher improvement. The Holmes Group involved the whole Nation into a dialogue on national standards for teacher preparation and secondary student's education (Fullan, 1995, pp. 230-235). A very similar taskforce on teacher and school improvement and reform was developed by Carnegie Foundation (Carnegie Forum on Education and Economy, 1986).

When Bill Clinton became president he was committed to national standards and testing discussed in educational debate of the previous decades. Unfortunately, with all the controversy over the national history standards and a Republican congress refusing to authorize voluntary national testing, the movement for national standards and testing became a dead issue. This leads us to where we are today. What "*A Nation at Risk*" report could not accomplish through voluntary recommendations, *The No Child Left Behind* legislation will attempt to accomplish through federal law.

### **Goals 2000**

When Bill Clinton became president he was determined to continue the educational reform he and his predecessor President George Bush began in 1989. In 1989 then President George Bush arranged for a national educational summit. In attendance were forty-nine of the fifty governors, members of the Bush administration, and business leaders from around the country. This was an opportunity for President Bush to voice his concern about the current state of America's educational system and express his views on the federal government's role in educational reform.

President Bush saw the federal government as a supporting and coordinating partner in educational reform not as its leader (New York State Education Department, 2006, p.55). He stated, “I firmly believe that the key will be found at the State and local levels” (Bush, 1989, p.56). Then Governor of Arkansas and soon to be President Bill Clinton led the charge to establish a set of national performance goals and create a set of benchmarks to be reached by the year 2000. In his 1990 State of the Union Address, President Bush shared with the nation the six goals that participants in the educational summit committed to accomplish by the year 2000. The first goal established the idea that all children would begin school ready to learn and would begin an expansion in early childhood education during the Clinton administration. The second goal called for high schools in America to increase their graduation rates to 90%. A determining factor used today to grade American high schools. Goal three help pave the way for standardized testing by requiring students in grades four, eight, and twelve demonstrate academic competency. The last three goals were broad in the nature and included: American students would outperform other nations in math and science, American citizens would be literate and finally, all schools would be safe and drug free. All the goals reflect the recommendations of the Nation at Risk report of the 1980s and by the Obama Administration many of these goals would become requirements of schools and school districts in America (National Goals Panel, 1992). Unfortunately, the summit produced a set of goals but no ways or ideas of how to accomplish them.

In 1992 Bill Clinton became President and came to office committed to educational reform through national standards and testing. His ideas and decisions in the area of educational policy and reform while in office would be shaped by his work on the

National Educational Goals Panel. In fact, his first proposed and successful piece of legislation was called Goals 2000: The Educate America Act (New York State Education Department, 2006, p.65). The Act put into legislation the six goals established during the educational summit in 1986 plus two additional objectives one involved teacher quality and the other covered parental responsibility. The legislation also launched a grant program for states to begin to develop state standards and assessments and for local school districts to implement standards-based reform. The requirements to apply for the funding were not stringent therefore, any state adhering to the idea of standards-based, systematic reform and had a planning process to support that effort could get funding under Goals 2000 (New York State Education Department, p.65). This became problematic because the rigor of the educational standards varied from state to state and district to district. The reason for the looseness of the requirements was to calm the fears of the opposition who felt the federal government was moving towards national standards.

President Clinton also had the opportunity to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which he renamed Improving America's Schools Act. Before Clinton school districts were able to adjust or lower academic standards for economically disadvantaged Title I students. When Clinton Reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act this practice was eliminated and changed to require that all students meet the same set of standards being developed by each state with the help of funds from Goals 2000. Title I funds therefore were to be used to aid students in poverty to meet the same set of educational standards. This change would pave the way for the next administration to establish adequate yearly progress academic targets.

By the end of President Clinton's terms in office Federal educational reform had moved to standards based curriculum with all students being held accountable for the same set of standards. This leads us to where we are today. What the *A Nation at Risk* report and Clinton could not accomplish through voluntary recommendations. The *No Child Left Behind* legislation would attempt to accomplish through federal law.

### **No Child Left Behind**

On January 8, 2002 President George W. Bush signed *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965. *No Child Left Behind* was his attempt to legislate the recommendations from the *A Nation at Risk* report and the educational goals created at the National Educational Summit then later included in former President Clinton's Goals 2000 program. The legislation increased the role of the federal government in educational reform and was a continuation of the standardized based reform movement of the previous Clinton Administration. *No Child Left Behind* focused educational reform movements in the United States on testing, accountability and competition among schools. The basic requirements contained within the law would change the educational atmosphere in the United States and move the country closer towards a national curriculum.

The first requirement centered on accountability and the idea of proficiency. Beginning in the 2005-2006 school year states would be required to test all their students in grades three through eight in math, reading, and later science. This would be a state test based on individual state curriculum, not a national test. The states would determine what level would be considered proficient. This proved to be problematic because each state had their own view of what proficiency was, so a student could be proficient in one

state and not proficient in the state next door. This further intensified the debate over a national curriculum and the standards based reform movement. I had the opportunity during this past school year to work with a consultant from Cambridge Education. Cambridge Education is a school reform consultant group from England that has been working in the United States for ten years in several different states. The main goal of the group is to help underachieving schools and districts implement school improvement practices and raise academic achievement. When I asked him what was the one weakness he saw in the United States educational system. He stated, "I think that the biggest weakness in the system is that there is not one set of national education standards, meaning that the education students receive in one state could be very different to that in another state. There needs to be consistency in standards, grading and credit awards so that 'mobile' students are not disadvantaged. A set of national standards would also eliminate the issues and potential confusion around common core and state standards" (Gooch, 2012). One cannot help but wonder how an established set of national standards that required all students in the United States to obtain certain content area benchmarks to be deemed proficient would change the way states approach educational reform. It seems to me that a national approach to education would bring everyone together to obtain the same set of national educational goals. Whereas, today's approach pits states against one another with each vying to prove they have the answer to increase academic achievement instead of working together.

The second requirement found in *No Child Left Behind* addresses individual students academic progress which should be statistically measured. *The No Child Left Behind* Legislation established Adequate Yearly Progress or AYP. Soon the question

being asked by teachers, administrators, State Departments of Education, parents, and students was did you make AYP? The ultimate goal and actual mandate sent to the states by the Bush administration was that by the year 2014 all students (100%) would be proficient according to individual state standards. One side effect of the mandate is the creation of an educational environment within schools and school districts where the only concern is teaching to the test and making AYP. What is forgotten about educating America's young people are writing, critical thinking, and analytical skills. These are all skills students need in order to be successful in college and careers beyond high school. Not to mention the fact that in many schools classes such as art, music, and social studies are disappearing in lieu of test prep courses. "The provisions of the law are turning large numbers of schools, particularly those serving low-income children, into test-prep programs" (Neill, 2003, p.1).

Another problem is that the goal of 100 percent proficiency is unrealistic. In her book, "The Death and Life of The Great American School System", Diane Ravitch reflected on the mandate she helped to create. She stated, "the goal set by congress of 100 percent proficiency by 2014 is an aspiration; it is akin to the declaration of belief. Yes, we do believe that all children can learn and should learn. But as a goal, it is utterly out of reach" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 103). She points out that the flaw in the mandate is the main goal of proficiency and its definition. She seems to have had a change of heart and now feels the idea of proficiency needs to be redefined as functional or minimal literacy in order to meet the goal (Ravitch, 2010, pp.102-103). This echoes the sentiment we are hearing today with reformers questioning their focal point of standardized testing and

students being judged based on proficiency, and beginning to gravitate towards preparing students to be college and/or career ready upon graduation from high school.

Another major short fall of the legislation that educational reformers feel is being overlooked is the ability of states to manipulate the academic achievement data of their students in order to meet the adequate yearly progress mandate. As stated earlier, states are free to create their own assessments based on their own curriculum and they set the bar for what will be considered proficient within their states. Because of the punitive nature of the No Child Left Behind states and school districts across the country are hesitant to set high academic achievement expectations for their students for fear of not making adequate yearly progress. States can further manipulate their student academic achievement data through the way they disseminate it. According to the law states must establish grade level annual measurable objective in the area of math and reading for each one of their sub groups. Examples of sub groups are English Language Learner, Special Education, and Economically Disadvantaged. Whether or not a school makes adequate yearly progress is determined by whether or not each one of the school sub groups meet their annual measurable objective. If just one student within one of these sub groups does not meet their annual measurable objective the entire school does not make adequate yearly progress. It is left to the states to determine how many students must be within each group in order for them to count in the results. Therefore, states can set the number of students required within these sub groups high so their test results will not count in determining adequate yearly progress. Unfortunately, students within these non counted sub groups all too often get left behind, in order for the school to focus on the academic

achievement of the students who do count in determining the schools adequate yearly progress.

In the end the *No Child Left Behind* legislation fortified the standard based reform movement in the United States. Now for the first time history American teachers, students, and school districts would be held accountable for a standardized set of academic performance goals in math, language arts, and science. However, *No Child Left Behind* only focuses on improving test scores in math and reading whereas “*A Nation at Risk*” supported the creation of a public school system that offered a well rounded education based on a coherent curriculum for every child (Ravitch, 2010, p. 29).

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Reform**

When Barack Obama became President in January of 2009, America was in the midst of one of the worst economic downturns in its history. Upon taking office President Obama was committed to reforming the educational system and ensuring that all children receive a world class education and would have the ability to compete in the new 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge based global economy. He viewed a strong education system as the best way to continue the war on poverty begun by President Johnson in the 1960s and voiced this view in his 2010 State of the Union Address. “In the 21st century, the best anti-poverty program around is a world-class education and in this country, the success of our children cannot depend more on where they live than on their potential” (Full Speech Transcript Obama, 2010, p.6).

President Obama began his reform of the educational system in America through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in February of 2009. The Act authorized the spending of \$77 billion to reform and strengthens elementary and secondary

education, with \$48.6 billion allocated to stabilize state educational budgets (White House, 2012, p.2). The remaining funds would be used to support the administrations Race to the Top competitive state educational grant, and School Improvement Grant program for local districts, and programs for early childhood education. The funds were used as a type of reward for those states and local districts that were willing to follow the federal guidelines for reform laid out by the Obama administration and work to improve teacher effectiveness, increase student's ability to attend college, improve academic performance with an emphasis on low performing school, and enhancing data systems (White House, 2012, p.2).

President Obama believed as his predecessor that educational reform started with rigorous academic standards, accountability, and competition. However, getting all states to adhere to a national reform model proved difficult since historically the education of its students has been the job of state and local governments. Therefore, Obama used a carrot and stick approach to gain buy in from all states in his national reform model. The Race to the Top Grant was a competitive grant if states adhered to the national reform model requirements they would be rewarded with opportunity to compete for federal educational grant dollars (the carrot). If they choose not to follow the national reform model they could not compete for grant dollars (the stick).

### **Race to the Top**

On July 24, 2009 President Obama and his Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan announced a 4.35 billion dollar state competitive grant program entitled "Race to the Top." In making the announcement President Obama explained, "In a world where countries that out-educate us today will out-compete us tomorrow, the future belongs to

the nation that best educates its people, period” (U.S. Department of Education, 2012) competition would be based on a point system whereas; states could earn up to 500 points if they complied with federal educational policy reform mandates such as: creation of a teacher and principal evaluation tool based on student achievement, adoption and implementation of common core curriculum standards, lifting the cap on the number charter schools allowed to operate in a given state, and the improved use of student achievement data in making instructional decisions.

There were two major drawbacks that the states had to face in order to compete for the federal dollars. First, many of the federal reform mandates required states to change language in teacher contracts such as, tying standardized test scores to teacher evaluations. Second, the state faced the obstacle of passing legislation such as, raising the cap on the number of charter school allowed to operate in the state. Finally, even if the states did meet all the required mandates there was no guarantee they would receive any of the funds such was the case for Michigan. In fact, Only forty states and the District of Columbia applied for funding with only twelve states receiving varying amounts of funding, based on the state’s student population, after phase two. Nine states were considered to be finalist after phase two and they were given the option to compete against each other for a share of 1.33 million dollars as part of phase three. In the end of the forty-six states that began the competition only twenty-two states received funding from the Race to the Top Grant.

Some states, such as Texas, elected not to compete for the grant citing that the Federal Government was attempting to control state educational issues. This was much to the dismay of local school district superintendents such as, Terry Grier of Houston Public

Schools, who began lobbying Arne Duncan for a local competition (Resmovits, 2012, p.1). Other states such as California were forced out of the competition after not being able to reach agreements with their teachers unions over the issue of teacher evaluation. Luckily, these local districts and others across the country whose states were unsuccessful in the state competition would get their chance. In May of 2012 the administration announced that this year's grant competition would include \$400 million to support school districts in implementing local reforms. In announcing the new guidelines for the district competition Arne Duncan, United States Secretary of Education stated, "Race to the Top" helped bring about groundbreaking education reform in states across the country. Building on that success, we're now going to help support reform at the local level with the new district competition" (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). To be eligible for the grant districts must service at least 2000 students with forty percent of their student population qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Grant recipients will be chosen based on their ability to create reform plans with a clear vision to increase student achievement with a focus on preparing their students for college and careers. Terry Grier, Superintendent of Houston public schools, plans to apply using his turn-around plan know as Apollo 20, which applies the qualities of high-performing charter schools to underperforming public schools (Rosmovits, 2012, p.1). The Federal Department of Education plans on funding 15-25 school districts with four-year grants ranging from \$5 million to \$40 million. At the time of this writing little has been published about the progress of the new Race to the Top local district competition.

## **Race to the Top Progress**

In March of 2012 Ulrich Boser of the Center for American Progress published a report that outlined the progress of the individual states that received the Race to the Top Grant. On a positive note according to the report Race to the Top has created an educational atmosphere within the United States focused on the creation of a common core set of academic standards even among states that did not receive funding. All states that have received funding through Race to the Top have created new teacher and administrator evaluation systems that use student achievement as one of its components although it still remains a hotly contested issue (Boser, 2012, p.3). On the downside all the states have delayed or changed part of their grants and many are beginning to question whether or not the states have the capacity to implement serious educational reform. There is also a concern that many of the states may have set unattainable goals for themselves (Boser, 2012, p.12).

Diane Ravitch, an educational reform historian has described Obama's educational reform plan as "an aggressive version of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind under which many schools have narrowed their curriculum to tested subjects in reading and math" (Ravitch, 2010). In a blog in 2010 she outlined three key problems with the Obama's Race to the Top competition. First, using student test scores in teacher evaluations will narrow the curriculum leaving out classes like social studies, art, and physical education and turning school into test preparation factories. Second, schools that are labeled as persistently low achieving will be closed or turned into charter schools. There is no evidence that students in charter schools out score their counter parts in the public schools in their areas. Finally, states are encouraged to use mayoral takeover to fix

low achieving schools districts. However, one only needs to look at Detroit Michigan or Cleveland Ohio to see that this model is not successful in raising student test scores. What Ravitch does believe is that there is a definite connection between poverty and academic achievement. She feels that in order to fix the schools America must first address its larger social problems such as racial inequities and the high number of children who are living in poverty.

Concluding, I would argue that, historically, Americans have felt that school improvement and reform was largely a state and local issue. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge based economy education has become the determining factor in the economic success of the county and its citizens. Beginning with the launching of Sputnik in 1957 the American government has become more and more aware of the important role education plays in both the country's economic standing in the world and its national defense. Over the past decades as each alarm was sounded that the American educational system was falling behind its competitors the federal government has responded by taking more and more control and oversight of America's educational system. However, because of the objections from many educational groups proclaiming that school improvement and reform was a local issue. The federal government had to tread lightly and until the passage of No Child Left Behind only took tentative steps into reforming the nations educational system. This caution to get involved on the part of the federal government is one of the main reasons why problems with the educational system have persisted over time. Deficiencies in America's educational system such as the need for stronger high school graduation requirements, more time devoted to instruction and homework, and higher requirements for individuals entering the teaching profession, to

list a few were all pointed out in the 1983 A Nation At Risk report and continue to be discussed and debated today with no clear strategies or policies on how to address the problems. This trend seems to be changing however, beginning with the passage of No Child Left Behind and continuing with the Race to the Top legislation the federal government has moved to put educational reform into law instead of making recommendations.

Another important trend in educational reform that should be considered is the fact that over the past decades the focus has been on academic achievement. Because of this you can trace a systematic move on the part of the federal government towards national standards and curriculum, thus in 2012 the trend has become state implementation of a Common Core. The Common Core is a national set of standards and curriculum. States must be in the process of implementing the Common Core in order to maintain federal dollars for education and to compete for competitive grants offered by the Obama administration.

What educational reformers and the federal government have seemed to ignore over the years is the conditions for learning. While all the attention has been centered on the idea of students being proficient in math science and language arts reformist have forgotten about the vast array of barriers to learning faced by students before they get to the classroom. This I believe will be the new trend in educational reform and I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER III

### MICHIGAN REFORM

Michigan's Educational System is at a crossroad. Michigan could boast it had achieved one of the world's best industrial economies during the twentieth century. The state led the nation and the world in furniture manufacturing, production of pharmaceuticals and chemicals, and dominated the automobile industry. Throughout the 1950-80s, due to the nature of an industrial economy, Michigan workers could easily move into the middle class and make a decent living without the benefits of a formal education.

Unfortunately, in today's economic climate, the probability of individuals finding gain full employment with only a high school diploma is disappearing. The new economies of the twenty first century are knowledge based, as more and more employers are now requiring some type of postsecondary technical training or formal education. The movement from an industrial economy to a knowledge based economy has created an educational achievement gap between Michigan and its competitors within and outside the United States. In addition, the 21<sup>st</sup> century puts its own set of expectations on the agenda of educational reforms connected with the culture of the new capitalism (Sennett, 2006), rapid development of informational technologies, and the "flat" world which is rapidly changing under the influence of globalization (Friedman, 2005). Furthermore, the nature of work will continue to change even more rapidly: according to the U.S. Department of Labor, today's workers will change more than 10 jobs by the age of 40 (Darling-Hammond, 2010). To be successful in their lives, today's workers have to

develop the new skills of problem solving, analyzing, designing new products, evaluating and managing own work, as well as the skills of effective communication and collaboration with others in many forms.

All this radically changes the new mission of school improvement and educational reform which have to be geared toward preparing students “to work at jobs that do not yet exist, creating ideas and solutions for products and problems that have not yet been identified, using technologies that have not yet been invented” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 2).

Faced with the challenge of trying to determine what students should be taught in order to succeed at jobs that have not yet been created, Michigan continues to be seen as a pioneer in the area of School Improvement and School Reform. In the current climate of teacher accountability Michigan has begun to focus on how it trains and prepares its teachers. One of the earliest reform movements in Michigan to address teacher training began to meet in East Lansing shortly after the publication of “A Nation At Risk” in 1983, which warned that America was in danger of falling behind other nations economically because of declining educational systems. Known as the Holmes Group this group of 96 research universities with professional educational programs began to meet to discuss how they could improve the teacher education programs at their own schools. As the group meet it became evident to its members that they felt an obligation to help recreate the American public school system and that it all began with the training of its teachers, “We cannot improve the quality of education in our schools without improving the quality of the teachers in them” (Holmes Group, 1986, p. 30). The group’s main goals soon became to reform teacher education and to transform teaching from an occupation

to a profession (Holmes Group, 1986, p. 9). The groups work is seen today in the way teachers in Michigan are trained, the credentialing of teachers, and how teachers are supported once they go into a classroom.

### **Michigan's Educational Policy History**

Another area that Michigan continues to lead the way is in passing legislation to address the mandates in Federal Educational Reforms such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. In order to advance a national education agenda the federal government began to make it a requirement that states sign into law certain components of school improvement in order to compete for federal school improvement dollars or to receive Title One funding. In this section I will explain several pieces of legislation passed in Michigan in order to meet these requirements and compete for federal dollars. In the next chapter I will describe in more detail the federal legislation and the impact it had on Michigan.

### **Public Act 25**

State leaders recognized the fact that Michigan's economy was changing to knowledge based economy and that a more educated citizenry was needed in order for the state to continue to thrive. In 1990, the state passed Public Act 25 as a way to begin to hold schools accountable for raising the academic bar and improve the schools. Public Act 25 was the first step towards creating a comprehensive framework for standards based accountability in Michigan's public schools (Education Policy Center at MSU, 2000, p. 3). The act contained four key elements: First, in the area of school improvement, schools would be required to create and implement school improvement plans that would address the academic needs of their students. Second, schools would be

required to align their local curriculum to the states core curriculum standards for student learning. Third, School would now go through an accreditation process that would evaluate them in the areas of curricula, staffing, facilities and the school improvement process. Finally, schools would be required to publish an annual report that would inform the public about the school's academic achievement, parental involvement, and its progress in the school improvement process. Public Act 25 was further strengthened in 1993 with the passage of Public Acts 335 and 339. The elements described above have become part of the school reform movement in Michigan and are contained in the school improvement process that all school and districts in Michigan are required to participate in order to maintain their funding. Today Michigan's school improvement process contains five basic steps: Step 1), gather (collect school data), Step 2), study (analyze data and set improvement goals), Step 3), plan (develop an action plan), Step 4, do (implement plan), and Step 5), review and reflect (Were the goals achieved?) (Michigan Department of Education, 2010). The process seems simple first, determine where your school needs to improve in the areas of academics or school climate, next, make a plan to improve, then, implement the plan, finally, check to see if your plan worked and improvement occurred. So why are schools not showing the improvement that the state and federal government requires?

The problem, as I see it, is that everyone involved in reforming schools have a different idea of what school improvement is and what it looks like. An individual's perception of school improvement depends on their relationship with the school system. When speaking to teaching colleagues about school improvement, their description of school improvement is that it was something they talked about in staff meetings from

time to time. The majority of the teachers I spoke to did not realize the importance of the school improvement process and that it is their opportunity to have a voice in changing their school's student achievement, climate and culture. It has been my experience that Administrators, on the other hand, treat school improvement as a task. The task is to complete a plan once a year and submit it to the state, and then the plan sits on a shelf gathering dust for the remainder of the year. Neither one of the groups feel any sense of devotion to the school improvement process and therefore they offer a lot in the way of lip service when creating the plan, but fall way short when it comes to implementing what they said they are going to do in order to improve their schools in the area of academics, climate and culture. The bottom line is the state and federal governments are concerned with one thing when it comes to school improvement and that is, "Did the school make adequate yearly progress?"

### **Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)**

In 1994, as a result of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) was instituted as an accountability measurement for Title 1 schools and districts. States would now be required to create state assessments in order to track Title 1 schools and districts' progress in improving student academic achievement. In Michigan these test are known as Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) at the elementary and middle school level and the Michigan Merit Exam (MME) at the high school level. Schools could then use their AYP information in creating their school improvement plans and determining their professional development needs. Schools and districts who successfully meet AYP would be recognized. However, schools and districts who failed to make AYP

for two consecutive years would be required to implement improvement plans and use a portion of their Title 1 funds for professional development.

The reauthorization of Title 1 in 2001 resulted in the passage of the Federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and adequate yearly progress became target goals of academic achievement in each state. “According to NCLB, Michigan and other states must develop target starting goals for AYP and the state must “raise the bar” in gradual increments so 100 percent of the students in the state are proficient on state assessments by 2013-14 school year” (Michigan Department of Education, 2012). No Child Left Behind also shifted the focus of the academic areas that would be measured to math and language arts and later science. Because the academic focus of NCLB was in the areas of math, language arts, Michigan adjusted its approach to AYP and turned its attention to these three academic areas. Unfortunately, because of the heavy emphasis of the test in these academic areas other academic areas such as social studies, physical education, and liberal arts classes have been decreased or disappeared from the course of a regular school day. The new formula also required that students’ attendance at the elementary and middle school level be used while graduation rates were used at the high school level to determine if the school or district made AYP.

### **Influences on Michigan’s Educational Policy**

**Educational Policy Center.** Michigan State University was one of the first institutions to recognize that Michigan’s economic future depended upon the knowledge, skills, and training of its workers. Michigan State University established the Educational Policy Center (EPC) in June of 2000. The Center’s main goal is to improve the quality of education by providing nonpartisan researched-based information to help shape the

educational policy debate at the local, state, and national level (Education Policy Center at MSU, 2000).

One of the first educational policy issues that the center became involved with was in the area of accountability. In May of 2000 the Michigan Association of School Boards created a task force to produce an action plan to improve the accountability system in Michigan. The Center's then director, David Plank, and Barb Markle, director of the College of Education's office of k-12 outreach, presented researched based information to the task force to help shape their action plan. David Plank published one of the Center's first of many policy reports on the work being undertaken by the task force to improve the accountability system. Today, the Center continues to fill three major roles in educational policy debate at the state and national level: first, the Center compiles, stores and analyzes educational data; second, the Center is a source for research reports, policy briefings, and expert testimony on educational policy issues; and finally, the Center supports initiatives to improve education in Michigan and beyond (Michigan State University, 2011). Just as the Holmes Group report in the 1980s impacted the way in which teachers are trained today in Michigan. The Educational Policy Center at Michigan State University continues to provide nonpartisan data and information to assist educational policy makers at the state and national level shape the debate on educational reform and improvement.

**Cherry Commission.** By the year 2002 Michigan's Educational Policy makers were feeling the pressure of the need to transform an educational system to address a changing economy and the passage of the No Child Left Behind Legislation on a Federal Level. In 2004, Michigan's then Governor Jennifer M. Granholm created the

Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth led by then Lieutenant Governor John D. Cherry. The Commission was a response to the economic downturn Michigan was experiencing at the beginning of the twenty first century and the new federal mandates. The governor and lieutenant governor tasked the Commission with developing policy recommendations that would meet the following three goals: First, the commission wanted to double the percentage of residents in the state who achieved an education or some sort of formal training beyond high school. Second, they wanted to create a better alignment between Michigan's institutions of higher education with emerging employment opportunities. Finally, they wanted to build a dynamic workforce. (Cherry Commission, 2004). I found the report especially intriguing because in my eyes it was the first report I had seen that matched economic success with education. I was also interested to see that the findings and recommendations of the commission are still evident in schools today across Michigan.

**Commission's findings.** The Commission discovered that although ninety percent of Michigan's ninth graders were reporting that they intended to go to college only forty-one percent were enrolling directly out of high school and out of the forty-one percent only 18 percent were graduating with a bachelor's degree (Cherry Commission, 2004). The fact that young people in Michigan were not taking advantage of postsecondary educational opportunities could be explained by the high drop-out rate, and for those students who stayed in school and graduated only thirty percent were taking courses that prepared them for higher education.

**Commission's recommendations.** The commission was united in their belief that the one factor that would have the most impact on Michigan economy was to have a well

educated and trained workforce. Several of the recommendations made by the commission are considered the norms in high schools across Michigan today. For example, it became obvious that the message being sent to young high school student had to change. During the twentieth century the expectation was that all students would graduate high school. However, in today's Michigan high school the bar has been raised and the expectation is that all students will graduate and enter into some sort of post high school education. The message being sent loud and clear today by teachers and administrators to students at all grade levels in Michigan is that all students in Michigan will be career-ready or college-ready upon completion of high school. Another change that occurred due to the recommendations of the commission is the addition of the American College Test (ACT) to the Michigan Merit Exam (MME). This test is required of all students in Michigan in order to graduate. The addition of the ACT to the state standardized test (MME) has created a different educational atmosphere in Michigan. Today Michigan high school students are not just preparing to pass another standardized test to complete high school, but are preparing to complete a test to enter college.

Despite the economic challenges faced by Michigan at the beginning of the twenty-first century one fact remained the same. The success of Michigan depends on the educational level of its citizens. Leaders in Michigan and other educational policy experts realized this fact early on and began to lay the ground work for Michigan's current set of education policy reforms.

### **Michigan 2011-2012**

Today, under the direction of State Superintendent Mike Flanagan, the Michigan Department of Education continues to make every effort to ensure that Michigan students

are career-ready or college-ready upon completion of high school. In the 2011-2012 school year, 79% of Michigan's school buildings and 93% of the school districts made AYP (Michigan Department of Education, 2011). However, the percentage of school buildings and districts making Adequate Yearly Progress is down from previous years and is expected to fall in the next year. One must keep in mind that the cut scores indicating proficiency have been raised by 10% each year in order to meet the mandate of 100% of students meeting proficiency by the 2013-2014 school year as outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. "Schools that do not make AYP two or more consecutive years are placed on the federally-required consequence list. The consequences get progressively more severe with each additional year a school does not make AYP, ranging from having to provide school choice and transportation to another school, to tutorial services for students, to eventual school restructuring" (Michigan Department of Education, 2011).

Beginning in the 2008-2009 school year stakes became even higher for schools and districts in Michigan that were not achieving Adequate Yearly Progress. The incoming Presidential administration of Barack Obama faced a national economic downturn and funding for schools at the state level were being cut to the bone. Coming into office, the Obama administration understood that the educational level of the nation's work force had a direct effect on the success of its economy and determined the United States' level of competition in the emerging knowledge-based world economy. Keeping this in mind, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act was passed in 2009. The Act was a response to the economic downturn America was experiencing, but one of its main objectives was to invest in education. Using funds from the American Recovery and

Reinvestment Act, the United States Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, announced two competitive grants: “Race to the Top” and “School Improvement Grant,” both of which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. However, in order for Michigan to compete for these federal dollars they would have to meet the Obama administration’s education reform criteria. The reform criteria required that Michigan raise the number of charter schools operating in the state, tie standardized test scores to teacher evaluation, school overhauls, and agreements with teachers’ unions (Resmovits, 2012). The result of the announcement was a flurry of legislative action in Michigan to meet the requirements and compete for the dollars.

### **Public Act 277**

At the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year Michigan had 250 charter public school academies operating in the state. By a vote of 20-18 the Michigan Legislature passed Michigan’s Public Act 277 gradually lifting the number of charter schools authorized by public universities to 300 through 2012 and 500 through 2014 after which there will be no cap on charter school authorization. Supporters of the Act including Republican State Senator Phil Pavlov, believed “by offering opportunities to parents and students across the state for potentially a different educational environment, everybody wins” (Martin, 2011). Opponents to the Act saw it as an attack on public education and its unions. One of the most controversial pieces of the legislation is that with its passage school districts could now contract out the hiring of their teachers to other sources in the same fashion many school districts are contracting out their non-instructional services. Democratic State Senator Hoon-Yung Hopgood felt, “all we’re doing is subsidizing these for-profit ventures and diverting scarce resources from our neighborhood, locally

governed public schools” (Martin, 2011). It is true that financial aid follows the students to the school they attend, so for every student who moves to a charter school a public school loses out on educational dollars. Unfortunately, the loss of educational dollars due to students moving to charter schools means public school districts general funds have been depleted. The general fund budget is where teacher salaries, educational supplies such as books, and student transportation cost come from. Because these funds have been depleted school districts have to make cuts that directly affect the quality of education within the district. Another side effect of this legislation is the way school receive their student educational dollars from the state. Each year in Michigan on the fourth Wednesday after school begins every school building counts their students that have enrolled and began to attend their school. The amount of dollars a district receives in the way of student educational funds from the state is based on this count. Charter schools have the ability to refuse or release students from their schools if they do not fit into their programs or if they find the student is too disruptive to their educational setting; this is not an option in a public school. Therefore, charter school will accept students at the beginning of the school year and hold on to them until they receive their educational dollars and then inform them that they are no longer welcome in their school. The student then has no other choice but to enroll in the public school and the public school has no recourse to recover the student’s educational dollars for that year. Basically, the charter school receives fund for a student they are not educating and the public school ends up educating several students that they receive no funding for. As a side note recent achievement data shows that most public schools are performing at or above the level of the charter schools within their area.

## **Public Act 1249 and 1250**

To the alarm of teachers and teacher unions, in January of 2010 Michigan Governor Rick Snyder signed Public Act 1249 and 1250 into law. Public Act 1249 and 1250 changed the way teachers and administrators are evaluated and tie their evaluations to student achievement. According to the Michigan Education Association, the new evaluation process requires that teacher be evaluated annually; evaluations must be rigorous, transparent and fair and be tied to student achievement (Michigan Department of Education, 2011). The acts also increases the amount of time it takes for a teacher to achieve tenure from four years to five. To add to the controversy, school building staffing decisions would no longer be required to be based on tenure or layoff decisions based on seniority. Governor Snyder commented on this past practice, “The old way of doing things with tenure, of using seniority as a primary guide, is just inappropriate in today’s world when we need to focus on students so much” (Huffington Post, 2011). What happens to often is a school will go through the expense of training its staff to implement a program or activity that will raise the academic achievement of their students only to find out that teachers they have trained are being moved to a new building and new teachers who have not been trained in the program are moving in. This makes it difficult for any school building to implement any school improvement activities with fidelity. This piece of legislation becomes particularly important to these schools, now other factors such as specialized training will be taken into consideration when determining staffing within school district.

## **Public Act 451**

The last hurdle for the Michigan Legislature to overcome before the state could then compete for the “Race to the Top” and “School Improvement” grant dollars were in the areas of school overhauls and agreements with teachers unions. Michigan accomplished this with the passage of the Revised School Code, Act 451. First, the Act required that districts and individual schools turn three to five year School Improvement Plans into Michigan Department of Education by September 1 of each year. The Act further went on to outline the process and required information to be included in the plans. Four of the main items now required within the plans are: goals centered around student academic learning, strategies to accomplish the goals, evaluation of the plan, and staff development. The passage of Public Act 451 went a step further then Public Act 25 now the school improvement plan and process was law. Individual schools and district were now required to turn in an official plan of how they were going to improve the academic achievement of their students. Districts and school are now also required under the law to turn in a report at the end of each year accounting for their progress on what they said they were going to do.

Next, beginning in 2010, in order for the schools to apply for the new federal School Improvement Grant dollars made possible through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the state superintendent would need to publish a list of the lowest achieving five percent of all public schools. Schools that found themselves on the list would be placed under the supervision of a school reform/redesign officer and required to submit a redesign plan to the Michigan Department of Education within ninety days of the school being placed on the list. Within the schools reform/redesign plan a school must

choose one of the following four intervention models required under the federal incentive grant program list: 1) Transformational Model includes replacing the principal, extending learning and teacher planning time, and implementing instructional reform strategies. 2) Turnaround Model includes that the principal be replaced and fifty percent of the school staff, implementing a new or revised instructional program. 3) Restart Model school district closes the school and reopens as a charter school. 4) school closer the district would close the school.

The schools are identified using a federally-prescribed and federally-approved formula to find what the U.S. Department of Education is calling the “Persistently Lowest Achieving” schools or PLA (State of Michigan, 2010). Then Governor Jennifer Granholm commented, “we are committed to ensuring that every student in Michigan receives a first class education, these funds will help schools that are struggling the most to meet this goal” (State of Michigan, 2010).

In September 2010 Michigan’s State Superintendent, Mike Flanagan, published the Persistently Lowest Achieving (PLA) schools list. The list contained the names of 108 schools across Michigan. The schools ranged from elementary to high school and were for the most part located in urban school district such as Detroit Public School that had forty-seven schools on the list. These schools then began the new required process laid out in Public Act 451. At this time there is very little that has been published on how the law has affected student achievement in these schools. I only know that colleagues in these schools have felt the frustration and pressure to raise academic achievement to get off the list and school districts and schools are struggling with how to get off the list.

Finally, the most difficult item for the state to tackle, if they were going to be able to meet the requirements to apply for the “Race to the Top” dollars, was reaching agreements with local teachers unions. The state had already successfully passed legislation that tied student achievement to teacher evaluations, changed tenure laws, and raised the cap on the number of charter schools. In Act 451 the state sought to have local bargaining units approve three key provisions in their collective bargaining agreements. The only schools that would be affected by the requirement to add the addendums would be the schools that were placed on the Persistently Low Achieving List. These schools were required to reach a consensus among their local union membership to add the following provisions to the contract: first, local contractual or seniority systems would not apply to the PLA school; second, contractual or other work rules that impede the implementation process of the redesign plan would not apply finally, the state school reform/redesign officer shall have full autonomy and control over curriculum and discretionary spending. The state and local school districts went to work placing pressure on local bargaining units to influence their members to approve the new provisions to their contracts. The biggest argument from the Michigan Education Association and its members was the fact that there was no guarantee that with the passage of all the anti-union legislation that Michigan would even get a piece of the \$43.5 billion dollars offered by the Obama administration. However, due to the pressure from the state, local districts, and an underlying threat that if addendums were not approved the state would come in and take over the school, local union leadership eventually were able to convince their members to agree to the new provision being added to their collective bargaining agreements. Now all the pieces were in place, and all requirements for Michigan to

compete for the “Race to the Top” were met. The only question that remained was would Michigan receive a grant?

In the end, after all the discussion, scrambling, and controversy on the part of the Michigan Department of Education, Michigan Education Association, local teacher collective bargaining units, and the Michigan Legislation, Michigan was not a recipient of the “Race to the Top” grant. However, Michigan was awarded \$119 million dollars in the way of a “School Improvement” grant. Each school who found themselves on the lowest achieving schools list distributed by the State Superintendent on September 1, 2010 had an opportunity to compete for a grant worth two million dollars each year for a three year period (State of Michigan, 2010). These dollars could be used by the individual school to implement their school improvement or reform/redesign plans. It was great that Michigan would be the recipient of the federal school improvement dollars. But, there were 108 schools on the list and this was a competitive grant not all the schools were going to receive financial support to implement their required reform/redesign plan. Schools that were unsuccessful in their quest for a school improvement grant found themselves with a plan, but no money to implement a plan that they had made a commitment to the state to put into action.

Michigan is committed to ensuring that students graduating from its high schools are career or college ready and have the ability to compete for jobs in an ever changing global economy. Where Michigan finds itself today is at the forefront of the national debate of how to transform a school system to meet the challenge of educating students for jobs that have not been created and skill sets that have yet to be determined. Whether it is by assisting to get legislation passed such as Public Act 451, or consulting

educational experts such as the Educational Policy Center at Michigan State University the Michigan Department of Education intends to raise the academic achievement bar for all of Michigan's students. In the next chapter I will discuss school reform on the national level and go more into detail about how national reform movements have affected education reform in Michigan.

### **Climate, Culture, and the Learning Environment**

On November 9, 2012 I attended my tenth Michigan Department of Education School Improvement Conference in Lansing Michigan. As always, I expected to listen to key note speakers and attend breakout sessions to hear the latest on raising academic achievement and what new programs, initiatives, or strategies are being used around the state.

However, this year was different the key note speaker was Baruti K. Kafele, the author of several books about the education of African American males including, "Motivating Black Males to Achieve." He is currently the principal of Newark Tech High School in Newark, New Jersey which is considered one of the best high schools in the nation by U.S. News and World Report. I was expecting to hear him speak about how he was closing the achievement gap at his school, but much to my amazement he began to speak about closing what he termed the "attitude gap." Basically his message was that in order to close the achievement gap you first must close the "attitude gap" or transform the culture and climate within the school to one that is conducive to learning.

Finally, a speaker of national standing at a state conference was speaking my language. A major factor that I strongly believe has been overlooked by the federal and state governments along with many educational reformers is the impact a student's

physical, emotional, social, and behavioral health plays in academic achievement and the learning environment as a whole.

## **Research**

There have been several studies and research performed over the past ten years that confirm this. Data from the 2009 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) revealed that among high school students those students engaged in what would be considered health-risk behaviors are more likely to have lower academic achievement than students not engaged in health-risk behaviors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009).

The survey is conducted every two years and is representative of the countries students in grades nine through twelve. Research also indicates that students who are suffering from chronic undernourishment score lower on achievement tests and show behavioral and emotional problems that play out in classrooms around America every day. Another obstacle faced by many of American students each day is mental health issues. A report released by the Surgeons General in 2000 points out that one child in ten suffers from mental illness that results in mild to severe impairments in educational settings (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000). In 2006 the Division of Adolescent and School Health survey National Youth Risk Behavior showed that forty-three percent of high school students reported drinking alcohol within the past thirty days; twenty-five percent reported binge drinking. Twenty-three percent reported cigarette smoking and thirty-eight percent used marijuana (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Finally, students who do not have a connection to school are more likely to use alcohol and drugs, engage in atypical behaviors, become pregnant, suffer from emotional

impairments, and therefore less likely to experience academic success (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002). Imagine being a student who is worried about where your next meal is coming from, where you will be sleeping that night, suffering from depression or beginning stages of diabetes, feeling left out at school and using drugs or alcohol to be part of the crowd. Would you be open to learning a new Algebra equation, understanding Romeo and Juliet, or care about the Holocaust?

Since the passage of No Child Left Behind and then Race to the Top Legislation the main focus to raise academic achievement in the United States has been on teaching strategies, adding time to the school day, and purchasing programs that promise to raise test scores by training teachers to do a better job. There has been very little, if any, attention given to the barriers to learning many students face every day before they get to the classroom. Students from high poverty areas are most susceptible to many of these barriers and consequently their schools are more likely to be labeled as persistently low achieving. Because of the pressure placed on these schools to raise student academic achievement many have been forced to become test prep factories with little attention being paid to the learning environment and meeting the physical, emotional, social, and behavioral needs of their students. "Education must address the needs of the whole child. Students' physical, social, and emotional development requires the same level of ongoing assessment and support as the academic development" (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007). In order for a child to learn and reach their full academic potential it is basic human nature that they first have their physical, social, and emotional needs met. This is especially important in high poverty schools districts where many of the students face physical, social, or emotional stressors that become barriers to their learning.

## **Coordinated School Health**

The concept of Coordinated School Health has its roots in the Comprehensive School Health movements in the late 1980s. Over the years the Center for Disease Control has adopted the name Coordinated School Health Model and identified eight components. In 2007 the Connecticut State Department of Education defined these components: The first three components support providing students with comprehensive health and physical education courses and ensuring that all students have access to health care. Research shows that students who are physically healthy and have learned strategies make healthy choices are less likely to exhibit risk behaviors such as drug abuse. A student's physical health also directly impacts their ability to learn. The fourth component ensures that students have access to nutritional meals during the school day and learn how to make nutritional food choices. Nutrition has been linked to both a student's academic achievement and classroom behavior. These first four components have become part of the national educational agenda as part of First Lady Michelle Obama's campaign against childhood obesity. The last four components have to do with the conditions for learning or the learning atmosphere. I believe that these components are the most important. If American schools are to raise academic achievement they must first make sure the conditions within a school are conducive to learning. Component five makes certain that students with mental health issues can receive services. Many of the classroom disruption in today's schools can be blamed on students who have mental health issues. These students not only create barriers to learning for themselves, but also for the students around them. Unfortunately, with America's laser light focus on academic achievement very few schools have mental health professionals or social

workers on staff to address the needs of this student population. Therefore, students with mental health issues many times suffer in silence and teachers are left to try to support their learning with little expertise in dealing with mental health concerns in the classroom. The last three directly address the learning environment or climate and culture. In order for a student to learn they must feel that their school is safe and supportive. Students must feel as if they are part of the school and develop positive relationships that support academic success. The importance of a teacher's mental and physical health should not be ignored. Staff morale and pride in ones school has been shown to have a direct impact on student learning. Finally, parental and community involvement is important if students are to develop the intrinsic motivation that is necessary for high academic achievement. (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007). All these components working together create an educational atmosphere within a school where students can be academically challenged and feel safe and confident that they will be supported to meet the challenges. The basic premise of Coordinated School Health is that in order for students to achieve academically they must have their basic physical, emotional, social, and behavioral needs met first.

### **Safe and Supportive Schools Grant**

In 2010 the Obama administration signaled a change in the federal government's attitude towards raising student academic achievement when it announced the Safe and Supportive Schools Grant competition. The grants would be awarded to State educational agencies to support statewide measurement of targeted programmatic interventions to improve the conditions for learning (United States Department of Education, 2010). Funds would be made available to states through a competitive grant based on plans to

implement the Coordinated Schools Health model in its Persistently Low Achieving Schools.

This was a discretionary competitive grant with dollars being made available through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and replacing the Safe and Drug Free School's money. Out of the thirty states that applied for funding eleven states received the funding: Arizona, California, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, South Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. The state of Michigan received the highest score on the rubric and was awarded the most money. Michigan was also the only state to add a parental engagement component to its grant proposal.

### **Michigan Safe and Supportive Schools**

During the spring and summer of 2011 school districts across Michigan began applying for the Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) Grant. "The purpose of the S3 grant is to help schools raise levels of academic achievement. Schools use student, parent, and staff survey results along with student discipline incident data to assist them in the selection of interventions to improve conditions for learning (school climate). In addition the grant will foster relationships with adults in the school setting, and engage parents and community members" (Michigan Department of Education, 2011). By the fall of 2011 twenty-four high schools were awarded a Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) Grant and began their implementation of their Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) Grant plans.

The most fascinating detail about the Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) Grant in Michigan is two of the requirements of the grant that one generally does not find in other federal funded grants. First, recipients of the grant were required to hire a person to work at least twenty-hours a week as the building liaison. The building liaison is required to be

housed at the high school and their main function is to facilitate the coordinated schools health team, lead the grant planning efforts and monitor the successful implementation of the S3 grant. Each of the school who was awarded funding also was assigned a state coach. The state coach makes regular visits to the school and assists the team with reviewing data, planning, and implementation of strategies, initiatives and programs geared towards improving the schools climate and culture or conditions for learning. The building liaisons, state coach, and the state core team come together twice a year for the purpose of networking, ensuring understanding of grant requirements, and to support the implementation building level plans. The level of support and training of the building level Coordinated Schools Health teams and building liaisons from the state makes certain that schools are utilizing their funds in the best possible way to create the most favorable learning environments for their students.

In conclusion, considering the building climate and student's physical, mental, social, and behavioral health seems to be a new approach to raising student academic achievement by the federal government. Perhaps they are beginning to understand the lessons they can learn from other countries such as Finland where treating the whole child while educating them is not the exception but the rule. After working for eleven years in a high school located in a high poverty area I can attest to the fact that the learning environment or the climate and culture of the building is the main determinate factor in whether or not students will achieve academically. Students must first have their very basic physical, social, emotional, and behavioral needs met before they can or will learn. It seems as if America is finally beginning to recognize this fact.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE BARRIERS FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

In this final chapter I plan to discuss the barriers faced by many American schools to putting into action the type of reform ‘drivers’ necessary to raise the academic achievement of their students. I will also point out how many of the reform efforts currently underway in the United States contributes to the dysfunction in the educational system.

Michael Fullan (2011) in *Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform*, points out that in order for whole system reform to take place you must first have the right ‘drivers’ or policies and strategy levers that will drive successful reform ( p. 3). In his view “the right drivers – capacity building, group work, instruction, and systemic solutions – are effective because they work directly on changing the culture of school systems (values, norms, skills, practices, relationships); by contrast the wrong drivers alter structure, procedures, and other formal attributes of the system without reaching the internal substance of reform – and that is why they fail” (Fullan, 2011, p. 5)

One of the major barriers for a meaningful educational reform was created by the controversial concept of accountability. The notion of holding states, school districts, and local schools accountable for the academic achievement of their students comes in the form of Adequate Yearly Progress. With the passage of No Child Left Behind the federal government began to mandate school improvement. Today the federal government measures this mandate through the use of state standardized test. President Obama further

strengthened the idea of accountability by mandating that teacher and administrators evaluations be tied directly to academic achievement through the passage of Race to the Top. These mandates have fundamentally changed America's schools all the way down to the classrooms. They have also created a barrier to ensure that all students receive a well rounded education because schools and classrooms have now been turned into test prep factories. This is especially true in schools located in high poverty areas. Programs in the area of the arts, high school elective classes and even recess are being erased and replaced with test preparation courses. Today students in America are being tested at a rate that would be unheard of in most other developed nations. Finland, for example has no standardized test. The country only gives one examination called the National Matriculation Exam at the end of what would be considered in America their high school year. Yet, according to an analysis conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Finland's students are on average one to two years ahead of American students in math and science (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Secondly, the idea of basing teacher's evaluations on student's scores on standardized test would make the teachers from other countries cringe. In America it creates another barrier to implementing the type of change that needs to occur in order to prepare students to be successful in the twenty-first century. The focus in America's classrooms has changed from equipping the students with the ability to learn to teach students how to take a test. Evaluating teachers based on standardized test has sucked the life out of a teacher's ability to assist students in developing a love of learning and reduced teaching to a mindless job. The other problem is that teachers are being held

accountable to raise academic achievement utilizing programs or strategies that they had no voice in choosing. The new climate of accountability in education has generated a panic within schools and districts whereas they are searching for a magic bullet to raise academic achievement. In the past ten years in the district I work in I have seen more than a dozen initiatives, programs, and educational reform consultants come and go. All promising to be the magic bullet, but resulting in no change in the academic achievement in the students. Nonetheless, the teachers are being held accountable for years of flat line academic achievement data. How do you hold teachers accountable for academic achievement when they do not have a voice in the school improvement process and they do not have the authority to ensure that programs or initiatives being purchased by the district are implemented with fidelity?

The main problem with accountability and why it will fail to bring about the type of systems reform necessary in the United States is because it does not create the intrinsic motivation within individuals nor does it build the capacity among educators needed for whole systems reform. Reformers in the United States should begin to focus on capacity building. A focus on capacity building will equip America's teaching force with the technical skills, tools, and strategies that will raise academic achievement. Through capacity building educators and students develop intrinsic motivation, meaning they do things well because it is important to them and the individuals they are working with. A study conducted by McKinsey and Company in 2010 entitled, *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*, revealed that countries that focused a higher percentage of their intervention in the area of capacity building such as, collaborative practices or technical skill building were more likely to show improvement;

versus countries who focused on accountability interventions such as performance assessments with consequences (Fullan, 2011, p. 9).

Another barrier to a meaningful educational reform is created by school competition. In Americas current educational atmosphere schools and teachers are pitted against one another in a competition over student enrollment, and funding. Public schools find themselves competing against charter schools to enroll students within their districts. Yet, all current research shows that for the most part charter schools are not out performing public schools academically. However, because charter schools choose their students they work to enroll the most motivated students and families. On the other hand, public schools are required to enroll all students. Therefore, public schools seem to have become the schools of last resort for the most unmotivated and hardest to teach students who cannot get into a charter school (Ravitch, 2010, p. 2). This scenario is especially true for district located in high poverty areas.

Through the passage of Race to the Top the Obama Administration has embedded market based competition into the educational system in the United States. Local schools, school districts, and states are now required to compete for federal dollars in order to obtain the financing in order to implement their plans to improve student learning. This form of competition among the schools, districts, and states has created inequities within America's educational system. It has created a national school system of "have" and "have nots". Those schools and school districts who are fortunate enough to meet the requirements and whose improvement plans are determined to be better than other competitors receive funding to implement their plans. Those schools or schools districts whose plans are determined to be lacking receive no extra funding. Yet the expectation of

the federal government is that all schools implement plans that will increase student achievement.

The competitive nature in today's educational policies in America damages the ability of teachers and school officials to build trust among themselves, parents and students. Under today's current policies American schools face a type of "walk of shame" when annual list of schools academic performance are published in local newspapers. When these list are published the blame game begins with administrators blaming teachers, teachers blaming administrators, parents blaming both, and students are trapped in the middle. This blame game makes it difficult for administrators, teachers, and parents to build the collaborative spirit that is necessary for whole school reform. Through collaboration the stakeholders begin to build the trust among each other that is needed to raise academic achievement in their schools. Instead of vilifying schools and teachers and pitting them against one another, it is time for America to move away from the blame game and begin to develop the degree of trust and collaboration seen in high performing nations such as Finland. In Finland teachers are held in high esteem and their professional judgment is trusted. Administrators, teachers, and parents work together in a collaborative spirit to ensure that all Finnish children receive a top notch education.

Over the past two decades American educational reform has mainly been focused on the idea of accountability and competition as a way to improve America's schools. However, American schools have not improved and many would say they have even declined further. "Today there is empirical evidence, and it shows clearly that choice, competition and accountability as education reform levers are not working" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 1). Common sense would dictate that if America is not achieving the level of

success in their schools they desire under the current policies that it would be time to reevaluate the policies. However, for whatever reason the American government holds tight to the idea that accountability and competition will work to reform America's public schools. As a teacher in a persistently low achieving school I can attest to the fact that the current policies do nothing but creates an us against them mentality within schools between administrators, teachers, and parents. The current policies do little to foster the collaboration and trust between all the stakeholders required to implement whole systems reform and raise academic achievement. American school children would be served best if educator and reformers could learn to come to the table with a collaborative spirit and recognize each group has a role to play in ensuring that students receive a well rounded education in any school in America.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

One of my findings as a teacher who works in a persistently low achieving school district in Southwest Michigan is that there has been no consensus among educational stakeholders regarding necessary changes for American schools' improvement. I can honestly say that when I arrived in the district I had high hopes and dreams for myself and the students I was teaching. I believed that teachers, administrators, parents and the community working together could design a school improvement plan that would raise academic achievement among the students and create a safe and supportive learning environment that was conducive to learning. Even after three years of course work, research, and dozens of books on the topics of school improvement studied, as well as discussions on school reform and educational policy history, not to mention interviews with international, national, and state experts in the topics-- the only factor that everyone

seems to agree on is that the United States Educational System is broken. However, no one agrees on what is the best medicine to fix it. This was one of my biggest findings. My research showed that one of the major challenges being faced by reformers is that the current educational system is based on the industrial economy of the twentieth century and is outdated. In fact, in today's twenty-first century knowledge based economy, even the yearly school calendar is based on the principle that America is a country of farmers and the need for children to be home in the summer to help take care of crops.

I strongly believe that the type of systemic change that needs to occur in order to meet the challenge of preparing students to compete in the twenty-first century economy requires all stakeholders to be on the same page and is a challenge that is easier said than done. Systemic change is difficult, it takes time, dedication, and nerves of steel on the part of all the stakeholders; teachers, administrators, students, parents and community members. According to the Center on Innovation and Improvement Twin Paths to Better Schools, “in nearly every case of a chronically failing school true change requires breaking the habit of dysfunctional processes and raising expectations—for staff and students—that have been low for years” (Brinson & Morando Rhim, 2009, p. 9).

Frederick M. Hess declares that the educational system has turned into a “culture of incompetence” (Hess, 2004, p. 5). In completing my research in this area I discovered a major disruption to the school improvement process and a contributing factor to creating a “culture of incompetence” is turnover in district and school level leadership. In an urban school district the average tenure of a district superintendent is approximately three years (Hall, 2011, p. 50). This is barely enough time for the individual to survey the landscape and begin to implement any type of reform much less see any type of results

(Hall, 2011, p. 50). The constant change in leadership and visions for the schools makes it next to impossible to implement any strategy or reform model with fidelity. Teachers, students, parents, and community leaders soon become frustrated with the inconsistency of commitment to an improvement plan and begin to question the expertise of their leadership.

Going hand-in-hand with the reality that there is no long term consistency in leadership to implement a plan of improvement is the fact that most state school improvement cycles, including the State of Michigan, are five years. Five years is not enough time to produce the systematic change necessary to build a foundation that supports high academic standards in our lowest performing schools (Hall, 2011, p, 49). Some experts are reporting that it takes at least five years to build a foundation for change and that in the some of the more challenging urban districts a timeline of ten to twelve years is more feasible.

Finally, school improvement plans tend to focus solely on students and their academic gains. Most plans are a cornucopia of strategies and objectives that address the students' academic short comings. What plans and school improvement fail to address are factors such as: family dysfunction, poverty, student attendance, learning disabilities and other miscellaneous social ills. If schools are to improve, their improvement plans need to begin to address barriers to learning outside the classroom. A student would find it difficult to focus or even care about a math lesson if they are faced with any of the above listed barriers to learning.

In conclusion, when I began my research I was really hoping to find that proverbial "magic bullet" that would assist my ailing school district. However, I believe I

have ended my research with more questions than answers. What I have learned is that the American school system is in crisis. Our school system is still geared towards educating students to go to work in factories or other blue collar jobs that no longer exist. A changing world and economy requires that students master skills that were once reserved for the elite in society (Hess, 2004). I have also learned that schools will not improve until all political rhetoric is put aside and stakeholders begin to address the dysfunctions in American schools with one goal in mind, improved student achievement. As for me, as a strong believer in the school improvement process, I will continue to encourage my fellow teachers, building administrators and district leadership to come to the school improvement table and support the team's goal of creating a plan for improvement that will be implemented with fidelity. I will attempt to persuade them to become part of the plan or solution and not the problem or barrier to school improvement. As for me, the teacher, I will continue to use all that I have learned about what works to improve student's academic achievement to assist my current and future students in obtaining academic success and reaching their life goals.

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