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Student Thoughts and Perceptions on Curriculum Reform

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STUDENT THOUGHTS AND PERCEPTIONS
ON CURRICULUM REFORM

by
Douglas D. VanderJagt

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how students experience and respond to Michigan’s increased graduation requirements. The study was conducted in a large, suburban high school that instituted a change to a trimester system in response to the state mandate. A criterion-based sample of 16 students, both college bound and non-college bound, participated in one-on-one interviews regarding their knowledge about, their understanding of, and their experience with the new Michigan Merit Curriculum, and how this increase impacted the student participants’ high school academic choices and/or postsecondary plans. Additionally, this study engaged focus groups of one or more parents of the participating students and a cross-section of teaching, counseling, and administrative staff from the case study site.

An inductive analysis produced findings for each participant group and was cross-analyzed among groups. Four major themes emerged from the study: (1) students experienced limited or nonexistent involvement in high school graduation requirement curriculum reform; (2) parents, students, and staff expressed concerns that completion of rigorous high school graduation requirements may not be attainable for all students; (3) the high school that served as the site for this study used a creative approach to provide flexibility for meeting the new graduation requirements; and, overall, (4) students
were adjusting and doing quite well with the new, more rigorous set of requirements.
The experiences of students, as described by their parents, and the high school staff themselves, provided insights about how this level of curriculum reform might continue to evolve, and what role students might play in that evolution.

Overall, this study supports previous literature on reform efforts in schools that reflect a lack of involvement by students at the level of either state policy development or local district response and planning. Students, parents, and staff had some level of agreement that students should play some role in major school reform and change, but both parents and staff were cautious about giving actively enrolled students a significant voice.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

For decades, the literature on school reform has focused on the difficulty of permeating the classroom with the specifics of any district, state, or federal live reform policy initiative. Study after study has focused on the impact of reform policy on teachers, the difficulty associated with achieving high fidelity sustainable reform at the classroom level, and the problem of weak results compared to the goals for improved outcomes embedded in the reforms. Most of this literature, however, has paid little attention to the role of students in the implementation and, ultimately, the success of reform initiatives. Moreover, few studies have focused, specifically, on the ways in which students are experiencing and responding to the factors embedded in the reform initiative that directly impact them. This study seeks to begin expanding the way researchers examine the impact of school reform by eliciting the voices of students relative to a state-sponsored reform that directly impacts the way students experience and make decisions about their high school program.

Historical Background

When George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2002, each state sought to individually address the challenges of higher standards with more stringent accountability measures. While NCLB and state accountability programs are clear about the student performance results that schools are expected to achieve, they often do not provide much guidance regarding how to accomplish these objectives. The
goal of the NCLB legislation was to ensure that by 2014 all children would be proficient at grade level in reading and mathematics. The law requires states to measure student achievement by testing all children in grades 3–8 every year, and once in high school. Each state determines its own academic standards, the courses taught, the standardized tests used, and the cutoff scores that define a student as proficient. NCLB prompted schools and states to begin the process of reforming education to meet higher levels of proficiency against the standards and through the assessments by the state.

Prior to NCLB, schools across America had already been attempting serious reform (Desimone, 2002). In the early 1980s, in response to *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), there was an increase in standards and regulations, an increase in core requirements, a longer school year, and teachers’ salaries were on the rise. This reform, touted as a primarily top-down approach, did little for the building capacity of the system (Hawley, Austin, & Goldman, 1988).

During the 1990s, K–12 education began a second wave of reform designed to broaden and deepen the relationship between schools and families, address the needs of special groups of students, attract and retain effective teachers, upgrade teacher education, and restructure teachers’ roles to make them more professional (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). Despite these waves of reforms, which resulted in notable changes in state curriculum and assessment systems, very little changed in educational delivery systems and outcomes, or in the way teachers teach.

By impacting both curriculum requirements and measures of achievement, and linking those changes to accountability for student outcomes, NCLB was designed to impact deeply into schools and classrooms, ultimately leading to major changes in how
schools deliver education to students and how teachers adapt instruction to help all
students become academically proficient in the core subjects of reading and math. For
policymakers, the expectation may have been for a rapid trickle-down effect, but for
teachers, the process of full adaptation may have been another issue altogether. Teachers
must implement change with and through their students. When the change is significant
and abrupt, like the sweeping 2006 Michigan Merit Curriculum reform—which enacted
major increases in high school graduation requirements to be phased in over a 4-year
period, teachers must work with and through the impact that reform makes on their
students. Rarely, however, do schools adopt a school reform implementation process that
deliberately draws upon student input or feedback to guide the implementation process.

**Conceptual Framework**

Raising the bar on student achievement and school accountability can push
schools to make changes in curriculum alignment (Anderson, 2005). These changes can
be seen in major curriculum reforms, or minor adjustments often not even apparent to the
non-educator. NCLB placed requirements on states, and, through the state education
systems, on local schools that, ultimately, dictate curriculum emphasis and placement and
can be a catalyst for broader change, however slow local schools and classrooms may be
to react. Reform legislation like NCLB, which enacts fundamental shifts in how schools
are held accountable, may be a driving force for change at any level of the school system,
but, typically, the classroom is the last place that responds.

Whether or not implementation comes down to a specific school or classroom
level, the shift or change in current practice at any level can and, eventually, will impact
all levels of the educational system if the reform is sustained and involves fundamental
changes in the norms and practices of the school. For instance, a shift in a core content course from one grade level to another could cause a domino effect that challenges the “highly qualified” status of teachers. This, in fact, is one of the ways that classroom teachers were affected in the earliest stages of states responding to the highly qualified provisions in the statute. In some cases, teachers needed to be reassigned to areas where they met the highly qualified criteria, and in other cases, teachers had to enhance their credentials to remain in their teaching assignment, or even keep their position.

Less than two decades ago, a teacher at the high school level could teach several different courses within the school system without a major or minor in that particular curriculum area. Highly qualified requirements set forth by NCLB forced district leaders to place teachers in classrooms that provide instruction only in the teacher’s major or minor. The days of teaching in a field of desire has turned into teachers being limited to their collegiate major or minor. This is just one example of how NCLB and other state-level reforms place higher demands on students and teachers and continue to be a driving force in educational reform.

Additionally, many important decisions, such as the placement of courses and curriculum alignment, need to be made by school-level officials and educators to comply with state plans to meet the federal NCLB requirements and continue to receive the federal funding that accompanies the statute. These decisions have potential implications beyond the district or school level (where they are usually made) and have the potential to eventually impact not only teachers at the classroom level, but the students as well.

For instance, decisions regarding alignment of curriculum to state and federal requirements can have significant effect on the way that high schools organize their
curricular offerings and work with students to make decisions about how to achieve the best preparation for postsecondary options. In some states, like Michigan, the core curriculum rigor implicit in the NCLB accountability model is elevated even further through state legislation articulating much higher and broader core curriculum graduation requirements enacted through Public Act 123 (2006).

Assigning high school courses to an appropriate grade level for optimal student performance and postsecondary preparation remains a talent school district officials all over the country attempt to fine-tune and master (Sebring, 1987), even without changes to state graduation requirements. When states add increases to high school graduation requirements to their reform legislation, the school organization and matriculation for students through the core curriculum requirements can become even more of a challenge, especially in cases where the core graduation requirements are increased enough to compete with non-core subject areas and vocational courses. A prime example of significant expansion of core curriculum requirements is the 2006 legislation to adopt a rigorous set of high school graduation requirements. In that legislation, Michigan chose to increase the curriculum relevance and the rigor for all students by raising graduation requirements in all four core content areas.

Studies have shown that increasing graduation requirements for students has a direct positive impact on student achievement (Clune & White, 1992), so, in that sense, Michigan’s high school graduation requirement legislation can be seen as being in strong alignment with the goals of NCLB and, more recently, the Race to the Top (RTTT) portion of the 2009 American Recovery and Resurgence Act (ARRA).
While some will argue that it takes more than increasing graduation requirements (Schimmel & Langer, 2001) and shifts in curriculum (Chaney, Burgdorf, & Atash, 1997) to achieve overall improvements in student achievement, Michigan instituted and adopted new graduation requirements for all students starting with the class of 2011 and beyond. Under Michigan’s Revised Public Act 451 of 1976, students are required to successfully complete 4 years of English, 4 years of mathematics, 3 years of science, 3 years of social studies, 1 year of health/physical education, and 1 year of visual/performing/applied arts, as well as an online learning experience.

The English requirement provides the most flexibility, as the requirement only calls for 4 years of English, leaving the interpretation of the specific curriculum content for each of the 4 years up to the local district. The new state graduation requirement for math, however, is specified at a much more explicit level—a year of Algebra 1, Geometry, and Algebra 2, as well as a requirement that students earn, at least, a credit of math their senior year. The three state-required credits for science incorporate biology, a choice between physics or chemistry, and an additional year of science. The social studies requirement encompasses United States history and geography, world history and geography, civics, and economics. Additionally, students graduating in 2016 are required to participate in at least 2 years of a language other than English, prior to graduation.

This shift in graduation requirements has caused students, parents, and schools to take a closer look at the scope and sequence of classes that are offered in schools and taken by students. In this sense, Michigan’s reform initiative to raise graduation requirements serves as a clear example of top-down reform that does not stop in its impact at the teacher level. This state-sponsored reform initiative has a direct effect on
the ways in which parents and their children make decisions about their high school program with curricular choices that may be more constrained, or complicated, than they were before the change in statutory requirements—but the impact does not stop there.

There are more issues than raising standards when dealing with curriculum change, even when that change directly affects only one level of the full K–12 school program. While high schools are faced with increased graduation requirements, their middle school feeder schools are being held accountable for academic preparation so that students can succeed with the broader and more rigorous high school graduation requirements. For this reason, middle schools, and even elementary schools, need to be involved in shaping alignment strategies to prepare students adequately for subsequent grades. Additionally, increased graduation requirements across the core curriculum areas raise concerns for lower-achieving students and students with special needs. These concerns can include modifications to curriculum and/or assessments for special populations to meet state-mandated requirements.

Students with special needs and various socioeconomic subgroups can present factors that further drive alterations to curriculum alignment and call for greater support for disadvantaged, special needs, English Language Learners, and other special student populations. Responses to identified student needs often require adoption of a whole range of differentiated instructional approaches designed to meet the needs of multiple variations in learning styles, predispositions, and requisite prior knowledge, skill, and proficiency among the subpopulations that make up any given school’s enrollment. These subgroups of students also pose a potential issue with school accountability, as each subgroup needs to show academic progress under NLCB regulations.
Under the provisions of NCLB, measuring the success of schools is done with a series of assessments. In Michigan, schools are measured by assessing students in third grade through eighth grade using the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP), and in the 11th grade with the aide of the Michigan Merit Exam (MME). With all this attention on high-stakes testing, it is the equal responsibility of the teacher and student to perform, and an expectation for the two to function as a team (Heller, 2005; Meier, 2002; Schiller & Muller, 2000). This, too, takes on implications for a major shift in the norms of classroom practice, assessment and grading, and program delivery, often with the focus of making significant shifts in the patterns of classroom instruction and student engagement.

**Problem Statement**

Recent years have witnessed vigorous and sustained efforts by policymakers to reform the quality of the classroom experience. As noted, several reforms in education have been instituted by state and federal policymakers and local district educational leaders (often in response to the reforms enacted by state and federal legislation). The core work of adapting to such reform efforts quite often falls squarely on the shoulders of the teachers in the classroom. Reform efforts put a strain on teachers and place most of the demand on them to adjust to new requirements and curriculum modifications (Walshaw & Anthony, 2007).

Teachers and parents have also played a leadership role in various reforms both at the local and state level. Because of their age, experience, and assumed advocacy for the best interests of students, parents and teachers alike are recognized in the educational political landscape. They are considered major stakeholders, as well as participants in the
education of the nation’s, or state’s, children; thus, researchers, policymakers, and legislators give some credence to children’s “voice.” Rarely, however, do these same researchers, policymakers, and legislators, or even local district leaders, seek out and attend to the “voices” of students as both the subjects of school reform initiatives and primary stakeholders.

Whether it is through major federal legislation, like NCLB, or a state-based reform initiative, like the Michigan Merit High School Curriculum (Michigan Legislation, 2008), legislated reform changes usually demand much from teachers by way of increased or different expectations that can be met only through significant changes in curriculum, the educational delivery system, and practice. While few legislative reform elements make new or different direct demands on parents, indirectly these elements have implications for how the school assesses the educational success of their children, how the school allocates resources that provide programs and services to their children, and what avenues of opportunity are available to their children (Zirkel, 2008).

In addition, major school reform initiatives may change the conversation between the school and parents in subtle but distinct ways. For instance, the Michigan High School Merit Curriculum is based on the assumption of the importance of postsecondary education. President Obama’s 2009 Race to the Top (RTTT) (United States Department of Education, 2009b) reform initiative reinforced new expectations that states will systematically track matriculation patterns to postsecondary education for high school graduates. Again, such changes in assumptions regarding the goals of education, and student attainment of those goals, filter into the conversations between the district and its
staff and administration and, eventually, between the school and parents at the classroom, school, and district levels where they can be monitored and interpreted to make sure that both internal and external (primarily parents) stakeholders do not get left out of the equation (Peressini, 1997; Sexton, 2000).

Often in the literature, parents and teachers are identified as two thirds of an important triad of central players in the educational process, along with students as the final third (Thiessen, 2006). Rarely, however, do legislated reform initiatives, either directly or indirectly, call for involvement from students, except for their performance on standardized assessments. In fact, the role of students in achieving the goals of state and federal reform is rarely addressed in the statutes and policies that frame and guide such reform, and thus are literally left for the local school to address. This reality runs against the evidence that increased student engagement and active involvement in the learning process correlates to increased student learning (Michigan Department of Education, 2008).

As a case in point, in 2006 Michigan passed legislation to increase its graduation requirements as a means to equip the state’s educational system with what then-Governor Jennifer Granholm called a “world class curriculum” in her State of the State address. This precipitated responses from local schools to realign curriculum, rethink student preparation for high school, redesign courses and courseware, and even rethink responses to, and interventions for, students who do not initially experience success with the more rigorous curriculum expectations. In fact, after passage of the 2006 legislation, there was a flurry of activity as Michigan high schools attempted to quickly gear up for a 2011
target date for students to graduate having achieved proficiency across the board with the new graduation requirements.

This flurry of activity, however, was done in a systematic way to identify how students were interpreting, responding to, and dealing with the new demands on their course requirements. If students are to be active participants in an initiative to graduate with “world class” curricular accomplishments, there is a need to gain a better understanding of how they perceive and respond to a change of this magnitude. With top-down management making decisions on scheduling, course offerings, elective choices, school calendar, content scope and sequences, and graduation requirements, student involvement could be a powerful voice in the making of these decisions, and/or in making success happen for students with these decisions.

Policymakers, administrators, teachers, parents, and even students can be involved in curriculum reform, and the commitment of all is imperative. Clarke, Stow, Ruebling, and Kayona (2006) assert schools that want to drive student achievement and improve pedagogy will put forth the time and effort required to accomplish such a goal. School curriculum specialists, department chairs, administrators, teachers, and parents all play a role in the quest for curriculum realignment to meet Michigan’s new graduation requirements. All members of the school community should be prepared to align their practices, beliefs, and resources in order to develop the necessary systemic and sustained change to existing local district curriculum frameworks. There is no policy level guidance, however, for schools on how to involve students as partners in the process of achieving the goals of this ambitious high school reform initiative.
Students are seldom, if ever, involved as key players in the process of implementation of curriculum or other forms of school reform; yet they are always participants in the process changes and outcomes of any reform or restructuring process. Moreover, students are always on the receiving end of change. Cook-Sather (2006) noted how students have a unique perspective on learning, teaching, and schooling. Cook-Sather clarified how student insights “warrant not only our attention, but also the response of adults, and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education” (p. 360). In the history of studying the school reform process, little attention has been paid to how students actually experience and interpret the reform from their own perspective. This is an area that is seriously understudied and potentially rich with possible insight to guide school reform initiatives in general, and Michigan’s high school curriculum reform, in particular.

**Purpose Statement**

Increasing the graduation requirements for the class of 2011 pushed school personnel across the state of Michigan to make adjustments to their curriculum and in the courses offered to students and required for a diploma. Administrators, teachers, parents, and, especially, state officials were very involved in designing these changes and interpreting what they meant to the public education system in Michigan. This study delves deeply into the experiences and perspectives of students, as they are the ones that have not been included as either a source of meaningful insight or a primary partner in shaping or implementing reform efforts.

The purpose of the study was to examine how students are experiencing and responding to Michigan’s increased graduation requirements. This analysis sheds some
light on whether the mandate of a set of state-required high school graduation credits plays a significant role in how students understand, experience, and respond to their high school academic experience. Additionally, this study sought out important clues about how students understand the reasons for the curriculum changes and whether this understanding translates to the motivation to succeed with the more rigorous curriculum expectations. Finally, this study looked for insights into how students could be tapped as important partners in achieving the goals of Michigan’s high school reform initiative within their schools.

Because parents and teachers play such an important role in helping students process their educational experiences, this study also sought to identify how teachers and parents are interpreting the impact of the curriculum changes on their students. This study analyzed those interpretations against the ways in which students describe their own experiences to provide some understanding about potential alignment or gaps between how the significant adults in students’ academic lives understand what is happening to students, and how the students themselves understand what is happening to them as a result of the curriculum changes.

**Rationale for the Study**

Schools across the country have a wide range of current graduation requirements. The Education Commission of the States (2010) notes how in recent years many states have implemented policies that align graduation requirements to state standards, or to college admission standards. While Michigan may be focusing on high school graduates and their transition to postsecondary education, a large population of high school students still does not attend postsecondary educational institutions. Students leaving high school
have bills to pay, groceries to buy, children to take care of, and cars to keep running. These factors, marked with the financial obligations of postsecondary education, play a role in students making a choice to not gain further education following high school (Ashburn, 2009).

Students who desire to not pursue a postsecondary education typically enroll in courses that are more geared toward job, rather than career, readiness. By contrast, districts that serve more affluent communities tend to be more centered on a college preparation curriculum. Michigan’s new graduation requirements (for all students) were purposed as an attempt to raise the rigor, relevance, and consistency of courses being offered to high school students with the assumption that all students must be prepared for some form of postsecondary education, even if they directly enter the workforce upon high school graduation. Another assumption driving this legislated change to high school graduation requirements was that Michigan’s economy would be revitalized with businesses and industries that require high school graduates to possess a higher level of academic preparation, even without additional postsecondary education.

Ultimately, Michigan’s new high school graduation standards directly align with former Governor Jennifer Granholm’s 2006 agenda to increase the volume and percentage of Michigan high school graduates entering into postsecondary institutions for further education, whether or not they also enter the work force upon graduation from high school. Governor Granholm’s agenda was to increase graduation requirements to help prepare students for college and ultimately bolster the state economy (Shakrani, 2006). When Rick Snyder, the newly elected governor, took office in 2011, he expanded
Governor Granholm’s focus, not just on completing high school, but also being postsecondary ready (Snyder, 2011).

Critics of former Governor Granholm’s Michigan High School Reform initiative (Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy, 2010) argued that the dramatic shift in high school graduation requirements would slow down schools’ ability to improve on their own. Rice and Malen (2004) argued that forcing schools to change graduation requirements could pull the focus of school improvement away from the school system and link all school improvement initiatives to testing results. In fact, since the passage of the Michigan Merit High School Curriculum, high schools across the state began to focus much more intently on the measuring stick (the new Michigan Merit Exam or MME) as the sole (or at least primary) indicator of school success in helping students adapt to the new high school graduation requirements.

School improvement plans, which were designed more broadly to drive high schools forward, are now developed with a primary concentration of improving test scores. Districts are making adjustments on “what” needs to be addressed in their high school improvement plans based on MME results (Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy, 2010). At the same time, the Michigan High School Reform Initiative provides no direction on the “how” part of implementing such a plan. Moreover, the MME is administered only once during a student’s high school career, providing only a limited picture of student achievement as the basis for interpreting the impact of the Michigan Merit Curriculum initiative, or for developing a comprehensive understanding of student performance and school improvement needs.
State-level mandates, such as those enacted in Michigan to increase the rigor associated with high school completion, have left districts in a quandary about how to meet the new rigorous graduation requirements and, at the same time, serve the needs of all students. Legislators set forth a rigorous set of requirements with little guidance on how to adapt those requirements to the diverse student populations that attend Michigan’s high schools. Similar to other state initiatives, schools were forced to respond quickly and had little time to research many of the school program and student advising or placement changes needed to comply with the changes in graduation requirements.

Even where a change like increased graduation requirements is generally accepted as important, it takes years to gather a complete picture on student impact resulting from that change. Typically, that impact is measured very narrowly through tested academic measures and very little understanding is achieved concerning the broader impact of such reforms on students.

Fortunately, we live in a world where student data are now held in cyberspace, which gives school leaders an opportunity to measure student progress and monitor curriculum changes more readily (Finn, 2010). Because schools have direct access to student data, they have begun to embrace and address curriculum needs and increased expectations across grade levels. Again, the data typically available to high schools for assessing student needs, progress, and impact are limited to broad achievement measures (like the Michigan Merit Exam) and, more recently, common assessments established at the district level. High schools were the last to enter into a serious and systematic consideration of student data to inform school improvement, so they are still playing catch-up to their counterparts at the elementary and middle school levels (Bernhardt,
2003), who have begun to look at student impact in broader ways (e.g., classroom assessments, predictor factors, and even student feedback).

As high schools shift to implement new standards, there will be different approaches to where and how courses are configured and offered to address student needs and prepare students to achieve the new graduation requirements. Schools may need to move courses like Algebra and Geometry to earlier grade levels in order to see a large impact on success rates of students (Schiller & Muller, 2003). Schools may have to add a year or two of a particular discipline, such as foreign language or social studies. The addition of such required courses could impact the opportunity for students to meet requirements by graduation time, or to include non-core course requirements in their plan of studies.

As the legislation to enact Michigan’s Merit Curriculum standards was moving through the political process, administrators, parents, and teachers all had a chance to react and respond, albeit with little opportunity to slow down the rapid pace of the legislative process or to modify the change before it became law (P. Bielawski, personal communication, 2010). Once the legislation was enacted, however, real dialogue did begin, with the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) playing the role of both arbiter and facilitator of the actual implementation. This has led to an ongoing dialogue between MDE and local districts serving as the primary filter for feedback from administrators, teachers, and (to some extent) parents to Lansing on the details of the implementation process.

Students could play a vital role in reform that directly affects their choices in life after high school; yet, theirs is the one voice ignored as districts filter feedback to MDE
and work to influence further policy interpretation around the new high school graduation standards. As is typical with school reform initiatives, policymakers rely on student testing as the number one way to determine the success of the educational reform and interpret the impact on students. Only through this narrow and indirect way of assessment will they determine how students are responding. Given the dramatic change in high school curriculum requirements prior to the enactment of the Michigan Merit high school graduation standards, and the requirements for each graduating class starting in 2011, students must be considered key players in the success of this reform.

Student feedback is often reduced to a number or a value and is usually collected only incidentally, or only loosely associated with the aftermath of reforms in education. Some researchers have commented on this systematic failure to delve into the ways students are actually experiencing a reform initiative in the early stages of implementation as a serious omission in achieving a fuller picture of the actual impact of that reform. Relying only on test scores, course completion data, course failure rates, changes in drop-out rates, and changes in high school graduation program patterns (either to the work force or to postsecondary educational options) is the equivalent to flying blind and doing a post-mortem on whatever happens (Rice & Malen, 2004). Students, as a voice in the early years of major change in high school graduation requirements, can offer important insights to guide the implementation of this ambitious high school reform initiative. That voice could make the difference between success and a dismal record of student casualties from this well intentioned school reform initiative.

Finally, understanding the alignment between how students are experiencing the change in high school graduation standards and how their teachers and parents perceive
the students are experiencing this change can provide important insights for how parents and teachers can better assist students through the transition to the new standards. At the same time, parents, teachers, administrators, and policymakers may find important clues to guide them in drawing upon student partnerships in the process of implementing the school reform change.

**Research Questions**

For the purpose of this study, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How do students describe the ways in which their school has responded to Michigan’s new graduation requirements; specifically,
   a. How do students make sense of the new graduation requirements in connection with their postsecondary plans?
   b. How do students describe the ways they are experiencing change as a result of their school implementing the new graduation requirements?
   c. How do students describe the ways they are involved in the curriculum reform process in their school?
   d. What issues do students describe as impacting them as a result of the change in high school graduation requirements?
   e. How are they responding to those issues?

2. How do teachers describe the way students are responding to the increase in graduation requirements; specifically,
   a. How do teachers describe the way students are involved in curriculum reform at the local district level?
b. What issues do teachers describe as impacting students as a result of the change in high school graduation requirements?

c. How do teachers believe students are responding to those issues?

3. How do parents describe the way students are responding to the increase in graduation requirements; specifically,

a. How do parents describe the way their son/daughter is addressing postsecondary plans in response to the new requirements?

b. How do parents describe the way their son/daughter is involved in curriculum reform at the local district level?

c. What issues do parents describe as impacting their child as a result of the change in high school graduation requirements?

d. How do parents believe students are responding to those issues?

**Methodology**

The goal was to delve into the issue of how students are experiencing and responding to the increase in graduation requirements in depth and detail within the context of one particular school. For this study, the approach employed was that of a qualitative research study. Several forms of qualitative research could have been used to approach this research, including a phenomenology, ethnography, case study, or grounded theory, which all fall under the qualitative research approach. For the purpose of this study, however, a case study approach was selected, as I wanted to start this line of inquiry with a single case bounded to one of the largest suburban high schools in Michigan.
The use of a case study method provided an understanding of this real-life phenomenon in depth within a bounded case. The research was conducted at one selected high school with a select population of students, parents, and teachers. A bounded case allowed for the depth of understanding into the lived experiences of students from one context as they describe their experiences with Michigan’s increased graduation requirements. As a result, a qualitative methodology was appropriate, given the use of a purposeful sampling and collection of open-ended data (Creswell, 2003).

Chapter I Summary

Research regarding student involvement in curriculum reform is an area that is lacking in educational literature. Increasing graduation requirements for students in the state of Michigan has forced schools to make adjustments in their curriculum and the assessment of students. Gaining an understanding of students’ perceptions on curriculum reform in relation to a particular sweeping high school reform state mandate could lead to stronger curriculum reform in schools in the future.

Parents also have their unique opinions and perceptions regarding how their sons or daughters have experienced the phenomenon of major change in their school experience. Additionally, teachers play a vital role in implementing comprehensive curriculum reform, and they work closely with students as they respond to major changes in graduation requirements. As the three entities have experienced this phenomenon through their own lenses, this research is designed to gain an appreciation for the commonalities and uniqueness of how students have experienced this phenomenon, versus how their parents and teachers perceive it.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The review of the literature provided several different viewpoints on the increase in graduation requirements and the pressure on students to perform in the classroom. A literature review provided context for the proposed study and demonstrated why it was important and timely to study this phenomenon (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). A thoughtful and insightful review of related literature helped me gain an understanding about how educational reform has developed over the years (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). While educational transformation takes place at all different levels, a closer look was needed to address how students are describing their experiences with curriculum reform. Educational reform comes from different levels; national, state, and local initiatives can lead reform, and understanding the participants in these reforms was significant to this study.

Additionally, the history of education reform is vital to understanding the impact curriculum reform has had on local educators and students in the classrooms. Recent years have witnessed vigorous and sustained efforts from policymakers to reform the quality of the classroom experience (Walshaw & Anthony, 2007). As education has transformed over the last century, understanding the past movement of educational reform is a topic of this review.

The history of reform and education leads us to our current reality, which is national legislation titled “No Child Left Behind,” enacted in 2002 under one presidential
administration, followed by an historic federal stimulus initiative enacted under the 2009 American Resurgence and Recovery Act (ARRA). This initiative was to escalate the impact of federal reform efforts in specific areas, i.e., teacher and leader quality, standards and assessment, data to support instruction, and turning around the lowest achieving schools (Lips, 2010). This latest federal reform initiative awarded states that provided a solid research-based and sustainable plan to address all four areas with a significant federal investment to expand and scale-up state-level work already established and showing promise in the four target areas. While this latest in a series of federal reform acts is too new to discuss in terms of impact on student outcomes, it has already produced significant changes in state legislation to meet the prerequisites for states to be considered as viable applicants for funding awards. This review will discuss the legislative impact of this new federal initiative, called Race to the Top (RTTT), and link its four focus areas to NCLB and other federal reform acts.

While the Obama administration has been busy rolling out its newest version of educational reform under the RTTT portion of ARRA, the No Child Left Behind legislation remains in place, with the likelihood that the next round of reauthorization activity will include some revisions to improve the alignment between NCLB and RTTT. Thus, this review took a closer look at No Child Left Behind and how this has directly impacted educational reform in the United States.

With the introduction of No Child Left Behind in 2002, Michigan had to take a closer look at education and how students were monitored and assessed. This included a critical examination of state minimum requirements for a high school diploma. Michigan was found to be among the states with the most minimal requirements and, led by the
State Board of Education and State Superintendent Michael Flanagan, the legislature was prompted to take a bold step to bring Michigan to the forefront, with graduation requirements that reflected a globally competitive set of curriculum expectations.

Within just a few months of first introducing the concern regarding Michigan’s low graduation requirements, legislation was introduced in Michigan to increase the graduation requirements for all students for the class of 2011. This review of literature provided an insight into how the graduation requirement legislation was developed and how the implementation has proceeded at the state and local district level.

With all the reform that is taking place at the federal and state level, the key stakeholders in this reform process will be examined. Politicians, parents, community members, and teachers are all vital parts of the reform process. They provide a wealth of knowledge about educational past practice and policy reform—that which has been successful and that which has failed. It is imperative to understand the involvement of these constituents and how they have led and supported reform efforts.

Addressing the key players in reform efforts already studied shed some light on the effectiveness and sustainability of reform movements based on current literature. Reviewing what was already known about how the various stakeholders considered in the literature on school reform were experiencing and responding to those reforms served as a backdrop for this study. The focus of this research, however, was the involvement of students in the reform process. The major premise that provides focus for this study was that better student knowledge and understanding of student experiences and perspectives during the creation of school reforms (like Michigan’s new high school graduation requirements) would play an important role in future reforms.
The conclusion of this review of literature looks into how the experiences and perspectives students in the past may or may not have been reflected in the educational reform process and literature. By examining both the history of major school reform initiatives and the impact of these reforms on various stakeholders, this review of the literature provides a better understanding of current realities in educational reform, from the federal level down to a local level, and begins to frame the potential for deeper understanding of these reforms at the student level.

The Political Context of School Reform

Reforms in the past have left practitioners with a sense of disengagement. Teachers are often told what is required of them, without being asked for their input. Most often, teachers are left out of the change process that leads to new policy that will be implemented in their school system (Olson, 2002). Over the last several decades, there has been a tremendous number of initiatives that have worked their way into the classroom. Noteworthy educational reforms have used jargon such as outcome-based education, best practice, achievement gaps, schools of choice, charter schools, and merit pay. The creation and impact of each of these “buzz-words” represent a shift in thinking about how to better serve students through their educational career.

Mandates continue to come down from the federal level, through the state to the district, to finally make their way to the classroom level. State and federal policymakers are usually good at telling educators what needs to be changed, but it is the professionals in the schools who are left to pay the price of making the changes (Shanker, 1984). That price is usually the hard work of translating broad policy into actual changes in practice that work to achieve the aims of the reform initiative. Thus, testing requirements, “highly
qualified” requirements, and increased graduation requirements have worked their way to the classroom door where teachers must translate them into day-to-day practice. Politicians at both the federal level and state level may have many theories that are well grounded in social science; however, there are traditional theories that teachers hold which are well adapted to their current setting (Olson, 2002). Those settings, and the practices that are firmly ingrained, do not adapt easily or quickly; rather, they evolve slowly and require a significant amount of focus and leadership to reach some level of alignment with the premises and expectations of the reform policy (Moffett, 2000).

Meanwhile, as schools and teachers grapple with the implications of any given school reform initiative, and respond to new mandates that often accompany that initiative, the sponsors of those initiatives (legislators, governors, and even presidents) move on to other things. The current reality is that legislators have several agenda items. They talk during their election campaigns about how education is an important agenda item for them, but they have other topics of interest. Once in office, the politics of education often takes a backseat, while focus moves to budgets and competing agendas as lobbyists tug away at legislators to shift their priorities.

This review was not designed to delve into the understanding of legislation on education or legislators who pass the bills; it was to simply review their involvement in education reform. Reforms get traction at the state and federal level because they respond to broader agendas that government leaders want to champion. Education reform is often seen as a lever for addressing complex and challenging social or economic problems: e.g., assimilation of various cultural groups, elimination of poverty, global economic competition (Dudley-Marling, Jackson, & Stevens, 2006; Shakrani,
These broader issues, however, require government leaders to take their eyes off the ball of the educational reforms they put forth once that reform is enacted. Any failure to achieve the aims of the reform will be charged off to the schools and educators who failed to deliver on the promise of the reform, inviting state and federal leaders to move on to the next wave of reform when it is their turn to be in power.

In between waves of educational reform, district administrators, building principals, and teachers respond, first, to comply with new mandates and all the bureaucratic components states put in place to manage, monitor, and report up the chain to federal overseers and funders. This creates a flurry of activity at the local level to incorporate new reporting requirements, new accountability measures, and new provisions for how state and federal funds can and must be allocated to the provisions of the new reform initiative. While this goes on, children come to classrooms every day, instruction continues, and administrators deal with the day-to-day rhythms of the school. In other words, the process of education does not pause or stop, so educators can gear-up, retool, or redesign their programs, processes, and practices to respond to the new state and/or federal requirements that accompany legislated reform (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

As the dust settles on the first wave of accommodations schools must make to comply with state and federal reform legislation, teachers and administrators move into the actual implementation phase, where they begin to examine and decide how they will change their programs, processes, and practices to deliver the results intended by the reform. This is where the work begins to have real meaning for the entire school community, including parents and students themselves. This is where the changes will actually filter into the day-to-day lives of students and, potentially, change their school
experience (Thiessen, 2006). Again, however, if the educational reform is not successful, teachers and school leaders will become the focus of blame, giving way to opportunity for legislators to call for a new wave of reform.

In every local, state, and federal election, politicians discuss how important education is to them for the future of their constituents. They provide hope for the voting public that they can improve our educational system. There are some very talented people in offices all across the country that are pushing for educational reforms, many of which have some measure of solid grounding in the research. Research-based reforms, however, have some limitations in their power to fundamentally change the output of the educational system. In the United States, we have grown up in a system that has been adjusted over the last century to meet the needs of an ever-changing population of children. The world continues to evolve, and education is evolving with it.

While every state is handling change to meet the needs of their children, sometimes educational reforms leap ahead of the current state of the educational research in order to get traction on broader issues. In Michigan, that issue is an economic crisis fueled by major national shifts in the U.S. economy and an historical over-reliance on the economic base created by the automobile industry (Shakrani, 2006). In response to this crisis, Michigan has attempted to leap ahead of most states in terms of educational rigor in an attempt to reinvent the state as a home for high tech, high expertise, and high innovation. With the enactment of one of the most rigorous core academic requirements for a high school diploma and the adoption of the Michigan Merit Examination, the state is attempting to create a post-auto industry identity characterized by a highly educated work force. This reform initiative has less to do with best educational practice research
and more to do with repositioning the state as an educational power house. Moreover, this reform comes at a time when Michigan is also struggling with some of the highest drop-out and lowest core academic achievement rates in the country, according to the United States Department of Education (2009a).

The full impact of the new high school graduation requirements, therefore, cannot be fully understood without taking into account the nexus between the requirements of NCLB for continuous academic improvement, elimination of achievement gaps, and improved graduation rates, with the RTTT and Michigan Merit High School Curriculum (MMC) focus on matriculation to postsecondary education for all students, including those who enter directly into the work force. While Michigan’s high school reform legislation is not, in itself, born of legislative policy to better employ research-based programs and practices, it certainly requires all schools to draw heavily upon informed sources to shape the way they adapt their school processes to achieve success for all students with the new graduation requirements. Further, the sanctions of NCLB raise the stakes on utilizing research-informed practices in ways that actually work for Michigan’s students—failure to do so will most certainly raise both student failure and drop-out rates as students are required to meet the new, rigorous curriculum requirements for graduation.

Adding to the importance of quickly finding what works for Michigan’s students, the state’s revised application for RTTT funding to support school reform work links teacher and administrator evaluations, retention, and compensation to evidence of research-informed practice and improved student outcomes. These RTTT provisions raise the stakes even higher for educators, and thus for students.
Finally, as Michigan struggles through a severe economic downturn, declines in school funding create the perfect storm of high-stakes state and federal educational reform that must be carried out in an environment of drastic spending reductions at the local school level. This perfect storm of mandates, reform measures, and funding losses, coupled with high-stakes ambitious reform goals, make Michigan an important case for considering every stakeholder’s perspective as schools attempt to rapidly redesign their educational processes to achieve the most ambitious educational achievement goals in the history of the country and the state. Ultimately, the impact of NCLB, MMC, and RTTT goals and mandates will rest on the shoulders of Michigan’s children. They are the ones who will either achieve or not achieve the intended outcomes. They are the ones who will experience the ways educators change school programs, processes, and practices, and they will be the ones who will be the final arbiters of how well those changes actually facilitate their learning and success.

**History of Curriculum Reform and Student Achievement**

Education in America has seen many face lifts, and each decade has provided a unique perspective on the priorities of public education. In the middle of the century, American schools were falling behind other nations in the areas of reading and mathematics. Since the late 1970s, public education has undergone a series of reforms to increase both the levels and range of math and science content that students master through the curriculum. And in the years that followed, data showed that more students were taking more difficult courses (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1994).
The push to increase the rigor of U.S. math and science classes in the 1970s led to the next reform introduced by former president George Herbert Walker Bush. Then-President Bush was growing impatient with school reform, and in the 1980s he commented on how school reform at the state level was much too slow and too timid. He placed great pressure on the country’s schools to raise the standards and improve our educational system. This educational reform movement is often said to have been launched by a flood of reports and studies that inundated the nation in 1983 and 1984 (Jennings, 1998). These studies drove home the point that the overall quality of the nation’s schools was, at best, a disgrace and, at worse, a threat to the U.S. economic and political welfare (Hawley et al., 1988). In response, by the end of the 1980s, 42 states had raised their high school graduation requirements, according to Coley’s (1994) Educational Testing Service report on educational reform.

Over that decade, there was a gradual increase in students completing the minimum academic program, which consisted of 4 years of English and 3 years of high school level math, science, and social studies. As this federal reform was enacted to raise the level and expectation of courses students were successfully completing, American students were still not completing courses with the academic rigor that would rival other nations like the Soviet Union. Moreover, as policymakers began to track and compare the academic achievement of U.S. students with those of other developed nations, American achievement levels began to fall behind (Viadero, 2007). The president's quest for an improved educational system may have been leading slowly to an increase in the number of science and math courses students were completing, but not necessarily to better schools.
At the state level, this decade saw a push for students to take more academic classes in an effort to increase student achievement (Jennings, 1998). In addition, states expanded testing to better track student achievement and determine preparedness of students for more rigorous academic work. States also began to lengthen the school days and the school year to boost student achievement, according to the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (Fuhrman & Kirst, 1994). President Bush still felt too little progress was being made. The president, at this point, determined it was time for a national approach to increase graduation requirements. The president anticipated that the leaders of each state would resist this plan if it were driven from federal level, but that did not occur. Historically, governors did not want to lose local control, and federal control was often met with great resistance. The governors in their own states had tried to create change in the 1980s through enactment of many laws mandating more stringent high school graduation requirements and raising requirements for teacher qualification, and yet they had not attained the improvements desired (Jennings, 1998). To the president’s surprise, the governors were looking for direction and top-down support to help improve education, and they embraced this national reform.

As with any presidential change, a driving force is the improvement of education across the country. President Bill Clinton took office in 1993 and he also had a plan to improve our nation's schools. The title of this plan was simply “Goals 2000” and it was sent to Congress as a reform to improve schools and student performance. Goals 2000 offered aid for bottom-up state and local school reform and increased accountability for results, while reducing red tape. In the previous administration, increasing the number of core courses students completed was the focus. The new administration took the
approach that the curriculum needs to be based on a common set of standards. The new reform focus was to motivate students to achieve higher common standards (Jennings, 1998).

There remains an argument that states should be left alone in determining their education policy and not be subject to educational reforms imposed by a national administration. The U.S. Constitution embodies the idea that government should be limited in its powers, and that the closer the government is to the people, the better it will function. In education, this has meant that, although states have the authority over the schools, the power to determine the content of education has usually been delegated to local school boards. With over 14,000 school districts and 97,000 public institutions in America (United States Department of Education, 2007), historically, there has been a great variation in the education being offered to students. Starting with expanded course requirements under the first President Bush, and continuing with federal pressure for states to adopt common curriculum standards under President Clinton, the federal government began a series of steadily progressive steps to intervene in the education provided to students at a state and local level with an eye to greater reliability in producing internationally competitive educational attainment levels for America’s students.

No Child Left Behind

Enacted in 2002 under the second President Bush with bipartisan legislative support, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) created a new round of federal legislation that endorses theories of standards-based education reform, then raised the stakes on standards-based achievement by imposing sanctions on schools that fail to progress
steadily in raising student achievement levels against state-level curriculum standards and eliminating achievement gaps between student population subgroups (i.e., special education, economically disadvantaged, and racial/cultural subgroups). This legislation is based on a belief that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve individual outcomes in education. The act requires states to develop assessments in basic skills to be given to all students in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school. The student’s scores are used to determine whether the school has taught the students well. This act does not use national standards as a measurement tool for our children; rather, standards that are measured are set by each individual state.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 provided direction for America’s schools. The goals of this act included improving academic achievement of historically underserved and/or disadvantaged students. The idea that students throughout our great nation were not receiving an adequate education was most noteworthy in some of the nation’s large urban school districts. The goal to improve the education of all of America’s children and, especially, those students being underserved by comparison to the achievement levels of other students, was one of the main focuses of the legislation (United States Department of Education, 2001). The purpose of this portion of the act was to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education. This opportunity would allow the students to reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement assessments. Through this legislation, the federal government was able to put pressure on states to commit to the NCLB goals or risk losing significant levels of federal funding that the states had
come to rely upon to augment the ability to adequately fund their educational programs through state and local resources (Zirkel, 2008).

The legislation also included language to help prepare, educate, and recruit highly qualified teachers and principals. Teachers at all levels would be required to be highly qualified in the subject areas they are teaching in their respective districts. Universities in the past have been providing teachers with certification that enables them to teach elementary or secondary. Now the certification process included a highly qualified area or areas that allow teachers to teach under the No Child Left Behind Act. Again, the federal government reached over state credentialing requirements for teachers and raised the bar on required qualifications to ensure greater equity in educational opportunity regardless of where students attend school.

Other areas of the No Child Left Behind Act provided direction for students who are not proficient in English. The purpose of this section of NCLB was to help ensure that children who are limited English proficient, including immigrant children, attain English proficiency. These children were expected to meet the same challenging academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet. The development and expansion of language programs around the country were to assist the students in this endeavor. This provision grew out of federal recognition of the growing plurality of American society and the economic impact of allowing growing segments of the American population (such as those for whom English is a second language) to be at an educational disadvantage.

The impact of No Child Left Behind has provided direction for all states to look at student achievement and measurement (Ananda, 2003). Michigan has chosen to raise
standards in its classrooms while also maintaining an expectation that all students will achieve these standards. As No Child Left Behind will continue to be refined over the next several years, the impact it has made in the education of our children has been noticeable. Legislation at state and district level is directly related to the federal requirements of No Child Left Behind.

On January 8, 2009, the U.S. Department of Education sent Michigan Superintendent of Public Instruction Michael Flanagan a letter highlighting three cornerstones that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 had successfully addressed. The letter noted the increased attention on high expectations for every child, improvement in student performance across the board, and a decrease in achievement gaps. The details laid out information about Michigan’s assessment system and how students were held accountable at grade levels 3 through 8 and 11. In relation to the high expectations for every child, the letter detailed the implications of Michigan’s graduation rate and how students were held to a high standard in all Michigan schools. Michigan had taken the NCLB legislation and tailored it to meet the needs of their students.

**Graduation Requirements**

In the last century, the social meaning of the diploma has dramatically impacted our educational system. In 1900, high school graduation was rare, and the act of leaving school before attending high school and earning a diploma was an expected fact of life for most teenagers (Dorn, 2003). The 1960s began to show us a time when older beliefs by the public about the value of schools were being transformed to embrace the new expectation of graduation. There was a sense of entitlement for school age children as the ideal of dropping out of school to join the workforce was being overtaken by the
importance of education in the world. School leaders in cities around the country began to worry about dropouts for economic reasons (Dore, 1976). These were no longer the students that ended their educational career early to help on the farm or to work in the factory; they were kids on the streets and in the neighborhoods during normal school hours, often causing havoc.

The current reality is that most middle-aged parents grew up in a time where education was not an option; it was expected. Parents today have been working in the world where all children go to school, and all are expected to graduate. The distant past provided a time when only the strong intellectual child would go to school and graduate. With the vast assortment of students gracing the hallways of our schools, policymakers continue to look for ways to strengthen the curriculum, raise the standards, and provide education for all.

Increased academic course rigor was a major goal of the education reforms of the 1980s, and increased graduation requirements were the most common change in state policies (Clune & White, 1992). The sense of more students taking more challenging subjects was the primary purpose of the reforms to increase the rigor of education. Decisions about graduation requirements are generally certification decisions. The diploma that students receive demonstrates that they have reached an acceptable level of mastery of knowledge and skills. Schools created classroom assessments that measured individual teacher instruction, but the state was required by No Child Left Behind to assess students with one common assessment. This large-scale standardized test system, as NCLB promotes, must show evidence that the test adequately covers all the specific or generalized content and skills that students have had an opportunity to learn (Riley &
Cantú, 2000). Therefore, all students should be provided a meaningful opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills that are being tested, and information should indicate an alignment among the curriculum, instruction, and material covered on the test used as a condition for graduation.

On April 20, 2006, in partial response to the higher expectations of NCLB, Michigan governor Jennifer M. Granholm signed into law a rigorous set of statewide graduation requirements that are among the best in the nation. The governor had argued that unless the state had a highly educated workforce, Michigan would not be able to compete in the global economy. The new program requirements were intended to increase the number of students who would be prepared for postsecondary education, and so would contribute to the development of the workforce of the future (Landauer-Menchik, 2006).

The requirements laid out in detail how every student in the graduating class of 2011 must obtain certain credits before graduation from high school. Four credits in mathematics were required, including completion of at least Algebra 1, Geometry, and Algebra 2. An additional math credit during the senior year is required of all students as well. Three credits in social studies are required, including at least one credit in U.S. history and geography, one credit in world history and geography, one credit in economics, and a civics course. Four years of English are also required of students. Other credits in visual arts, performing arts, or applied arts, as well as physical education and health are required. An online learning experience was added to ensure all students a basic level of technology. In addition to the requirements for the class of 2011, an expectation of 2 years of foreign language will be a requirement for the class of 2016.
These requirements were put in the place to ensure that Michigan had a rigorous and relevant set of requirements for students. In the past, students may have taken classes that were relevant, but maybe not as rigorous. Schools have often permitted students to take soft electives instead of hard subjects. It is no surprise that if students are not required to take difficult subjects like math, science, and foreign languages, most of them do not (Shanker, 1984). The impact of the No Child Left Behind Act was now starting to be seen at the state level as adjustments were made, such as Michigan’s graduation requirements. Schools around the state were beginning to make adjustments with what classes they were offering to meet the requirements set forth by the governor.

There was more than just adding new courses, or adjusting the curriculum at the high school level. While schools added courses and adjusted curriculum, there were also additional modifications that had to be made to the assessments that were used to measure student progress (Rothman, 2002). The increase in graduation requirements was now leading to an increase in assessments that accurately measure those requirements. The reform that started at a national level was now working its way directly to the classroom and the assessments the teachers were creating to measure student success. These assessments were once again a measure of success, but ultimately schools are being held accountable by the Michigan Department of Education for meeting this newest set of stringent graduation requirements. Schools throughout Michigan were now being directed as to what was to be taught, and the state would report publicly on the success of those requirements through various assessment measures.
Key Players in Education Reform

Educational reform has been around for years as local districts, states, national commissions, boards, and experts have issued reports detailing the shortcomings of American education (McChesney, 1996). As reforms succeed and fail, we look for direction as to who has the most to gain and the most to lose in these reforms. The policymaking stakes run high in search for explanations on the success of school reform, because the questions that ask why reforms failed in the past, and why they return, go to the heart of present policy debates. Policymakers often wonder whether federal, state, and district mandates to alter the educational process will ever get past the classroom door (Cuban, 1990).

For reform to be successful, legislators, district leaders, building principals, teachers, and community members need to be involved in the process. As time-consuming as it may be, and as stubborn as certain constituents can be, successful school reform involves active participation by all members. The past has taught us that educational reform is developed a great distance from the school buildings but is measured in the classroom. We have come to a point where policymakers think they can improve education without involving educators. Education summits occur throughout the world with educators excluded. Rules and regulations are being developed without consultation with the teachers in the classrooms. Whole systems have been devised to circumvent those who must implement them (Houston, 2002).

The key players in educational reform must bear in mind the many constraints that will ultimately impact education for years to come. The most important issue underlying educational reform is the direct impact it will have on the children.
Policymakers and the education community need to ensure that the decision-making process does not result in denial of educational opportunities or benefits to students (Riley & Cantú, 2000). The impact that educational reform has on all students is rarely viewed as a hurdle in the process. Students are seldom involved in any educational reform initiatives or included in debates regarding national, state, or local mandates.

While students are most often removed from the process, sometimes there is very little involvement from the community at large. Few policymaking bodies involve the public in substantive ways when mandating school reform initiatives. Obtaining public feedback, much less reaching public consensus, is difficult and time-consuming (Sexton, 2000). The support of the community can defend or destroy educational mandates.

**Role of Administrators, Teachers, and Parents in Reform**

The impact of No Child Left Behind left a lasting impression on public schools in Michigan through the legislation to increase graduation requirements. Policymakers across this great nation have had the opportunity to leave their mark on education through various reform initiatives. District administrators, teachers, and parents play a primary role in implementing educational programs. The importance of all the role players in public education reform to work together is imperative. Knowledge, communication, trustworthiness, and dedication are all traits that the role players in educational reform need to possess. No one group can stand alone as leading the charge without support of the people above or below them.

The leader of every school district plays an important role as a liaison between state policy and district policy. When state policy changes, the direction in which the district must follow rests on the shoulders of the superintendent. The Board of Education
plays an important role as it continues to work with the superintendent on policy changes that affect their district. The changes made at a state level currently impact each individual school district to some degree. Superintendents, with support of their Boards of Education, work to maintain the best educational environment for their students that they can. School reform will continue to require districts to adapt. However, without strong leadership, reform changes within districts are bound to fail. As school leaders continue to monitor and adjust district curriculum, the initiatives of change within each school building depend heavily on the effectiveness of the building principal.

School building leaders play an instrumental role in the successes or failures of school reform. Communication, direction, salesmanship, and vision provide schools an opportunity to embrace and adapt to the vast majority of school reform initiatives. Principals play critical roles in these initiatives, as they have the potential to impact all aspects of district school policy (Good, 2008). They make decisions about curriculum, instruction, teacher hiring and evaluation, assignment of students to teachers, and extracurricular programs. Building principals are seen in the public eye as the face of school reform. While building principals are responsible for implementing new policies, they also are responsible for how they handle public relations in respect to changes. The need for administrators to inform their community and urge consensus around the reform agendas is important to lasting reorganization (Sexton, 2000). Without the support of the parents and the community, changes within a school building can be met with great resistance.

As district leaders and building principals strive for a clear and effective change process, direct impact on student performance continues to lie in the hands of the teacher.
Teacher involvement and support for educational reform can greatly impact the success or failure of any reform initiatives. Policymakers must involve teachers in the reform process, and accountability must be balanced with professional autonomy (Fullan, Rolheiser, Mascall, & Edge, 2001).

In the past, teachers have had the opportunity for a great deal of freedom, with a low level of accountability. The past decade has produced a shift toward not allowing teachers a great deal of flexibility, but demanding a higher degree of accountability. School reform should not limit teachers’ creativeness within the classroom, but should allow for their voice to be heard as policymakers continue to reform education. People at all levels can value the input of teachers. When people learn from each other, everyone can gain without taking away from others (Fullan, 2008).

Teachers are often not aware of how their involvement can impact school reform. Teachers are more concerned with day-to-day matters pertaining to supplies, instruction, and grading. Most teachers have limited interest in major policy decisions (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). Their traditional theories of practice in the classroom create a foundation for successful past reforms and hold the fate of future reforms. There is a need to find out what teachers think of reform, and to question those who have intimate knowledge of what happens when new initiatives are launched (Olson, 2002). Even when teachers are involved in the process, most often they are left out of the route that leads to the implementation of the reform. Reforms such as outcome-based education, No Child Left Behind, school-to-work, and standards-based education have worked because of the pressure from the legislation to adhere to the regulations, not because teachers were involved in the creation or execution of these reforms.
Parental support will not guarantee successful reform, but the lack of support can sabotage even the most well-intentioned initiatives (Meyer, Delagardelle, & Middleton, 1996). The vast majority of parents, even those who may not be in favor of current practices in the classroom, are concerned about their child’s learning and interests. Students are growing up in an educational system that is different from the education their parents received. Children of all ages are encountering more difficult and different kinds of curriculum than did their parents during their school years (Peressini, 1997).

Often parent involvement is as much about educating parents as it is about obtaining parental support for their children’s education (Good, 2008). When school staff, parents, and community engage in democratic decision making together, they develop a sense of joint ownership of the local school district. When teachers value the knowledge parents and community members bring to children’s learning, they can design a challenging and culturally responsive curriculum (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2005). By adding the perspectives of families and communities to the school reform equation, educational organizations reflect a new generation of engaging parents. There is a tremendous benefit to utilizing local knowledge and understanding how the dynamic between schools and their external environment can lead to long-lasting reform (Fullan, 2005).

**Student Involvement in Reform**

There is surprisingly very little research on the involvement of students in school reform. We do know that young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling, and that their insights not only require our attention, but also the responses of the adults making the decisions (Cook-Sather, 2006). Students and teachers have
different perspectives on learning, and policymakers need to appreciate those differences and respond (Thiessen, 2006). When policymakers do think of students, they think of them as potential beneficiaries of change. The view that students can be involved in the process is seldom embraced. Policymakers are looking at achievement results, skills students would attain, attitudes that they would adopt, and the impact on potential jobs for students (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). They rarely think of students as participants in the change process.

When school reform directly impacts the classroom environment, information is hardly ever provided to students. Involving students in the change process is imperative, and communicating with them about the impact of school reform is also vital.

No matter how elaborate and complete a plan may be, it cannot be carried out successfully unless the students are brought rather fully into the knowledge of what to do and how to do it, and brought to a commitment to cooperation in the process . . . but communication of plans to students is almost never addressed. (Clark & Yinger, 1980, pp. 21-22)

The outcomes of school reform are measured by the success of students in the classroom. While little is done to involve students, they hold the measurement stick to the successes or failures of educational reform. It is noteworthy that any innovation that requires new activities on the part of the students will succeed or fail based on whether students actually participate in embracing these activities (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). We need to stop thinking of students in terms of just learning outcomes and start thinking of them as people who should be asked to be involved in this process. Involving students
in specific change, into new forms of updated learning, directly addresses the knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary for all students to become engaged in their own learning.

This analysis of literature reviewed how curriculum reform has taken shape over the last several years. The review sheds light on how initiatives have been created and implemented, at both a national level as well as a local level. Information that was lacking in the available research consisted of how students have been influencing curriculum reforms and their perceptions on how these reforms have been impacting them. While this was the purpose of the study, the review of literature helped create a better mental frame about how past curriculum reforms began and what key players were affected.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study delved deep into the experiences and perspectives of students, as they are the primary partners in shaping or implementing reform efforts. The purpose of this study was to examine how students were experiencing Michigan’s increased graduation requirements. The three overarching research questions that were addressed were:

1. How did students describe the ways in which their school responded to Michigan’s new graduation requirements?

2. How did teachers describe the way students were responding to the increasing graduation requirements?

3. How did parents describe the way students were responding to the increasing graduation requirements?

As was suitable to the nature of this investigation into student experiences related to school reform, a qualitative research approach was implemented. Determining the correct methodology for any research was vital to the preferred outcomes of a study. Using a qualitative approach provided me with a method that called for more cause-and-effect thinking, reduction of data to specific variables, development of hypotheses and questions, use of open-ended data collection, and the examination of potential theories (Creswell, 2003). Creswell (2007) viewed qualitative research as one that is conducted when we need a complex, detailed understanding of an issue. Qualitative research provided more of a broad approach to the study of this social phenomenon and helped me
gain an understanding about how students were describing their experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), qualitative research involves the study, use, and collection of a variety of empirical materials that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals’ lives. Qualitative research is a form of inquiry used when the researcher is attempting to gain a deeper view of a phenomenon. Case study research looks to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved within a specified bounded context. Students were the main focus of this research. However, gaining comprehension from people around them, through parents and teachers, provided a deeper understanding of how students were experiencing the school reform under study.

A single case study was used to gain appreciation of how students at a single high school were living out this phenomenon. Hancock and Algozzine (2006) described such studies as the collection of information for the purpose of describing a specific group with no intentions of going beyond the group. They further identified inferential research as a desire to go beyond a specific group in order to make generalized statements about a larger population. This study did not attempt to make such generalizations, but may have created a frame for future studies that extend beyond a bounded context.

**Research Method**

Qualitative research was conducted because we needed a complex detailed understanding of the issue (Creswell, 2007). Stake (1995) also noted how qualitative studies typically orient cases or phenomena, seeking patterns of unanticipated, as well as expected, relationships. Understanding the experiences of one particular group of high
school students from one school system was vital to this research. A qualitative researcher has a need to study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena, in terms of the meaning people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Additionally, because the focus of this study was to give voice to a previously minimally engaged stakeholder in the literature on educational reform, i.e., the students, this case study engaged participants through a phenomenological frame to elicit the full richness of student experience with the specific school reform initiative studied.

Phenomenology provided interview methods that allowed me to engage participants in reflective and reflexive conversations, which produced insight into how individuals experienced and internalized their experience with a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2007), in this case, the experience of being a student in a Michigan high school that has undergone program and process changes in response to a state initiative to raise graduation requirements.

**Description of Case Study Methodology**

Qualitative methods can be used with any of five specific traditions. Creswell (2003) mentioned strategies such as narratives, phenomenologies, ethnographies, grounded theory studies, or case studies. In an attempt to better understand this case, a case study approach was used. This research did not attempt to generalize the findings to another population of students or another school system, but to comprehend this one case (Stake, 1995). Yin (2009) described case studies as an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context.

A case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). A single leaf, even a single toothpick, has unique complexities—but rarely
will we care enough to submit it to case study. We study a case when it is of very special interest. Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances (Stake, 1995).

Case studies are different from other types of qualitative research in that they are intensive descriptions of a single unit, or a bounded system. While this research is not attempting to discover insights or theories that will influence other cases, the information gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research (Merriam, 1998). The goal of this qualitative case study design was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how students described their experiences in balancing an increase in graduation requirements.

**Human Subjects Institutional Review Board**

Before collecting data, I applied for approval to the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) of Western Michigan University. My proposal was reviewed by the board of the university to ensure that the research would proceed with appropriate protections against risk to humans (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). There is a long history of the Institutional Review Boards, which are designed to protect human subjects during research. Because my research would be connecting and working with students under the age of 19, it was important that I gained informed consent and protected participants from any harm. Confidentiality of all participants was especially critical.

**Primary Data Collection**

The data collection plan was designed to gather data in response to the three overarching questions and some subquestions. Data collection and analysis focused on a particular high school and students that experienced this phenomenon. All students were
currently enrolled in the same school, and had been for a minimum of the past 3 years. It was imperative that all participants had experienced this phenomenon for this method of study to be considered suitable (Creswell, 2007). Careful attention was given to the process of choosing the setting for this research, and the method of data collection and analysis. Individual interviews were the main data collection technique for students. Focus groups with teachers and parents were conducted to gain insight about how they described their collective experiences with how students were processing this reform (Creswell, 2007).

The study took place at a large suburban high school in Michigan that is North Central accredited and a National Blue Ribbon School. The school has a population of approximately 2,500 students in grades 9 through 12. The size of the junior class fluctuates between 625 and 650 students throughout the school year. The increase in required graduation requirements provided direction for this district to increase local graduation requirements to meet the standards set by the state.

Selection of Participants

The number of people that I interviewed varied for each member group. There is no real minimum number of people to interview in qualitative research, as the depth of understanding is the goal of this research (Patton, 2002). Hatch (2002) suggested keeping the number flexible in case more information is necessary and more participants are needed. There are two criteria when selecting sample size. First, I wanted to make sure that I had a sufficient number of participants to reflect the population. Second, I did not want to interview too many people so that I heard the same information over and
over. This is called saturation of information, which does not add depth to the understanding of the case (Seidman, 2006).

Collection of data began with purposely identifying 30 students at the 11th grade level with added criteria as the initial pool of possible study participants. Fifteen of those students were selected from a pool of students who were on a college-bound track and who had no grades on their high school transcript below a C in a core academic class. The pool of candidates for the other 15 initial participants recruited for the study pool consisted of students who self-identified as non-college bound and who had failed at least one course their 9th grade or 10th grade year. For both groups of students in the initial pool, the researcher used a random selection process from all students who met the inclusion criteria to form the initial pool of 30 prospective participants. In this fashion, half of the study participants were those generally considered to be at academic risk, and half were those generally considered to be academically proficient.

The researcher sought parent consent for all students in the initial pool to solicit their student for participation in the study. Random selection from those who met the inclusion criteria continued until the researcher had secured 15 parent consents for each of the two groups within the pool of 30 students. Recruitment of actual study participants was done through a random process of selection for each of the two groups until five initial consenting participants had been identified for each of the two groups. As students were randomly selected from each of the two groups of potential participants from the study pool, those students received an invitation to participate in the study. If the student responded with interest in participation, the researcher provided that student (and the
parent) a participation consent form. Students were confirmed as actual participants in the study upon receipt of the signed (student and parent) student consent form.

Students at this school had taken different paths to attaining the number of credits to achieve junior status. The diverse backgrounds provided a deeper, well-rounded understanding from the views of the students. After interviewing and analyzing the data from the first 10 students from the pool of 30 (five students from each of the two subgroups), the researcher analyzed the data to determine the need to seek out additional participants to gain a deeper and/or more varied perspective from each of the two groups of students. If the first five in-depth interviews from each subgroup provided saturation to the point that dominant themes emerged, the student participant interviews would stop until after the parent and teacher focus groups were completed for the initial 10 study participants. Based on the full analysis of student, parent, and teacher data, I determined the need to add study participants to reach a point of saturation for common segments of meaning and dominant themes. Some of the interviews were not as lengthy or rich with information, and, in that case, the additional interviews were conducted even before interviews with parents and teachers commenced. Because saturation did not occur with the first 10 students, I added two more participants from each of the two groups that formed the study pool until I was satisfied of a saturation point that yielded a full, rich understanding of a participant’s experiences and perspectives.

Parents were selected in a similar fashion, as they were asked to participate in the focus group if their son or daughter had been chosen for the initial interview. With a pool of 30 potential student participants, parent consent and acceptance to participate in the study was needed up front before potential student participants for the pool of 30 were
contacted with an invitation to consider participation in the study. Further, as students were randomly drawn from the pool for an invitation to participate in the study, a letter outlining the interview protocol and process was sent to parents of selected students for approval. A total of 10 parents were initially interviewed based on the criteria set forth for the student participants. Parents were selected in the same fashion for the second-round focus group (needed for data saturation), after the students for the second stage of interviews were selected from the initial student pool.

To gain an understanding about how teachers perceive students experiencing this phenomenon, teachers were invited to participate in a focus group discussion. The criteria for possible teacher participants were based on their experience teaching 11th grade students and curriculum. The building administrator put together a pool of teacher candidates who were scheduled to teach courses comprised of primarily 11th grade students. Teachers were sent a letter of invitation outlining the data collection process and defining the purpose of the research. The first 20 teachers from the pool of potential study participants who expressed interest in participating in the study were presented with a consent form and further explanation of the particulars of their participation. Teachers who signed the consent were added to the pool of actual study participants until a total of 14 participants was achieved.

Two separate times and dates were scheduled for these focus groups to offer some flexibility for participants to be involved. The first focus group had eight participants, and the second focus group had six participants. Times and locations of the focus groups were determined by the building administrator and adjusted to provide flexibility for the staff. Those teachers who signed the study consent form received
written confirmation of the date, time, and location of the focus groups. A light snack and beverages were provided to participants as a simple gesture of appreciation for their involvement in this research. Interview questions were sent by email to all participants prior to the focus groups, outlining the exact interview questions and protocol of the sessions.

Attention was given to fulfilling all the requirements of Western Michigan University’s Human Subject Institutional Review Board (HSIRB). Prior to participation, written consent was obtained from parents of students participating in the study, as well as from the parents themselves. Written consent was also obtained from the teachers before participating in the study. Steps were taken to protect each subject’s identity during this research. This involved the use of pseudonyms such as “Participant 1,” “Participant 2,” and so on. Each participant was told that he or she was free to depart from the study at any point. Full explanation of the data collection and storage process was provided in the consent form to all participants.

Data Collection

Three sources (students, parents, and staff) and two types of data collection methods (interviews and focus groups) were used for this study. Students in this study provided their insights in an interview that I conducted. Parents and staff members shared their experiences by means of focus groups. Because the data collected through the interviews was crucial to this study, a pilot interview was conducted to confirm that the interview questions reflected my thinking on the most significant factors of the study (Merriam, 1998). Not only was this good practice in interviewing, but pilot interviews identified which questions were confusing and needed rewording. Following the pilot
interview, interviews with students commenced. The purpose of the interviews was to allow me to enter into the other person’s perspective (Patton, 2002).

The interview protocol for students is included in Appendix C. Each student interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted individually and in a comfortable and familiar setting to the interviewee. The interviews also took place at a time that was convenient for both the interviewee and the researcher (Creswell, 1998; Merriman, 1998). Each interview was digitally recorded to guarantee accuracy of records, and to allow complete focus on the participant and his or her responses.

A follow-up interview could have been requested only if clarification of responses was needed. Prior to the interview, all participants signed a consent form (Appendix B) permitting the session to be recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The key to in-depth interviewing was to understand the experience of increased graduation requirements at this particular school, not to predict or to control that experience (Seidman, 2006). Interviews were transcribed after the completion of each interview for data analysis. All students involved in the interview process were given the opportunity to review the written record at a later date to ensure accuracy and to allow for any follow-up questions or comments.

Focus groups were used to explore how parents and staff described their experiences of how students were affected by increased graduation requirements. A focus group interview is usually an interview with a small group of people. Groups are typically 6 to 10 people with similar backgrounds who participate in the interview for an hour or so (Patton, 2002). The focus group protocol and discussion guide are included in Appendix D. Focus groups lasted roughly 45–60 minutes and took place in a classroom,
conference room, or other school office. Prior to the focus groups, as stated previously, consent forms included in Appendix B were signed by the participants. A limitation that is noted later in this study pertained to a concern that comments may not have been made by staff with an acting administrator in the room. As I am the primary researcher, every attempt was made to limit the impact of any bias that may have existed.

My direct involvement in the data collection and analysis process is one of the significant challenges of qualitative research (Creswell, 2003). For the sake of these focus groups, a third party non-educator facilitator was used. This individual was not employed by the school district and did not have any connections to the district. The district involved in this study conducts regular research studies with staff, and I, as the principal researcher for this study, used the district third-party researching services of Gartner and Associates to conduct the staff focus groups to validate the responses and diminish any biases that I may have had. During these focus group sessions, it was clear that this was a group interview, not a problem-solving session (Patton, 2002).

Data Verification

All data collected in the interviews and focus groups were collected electronically and transcribed using computer software. Although computer software was used for transcribing, it was not used in the initial analysis of the data. Using computer software to analyze data can be an effective use of technology, but it limits the personal connection that I would have with the data (Hatch, 2002). Even though software for coding and transcribing has become more diverse and functional over the last several years, I wanted to be the main analyst of the data (Yin, 2009). Following the student and parent interviews, and parent and teacher focus groups, data immersion took place by reading
and re-reading the transcripts. This was an essential first step to help me become intimately familiar with the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). With multiple forms of data, the observed consistencies in the data were noted.

The views of the three different categories of study participants were unique, and drawing similarities and differences from their perspectives was noteworthy. Patton (2002) described this as triangulation, and we use this to strengthen a study by using multiple methods. The need for triangulation arises from an ethical need to confirm the validity of the processes. Merriam (1998) suggested that using multiple methods of data collection and analysis triangulation strengthens reliability, as well as internal validity.

For the sake of this research, the use of triangulation, member checking, and clarifying my biases was used to show internal validity. In qualitative research, the requirement of validity is often not of concern. Validity, as noted above, is an interesting suggestion. Validity does not carry the same connotations as it does in quantitative research (Creswell, 2003). There are several forms of validity as noted by construct validity: internal validity and external validity (Yin, 2009). Concepts that have been offered that might make more sense for qualitative research are those of trustworthiness, credibility, conformability, and data dependability. Based on the nature of this research, and the connection to the teacher participants (and possible parent participants), a third-party non-participant teacher was used during the parent focus group. A teacher not currently teaching 11th grade students was asked to assume this role. This observer took notes, observed behaviors, and provided validity to the research obtained during the focus groups.
As noted earlier, triangulation is used to show consistencies between multiple viewpoints (Yin, 1984). Member checks are also used to show internal validity and help provide confirmation of the data collected. The idea is to use members that were interviewed to determine if what was transcribed accurately describes what was expressed in the interview (Merriam, 1998). Students were provided a copy of their transcribed interview for the purpose of member checking. Following the teacher and staff focus groups, the description was also made available to members to ensure that corrected interpretations had captured the essence of the focus group interviews.

Based on the number of student interviews, there was a need to have a second round of interviews with additional students. I needed to make sure that there was a sufficient amount of data that reflected the population. After the initial 10 student interviews, I determined that an additional 6 students should be interviewed to ensure an abundant amount of recurring information that was recorded over and over throughout the interviews. A second group of 6 students (all from the college-bound subgroup) was interviewed to expand the data set and achieve saturation. This process was employed so the data analysis for the student interviews yielded no further significant meanings (Seidman, 2006).

**Data Analysis**

To gain value from the interviews and the focus groups, the data collected needed to be organized and analyzed (Merriman, 1998). Maxwell (1992) suggested that this is how researchers make sense of data that they have collected and are able to apply their findings to interpret the larger meaning of the data. The focus of qualitative analysis is to reduce the data by developing codes or categories to uncover common themes and find
significant patterns (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). Upon completion of the interviews and focus group sessions, the data were read and reread to categorize the participants’ responses. The data were analyzed for themes, patterns, and categories. Once the data were coded, they were rearranged into unique groups that allowed for the data to be compared within and between other groups.

The overall purpose of coding the data was to gain an understanding of the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 1998). The qualitative research process produced a large amount of data. Because of the large volume of data that were collected, I considered using a computer program to help code and further assist in the analysis of the data. The decision to personally code the data was made in order to gain a deeper understanding (Creswell, 1998). The data analysis was directly linked to the research questions stated previously, and coded to each question. Based on this analysis, I gained a meaningful understanding of the impact school reform has had on students, parents, and teachers.

The analysis plan for each data set was based on an inductive approach. Using the subquestions for each of the data sets (students, parents, and teachers), the analysis began with lifting significant segments of meaning (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) that related to each of the subquestions. The next stage of analysis was to cluster the segments of meaning around like concepts or constructs for each subquestion and to cross-analyze those clusters of meaning for segments across all subquestions. Various combinations of clusters were examined until one set of clusters emerged as representing a holistic understanding of each data set. Once the clusters of meaning were confirmed, they were further reduced to themes and subthemes as best fit the most natural and
authentic interpretation of the data from each data set. Finally, the findings from each
data set were cross-analyzed for comparative understandings between the findings from
students, parents, and teachers.

The Researcher

As a member of the school district chosen for this study, it was imperative that
subject and questioning techniques not jeopardize the quality of data attained during the
research process. Although I am an administrator in the district, I did not have direct
contact with the students chosen as participants. These students were active in my
building two years ago and had no classes in the building that I currently lead. Questions
designed to gain student understanding of this curriculum reform were also not designed
as questions of a high sensitivity. Connection to participants, questioning techniques, and
content of questions were addressed in the consent form delivered to parents prior to
participation in this research.

Parents could also be associated with students that were currently in my building.
The importance of focusing on their junior-level student was reiterated prior to consent.
Questioning techniques and content of questions were also explained to parent
participants prior to consent. Parents had the right to withdraw from the study at any
time, and also had the right to withdraw their son or daughter from the study at any time.
Parents were notified that they could review the written transcripts from their interview,
or their son or daughter’s interview. Parents were able to write comments on a separate
piece of paper, making any helpful statements they felt were reasonable about their
interview or the interview of their son or daughter. This page of comments was included
in the analysis and findings, but did not alter my interpretation and transcription of the interviews.

Teachers selected for the focus groups were not staff members working in my building. While there may have been relationships or mutual respect for one another, the content of the research was not of a sensitive nature, thus my role in the district was not likely to influence their responses in the focus groups. Teachers were provided with a clear description of the research and the focus of the study. The focus groups were intended to gain an understanding about how teachers viewed student perception of the increase in graduation requirements and had no bearing on their connection to me as the researcher.

**Limitations**

In conducting case study research, there is a need to identify key limitations and possible delimitations. Delimitations are the boundaries of research as it is being proposed and include such information as the case being investigated (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). While case study research for the most part delimitates itself to a single bounded case, this study was confined to one school and one set of participants.

Limitations, on the other hand, are the factors that may affect the results of the study and that are generally beyond the researcher’s control (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). The limiting factors were that this purposive sampling procedure decreased the generalizability of the findings (Creswell, 2003). The involvement of the researcher as a school principal could have influenced the outcome of the observations and interviews. Staff and participants, for example, may have behaved in some atypical fashion when they knew they were being observed (Patton, 2002).
Chapter III Summary

The methodology described in this chapter was intended to delve deep into the experiences and perspectives of students in shaping and implementing reform efforts. This bounded case also facilitated the identification of a sample of students, their parents, and their teachers who were interviewed to gain rich and multi-perspective interpretations of how students were experiencing this phenomenon. Purposeful sampling was applied in determining the students, parents, and teachers to interview. Parents and teachers were interviewed in a focus group setting with 6 to 10 subjects per focus group. Students were selected based on two criteria. First, they had to be an 11th grade student, and, second, they were a college-bound student with no academic course failures, or a student that self-identified as non-college bound and who had failed at least one credit of new high school course requirements. The premise was to find diverse levels of educational backgrounds of these 11th grade students. Parents were selected in a similar fashion as they were asked to participate in the interview if their son or daughter had been chosen for the initial interview.

Data were collected with the use of an electronic voice-capturing device and transcribed by the researcher. Member checking was provided for data that were collected from the parents and teachers. Coding of data was used in search of salient points as they emerged from the findings to understand the main focal points about how students responded to this reform.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of this qualitative study. Each of the interview questions was examined with findings categorized into themes. Additionally, the research questions were used as a lens for further analysis of the data, and findings were further organized into themes under each question. The purpose of this chapter is to provide results and analysis of the data resulting from individual interviews and focus groups that took place with students, parents, and staff members at one particular high school. A set protocol for all interviews and focus groups was followed in an attempt to address the research questions, which also allowed for dialogue and discussion to take place. Due to the fact that students were interviewed individually, a collection of their data was summarized into individual tables based on each question. Students had an opportunity to answer every question, thus allowing for a summary of every question for every student. Detailed data collected from the interviews are presented in table format with a summary for each question.

The staff focus group and the parent focus group interview data were summarized based on common themes that emerged from their responses. Involvement in a focus group could have been a unique experience for study participants, as all participants in the focus group were not required to comment on every question; however, the focus groups were conducted to provide opportunity for alternative perspectives to emerge. Parent and staff focus group findings followed the student interview findings as a means
to gain a deeper understanding of how students were dealing with the increase in graduation requirements. The process for data analysis offered by Creswell (2003) and Patton (2002), and described in Chapter III, was used, which included identifying keywords and phrases, organizing them into themes, and analyzing the meanings that they revealed.

The evidence that follows represents a summary of student interviews, followed by staff focus group findings, and, finally, parent focus group data. Each data set was analyzed within to discover common themes that emerged amongst the data. The data were also analyzed across data sets from the student interviews and teacher/parent focus groups to identify common themes between students and staff, mutual themes between students and parents, and, lastly, shared themes between staff and parents.

To conclude the analysis of data, all the information collected based on the three research questions, as well as the subquestions, are presented. For this study, the following three main research questions were addressed. First, the data were analyzed based on how students described the ways in which their school responded to the new graduation requirements and how they were experiencing the change. Second, the data were analyzed according to how teachers described the ways students were responding to the increase in graduation requirements. Finally, responses collected were analyzed based on how parents described the way their student was responding to the increase in graduation requirements.

**Description of Sample**

As indicated in Chapter III, the population for the study was purposely chosen to look closely at the impact a change in graduation requirements would have on students.
With a graduating class of 600 students, the top 100 students were identified, as well as the bottom 100 students, based on current grade point average. From the list of top 100 and bottom 100, a sample of 30 students was randomly selected and sent letters inquiring about their interest in participating in the study. The first few interview questions helped to profile the students who were involved in this study. While the gender, ethnicity, age, and other demographic statistics of the students involved were not of importance other than to describe the population studied, the quality of student and personal perception of their educational experience was. This information was collected and summarized for all participants involved.

Using the same initial student pool, their respective parents were also sent a letter inquiring about their interest in participating in a parent focus group. If a student and a parent agreed to participate in the study, they were added to the list of possible candidates. Ten students and their parents from the top 100, as well as 6 students and their parents from the bottom 100, agreed to participate in this study. Each student participant was interviewed individually, while the parents participated in a focus group.

Staff was invited to participate in a focus group based on an invitation letter sent to all staff members at the high school level. If a staff member agreed to participate in the study, he or she was put in a possible pool of candidates. The staff focus groups consisted of 14 members with at least one year of experience in their current role. Participants consisted of staff with a wide range of curriculum experience. The staff focus group ultimately included an assistant principal, athletic director, English language arts teacher, economics instructor, child development teacher, vocal music instructor, resource room teacher, school psychologist, as well as other core curriculum teachers.
Over the course of a 2-week period, interviews and focus groups were scheduled based on accessibility of participants. Student interviews lasted roughly 30 to 45 minutes and took place in an office conference room and outside of the student instructional day. Parent focus groups were divided into five smaller focus groups, to provide flexibility for parents’ personal schedules. Each focus group lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and was scheduled at a location off campus. The staff focus group took place outside of the school day, took place in a large office conference room, and lasted roughly two hours.

**Data Collection Protocols and Process**

The individual student interviews followed the protocol outlined in Appendix C. The interview questions were created to support the research questions for this study. Interview questions were examined and at times augmented by probes to gain a deeper understanding. Some responses did not pertain to the specific interview question. Those responses were still analyzed and were explored in this data review. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Member checking was utilized as a way to internally validate the responses from each participant (Merriam, 1998). The same process was followed for each staff and parent focus group, and the questioning layout is noted in Appendix D.

Starting with Table 1, the data in the tables to follow are arranged based on whether the participant was obtained from the pool of top 100 or bottom 100 students in the participating schools (i.e., whether the participant were likely to be college-bound or non-college bound). For each grouping of either top 100 or bottom 100 students (based on G.P.A. and course success/failure as defined in Chapter III), the students are listed in
numerical order by participant number within that group. A simple dividing line in each table shows the break-off between the two participant groups. While this research is not designed to be a comparative study, ordering the data in this fashion allowed me to discover any patterns, themes, and categories in the data (Patton, 2002) that were notably different between the two groups of participants. Throughout this analysis, I will address any notable differences between the subgroups if it is represented in the data.

**Student Interviews**

Close attention was paid to the interview protocol throughout every interview. The preliminary questions to individual students helped describe the demographic makeup of the population. Of the 16 participants, the differences in high school course of study are noted in Table 1. Keeping in mind that 6 of the participants were selected from the bottom 100 of this particular class, 12 of the 16 participants identified themselves as being in a college preparatory track. Participant 1 communicated that “all along I was preparing for college after high school.” Two of the participants even noted that, while they were in a college preparatory path, they felt they were more advanced than just a traditional college plan. “I plan to attend an Ivy League school,” stated Participant 15. Four of the participants mentioned that they were planning on not pursuing a 4-year institution following high school. Those who noted they were not pursuing a 4-year institution mentioned they could possibly pursue community college, military, or work, or they were unsure.
Another key element to describe the students involved in this study was to better understand the type of student. For the researcher to better understand the type of students, the students were asked to academically describe themselves. Several of them (11 participants) noted that they perceived themselves to be very good students in school. Participant 6 described him/herself as “hard-working, passionate, always trying to do my best,” while Participant 10 said, “I’m a better than average student.” When asked the direct question, students generally placed themselves in one of two categories: Either they were a strong student and worked hard, or they described themselves as lazy, didn't
work very hard, or struggled in school. One participant (number 5) even noted that he or she “like being recognized as a good student.” Table 2 identifies how the study participants matched themselves against a set of student characteristics.

**Table 2**

*Self-Described Type of Student*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>AP student</th>
<th>Enjoys studies</th>
<th>Hard working</th>
<th>Lazy</th>
<th>Not hard working</th>
<th>Struggles</th>
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As I continued to better understand the student participants, he inquired about the students’ understanding of graduation requirements. After students explained what they knew about the new graduation requirements, three main themes emerged. First, students realized there was an increase in graduation requirements (“I know that they increased,” stated Participant 9); second, they did not know all of them (“I know you get a broad range of studies form all different subject areas,” added Participant 6); and, finally, the
increase in math requirements gained the most attention (“Mostly that there was some math stuff added,” voiced Participant 11). Initially, students noted that they understood there was an increase in graduation requirements and that there were a lot more requirements now than there had been before. Nearly half noted they were not completely sure what the new graduation requirements were. A majority of students did know that the new graduation requirements reflected an increase or expansion of graduation requirements, but were uncertain just where in the curriculum those changes occurred. Several realized there was an increase in the mathematics requirement, as illustrated in Table 3. Participant 14 broadly expressed an understanding of the increase in mathematics requirement by noting, “There are 4 years of math, one having to be in your senior year.”

Of the top students who were interviewed, 60% understood there was an increase in mathematics, while a third of those were not worried about the increase. The non-college bound students interviewed revealed two thirds of them knew that there was an increase in mathematics, but nearly all of them (5 out of 6) were not sure what the increase was. Tables 3 and 4 categorize the status of the student participants in the understanding of the new graduation requirements. Table 3 presents each participant’s individual status, while Table 4 presents the aggregated participant by either college bound or non-college bound.
Table 3

Knowledge About the New Graduation Requirements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Increased</th>
<th>Lots of them</th>
<th>Don’t have to worry about them</th>
<th>I know them</th>
<th>Increase in math</th>
<th>Increase in Science</th>
<th>Increase in Social Studies</th>
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</thead>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

Knowledge About the New Graduation Requirements (Grouped)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Increase in math</th>
<th>I know them</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Not worried about them</th>
<th>Increase</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Bound</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-College Bound</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the preliminary information was gathered from the students, the interview shifted to more detailed information about the increase in graduation requirements.

Participants were asked from what types of people were they hearing about the change in
graduation requirements. Specifically, who was the students’ main source for obtaining this type of information? Overwhelmingly, the students interviewed mentioned they had heard about the changes mainly from counselors or their teachers. Participant 5 noted that “my teacher was really the one that gave us a lot of information.” Participant 6 heard about the changes “through the interviews with my counselors my sophomore and junior year.” Over half of the participants interviewed explicitly mentioned that they heard about the changes from the counselors. A few of the participants noted how they had heard about the changes from friends, parents, or online. While most had a general idea of the changes, two participants were less informed. Participant 12 didn’t hear about the changes from anyone, and Participant 3 had no idea where he or she had heard of the changes. Table 5 identifies how the participants discovered the changes in graduation requirements.

Finally, the student participants were asked specifically how they learned about the changing graduation requirements. While answers varied greatly among the participants, students noted that their counselors were the main source for learning about a change in graduation requirements. “I would say mostly through my counselor,” added Participant 8. Participant 15 said, “High school counselors my freshman year.” Some learned about the change while they were at one of their orientation programs, and others heard it from their teachers. “The teachers were telling us and explained it to us,” noted Participant 16. One student participant did not hear about it until the 11th grade year. Table 6 describes the sources from which participants stated they learned about the changing of graduation requirements.
Table 5

*Types of People Students Heard From*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Counselors</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Students or friends</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>On-line</th>
<th>No one</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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After the student participants were asked how they learned of the changing graduation requirements, the focus was directed to how the change affected them. Table 7 identifies the key points students made when asked how the change affected them. While nearly half of them noted it didn’t affect them that much, several other ideas surfaced about how the increase affected each individual student. Comments such as “It has affected me a lot, especially the math one” were made by Participant 3, and Participant 8 also noted “there was less room for electives.” Student participants 1 and 15 mentioned how the increase in requirements would force them to test out of required classes so they could fit other classes into their schedule.
Table 6

*From Whom the Students Learned About the Change in Graduation Requirements*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Counselors</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Mailings</th>
<th>Was not told</th>
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Student 1 commented:

In order to take some of my honors classes, I had to get two of my classes waived. One of them was physical education and the other one was an additional visual arts class. And then I ended up testing out of another class just due to the switch to trimesters and various other requirements. I still ended up taking a couple of classes that were not necessary just because I had to meet requirements; it was kind of chaotic.
### Table 7

**How Change Has Affected Students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Didn’t affect me much</th>
<th>Trimesters helped</th>
<th>Just harder</th>
<th>Had to make adjustments</th>
<th>Had to test out of required classes</th>
<th>Had to take some classes I didn’t want to take</th>
<th>Used middle school classes</th>
<th>Would not have taken math</th>
</tr>
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</table>

Student participant 16 stated that the increase in graduation requirements and the transition to trimesters affected the amount of core academic time received:

I did get more electives with trimesters, but I felt like I got less time with some of the core classes, like math. I only had two trimesters of math in a year, so I don’t feel like I got as much out of it.
The student participants were then asked two questions about how the changing requirements forced them to make adjustments in their current high school programming, or what their plans were after high school. Overwhelmingly, students commented that the changing requirements did not alter their postsecondary plans (13 out of 16). Participant 2 said, “I don’t think so, I was always planning on attending a community college,” and Participant 10 simply said, “Not really, no.” Some noted that the increase in requirements may have helped them toward their occupation, or the increase basically helped them for the future (in a general way). Table 8 identifies the responses the participants gave when asked about how the change in graduation requirements altered their postsecondary plans.

As the focus moved from the change in postsecondary plans to how the increase in graduation requirements changed the student’s current high school programming, two main themes emerge. Nearly half of the students noted how, because of the increase in requirements, they had to take some core classes that they did not want to take. Participant 16 just said, “It changed my whole schedule around.”

While most students commented about the additional classes that they had to take, another theme emerged—students simply could not fit all of their electives and requirements into the current structure and schedule. “It didn’t allow me [to take] another elective,” said Participant 8, and “I was not able to take choir or music,” expressed Participant 1. Along the same line of fitting all the core and elective courses into a participant’s schedule, some participants noted how the transition to trimesters helped address this issue. “I did get more electives with trimesters,” expressed Participant 16. The discussion about trimesters will be explored later in this study.
Table 8

*Did Change in Graduation Requirements Change Students’ Postsecondary Plans?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Kind of Helped me in occupation</th>
<th>Helped in general</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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</table>

Only a few students mentioned how they would not have taken as much mathematics if it were not for the increased math requirements. Participant 12 said, “If I didn’t have to take more math, I would not have.” Others simply revealed that the increase in graduation requirements forced them to take more electives. Student participant 4, when asked if the increase affected his or her high school programming, simply stated, “I would’ve blown off my senior year.” Table 9 categorizes the responses of the student participants.
Table 9

*How Change in Graduation Requirements Changed Students’ High School Programming*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Couldn’t fit other electives/classes</th>
<th>Took some core I didn’t want to</th>
<th>Had to take more electives</th>
<th>Trimesters helped</th>
<th>Wouldn’t have taken as much math</th>
<th>Changed my whole schedule around</th>
<th>Had to test-out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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</table>

Student participants were asked what advantages or disadvantages they saw in the new increased graduation requirements. Table 10 categorizes the responses of the student participants in relation to what advantages they had experienced or anticipated. When data were collected on the advantages, two main themes emerged. First, half of the participants noted how it forced them to take more rigorous classes. “Pushes kids more to strive and take more core classes,” said Participant 6, and Participant 9 added, “Makes you take more core classes your senior year.” Nearly half also noted how they expected that the new graduation requirements would push students and provide them a more well-
rounded education. Participant 8 said, “I think it makes students more well-rounded and opens their eyes to various [other classes],” and Participant 14 agreed by saying, “It makes students more well-rounded in their educational experience.” Participant 5 noted:

It [increase in graduation requirements] gives you more of a well-rounded education. It forces you in some cases to take things you may not have been interested in. I'm a perfect example. I almost for sure wouldn't have taken government or economics. It helps people become well-rounded and pushes them into other areas.

Table 10

_Advantages Students See in the New Graduation Requirements_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Forced to take more rigorous classes</th>
<th>Well-rounded education</th>
<th>Pushes kids</th>
<th>Prepares for college</th>
<th>Trimesters</th>
<th>I guess for us it's good</th>
<th>Helps develop our county</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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</table>
While one student, Participant 12, did not feel there were any advantages, other students remarked on how the increase prepares students for outside of the school environment. Participant 15 stated, “Students being challenged throughout high school can make them a better student and a better contributor to the workforce.”

As the student participants shifted their focus to disadvantages, there was a wide range of opinions. Some of the most popular responses addressed how students were forced to take electives they did not want to take. Comments included, “You end up taking electives you don’t like” made by Participant 11, and “Instead of choosing what they want to learn, they were forced to learn other stuff,” added Participant 16. Others specifically noted how one of the disadvantages was the requirement of mathematics, specifically taking Algebra 2 to graduate. In support of another student, Participant 1 said, “One of my friends is not very good in math, and she is going into literature, so does she really need to know Algebra 2?” A few students felt that the increase simply made them take more classes, even if they were not college-bound. Participant 3 expressed, “I’m a hands-on guy,” and Participant 15 was concerned for “someone looking into a technical school or they know for sure they’re not going to be using a certain skill.” An interesting conversation evolved while probing the disadvantage question, as some participants expressed a concern that the increase was creating more academic and social pressure for students. Participant 2 remarked explicitly that “the increase is causing more strain and stress on all kids. Forcing students to take classes that they will clearly struggle in, places undue stress on them.” Participant 4 added that “students taking hardcore classes their senior year, it’s just too much for them.” This idea of rigor and stress will be addressed later in this study.
Participant 15 said, “If a student partly knows what they want to do, why [make them] take certain classes?”

Table 11 outlines the wide range of observations made by participants regarding the disadvantages.

Table 11

*Disadvantages Students See in the New Graduation Requirements*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Take electives you don’t like</th>
<th>Math (Algebra 2)</th>
<th>Causing more stress</th>
<th>Scheduling conflicts</th>
<th>Get behind</th>
<th>Graduating is hard</th>
<th>Drop out</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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</table>

Student participants were asked why they thought there was an increase in graduation requirements. While there was not a clear theme that arose, general consensus of the participants centered on preparing students for a little stronger workforce, or a better prepared life after high school. “To make sure that all students have the skills to do
what they want to do after high school,” stated Participant 8, and “To help get kids more college-bound,” said Participant 4. The development of a well-rounded student was also identified, as noted in Table 12 below. Participant 6 suggested that this was done to allow students a “broader learning experience.” Participant 1 remarked how this increase was politically driven: “Someone just wanted to look good.”

Table 12

Why Students Think There Was a Change in Graduation Requirements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Better jobs</th>
<th>Improve skills</th>
<th>Global improvement</th>
<th>Better Michigan</th>
<th>State would get more money</th>
<th>College prep</th>
<th>Politics</th>
<th>No idea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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Participants were asked a two-part question, addressed in Table 13 below. They were first asked if they thought the increase in requirements was an important one. The
follow-up was why they thought it was, or was not, important. The students involved in this research were split on whether this was an important change. Half of the participants (8 out of 16) felt it was an important change and had various reasons why they thought it was important. Participant 4 noted how the change was important because now “my senior year matters.” “With the economy the way it is, people want to hire the best,” added Participant 6.

Table 13

*Students’ Thoughts on Whether the Change in Requirements Was an Important One*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>On the fence</th>
<th>Hasn’t affected me</th>
<th>Senior year matters</th>
<th>Had to take irrelevant classes not needed</th>
<th>Michigan is now serious on education</th>
<th>Miss “hands-on” classes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>X</td>
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Participants 15 and 16 felt the change was important because now “Michigan is taking education seriously” and they are part of a “smart state.”
On the other hand, six of the participants did not feel it was an important change. Participant 11 remarked on how the change “forces students to take irrelevant classes.” Participant 1 detailed where change should happen to impact students:

I don’t really notice much of a change in teaching methods in a positive way. The average required classes are just trying to cram in the information. So, has it been an important change? Not really, but it has impacted people. If you’re really interested in changing how well students acquire information and how well they’re learning, change needs to happen at the classroom level.

Participant 3 was on the fence about whether it was a good change. “Kids that plan on doing physical labor are not going to get through all these requirements because they fall behind, so they end up dropping out.”

A majority of students were indifferent as to reasons why the change is or is not important, stating that the change really has not affected them.

The focus then shifted to who should have been involved in this curriculum reform to increase requirements. Table 14 below lists the type of people that students felt should have been involved. Four main parties emerged as key contributors, suggested by the participants. Overwhelmingly, students felt they should be involved in the process of considering and implementing curriculum reform such as this. Participant 10 supports involving students as “Ultimately they’re the ones that have to deal with the requirements.” Participant 13 supports student involvement “because a lot of people don’t know what students go through.” Participants also stressed the importance of involvement from teachers, administrators, and parents. “If you want to be effective, you would have to consult [with] people that really know what’s going on,” commented
Participant 1. Participant 9 remarked how students should be involved; “not just the students that are excelling, but use a wide variety of students to see what they think about how the new graduation requirements would affect them.”

Table 14

*Students’ Thoughts on Who Should Be Involved in Changes in Graduation Requirements*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Top state school officials</th>
<th>Board</th>
<th>Business leaders</th>
<th>College entrance staff</th>
<th>Not politicians</th>
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Some students did feel that business leaders and other top state officials should be involved. Participant 1 noted how this clearly should be an initiative that does not involve politicians:
Politicians, although they may have advanced degrees, are not the ones in the classroom teaching. Most of them have not been in the classroom for at least 25 years. They are just not going to be as aware of teaching methods and technology and things like that.

When participants were asked specifically if they thought students were involved in the change in graduation requirements, the general consensus was no, students were not involved, as shown in Table 15. Participant 6 was the lone student who expressed that students might have been involved: “Yes, I'm sure students were involved. I'm not sure how, but I think they were.”

Table 15

Were Students Involved in This Change in Graduation Requirements?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
<th>Not current student – former</th>
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All the participants, with the exception of one, noted how students were not involved in this process. Participant 2 hoped students were involved, since “it’s affecting them the most.” Participant 4 thought that students were involved, just not current students.

Table 16 summarizes the students’ responses when they were asked if students should have been involved in the increase in graduation requirements. One hundred percent of the participants voiced that students should have been involved. Participants 2, 4, and 10 expressed that students should have been involved because they were the ones that had to deal with the requirements. Two participants, 1 and 12, suggested that students should have been involved, just not all students (in other words, they should have been represented). Participant 3 stated, “[Students] have to go through it and it’s their future,” and Participant 5 added, “Students would be a good group to see what they’re thinking.”

Table 16

*Students’ Thoughts on Whether Students Should Have Been Involved*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not all</th>
<th>Biggest impact is on kids</th>
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<tr>
<td>College Bound</td>
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<td>Non-College Bound</td>
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Finally, student participants were asked what students might contribute if they were involved in the increase in requirements process. Two main themes emerged from the collection of these data. First, student participants expressed that students could offer
a great deal of insight into this reform, as they could shed light on what other students were dealing with. Students have personal experiences and a different view of education. Participant 1 noted that students “can add personal experiences giving more of a collaborative look at things.” Participant 5 agreed and said, “They might provide some input on what they and their fellow students could be doing to prepare themselves for the future.” Some expressed that times had changed and students could provide greater input. A second theme that emerged was how students could provide feedback as to whether the change could, or would, be effective. Student involvement could provide feedback on whether there should be flexibility in this reform and whether or not the change was good. Participant 10 noted that we should “just use their input to maybe change things for the future.” Both of these themes will be explored deeper in Chapter V. Table 17 summarizes the responses as to how students might contribute if they were involved.

**Staff Focus Group Findings**

To fully understand how students are responding to the increase in graduation requirements, a focus group was conducted with a wide range of staff members from the same high school. Participants in this focus group consisted of teachers, administrators, the athletic director, and non-instructional staff. The makeup of the teaching staff included an upper-level English teacher, an underclassmen child development teacher, a government instructor, a technology teacher, a special education resource room teacher, and a psychology teacher. The amount of experience varied, as staff ranged from a second-year teacher to a professional that has been working in the profession for 30
Table 17

*What Students Might Contribute if They Were Involved*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Personal experiences</th>
<th>Better view on things</th>
<th>Times have changed</th>
<th>Different point of view</th>
<th>Need flexibility</th>
<th>Whether change is good or not</th>
<th>Control their future</th>
<th>Prepare for college or not</th>
<th>Wouldn’t have mattered</th>
<th>Should just value our opinion</th>
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years. When the staff was asked a series of questions, available in Appendix D, underlying themes emerged and were explored.

In a focus group session, staff members were asked individually to express what they knew about the current high school graduation requirements. Two main talking points summarized the feedback that staff provided. First, generally the staff knew that there was an increase in requirements, specifically that students would now need 4 years
of mathematics. The previous specific high school graduation requirements in this district called for most of these credits; however, the scope and sequence of the math requirement was the biggest adjustment for this school.

Secondly, they expressed a need for their high school to change the delivery method of instruction to allow students to obtain all their requirements in a high school career. The need for the high school to transition to a trimester scheduling format was referenced as necessary. While other comments were made as to what they knew about the increase in graduation requirements, such as increasing fine arts, social studies, and science, the main themes centered on the increase in the mathematics requirements and the transition to trimesters.

The staff was very informed about the increase in high school graduation requirements. The inquiry turned next to identifying the participants’ main source of information regarding the change in high school graduation requirements and how they were notified about this change. The general consensus of the staff involved in the focus group was that they received a great deal of information from staff meetings, administration, and high school counselors. “Guidance counselors do a pretty good job pointing [students] in the right direction,” noted one staff member. One member mentioned getting information from the district website and emails from the Michigan Department of Education, and that the superintendent provided a great deal of information about this curriculum shift.

To gain a better understanding of how students were dealing with the increasing requirements, the staff was asked to discuss how they felt students were experiencing the change. Overwhelmingly, the staff felt that the students would do well when met with
this challenge. They expressed how students were well prepared for change. One staff member noted that “it really shouldn’t change anything at our high school, as we are a high performing school.”

More than one staff member voiced a concern for other schools that already struggle to meet graduation rates. The sense of empathy for other professionals at lower-functioning high schools caused concern for some staff, when they noted, “I can’t imagine how [XYZ] school will make it.”

The focus group was asked if they thought a change in graduation requirements would change students’ postsecondary school plans. A few staff members expressed that the increase in requirements may give students more options. Participants noted that some students were receiving their ACT test scores back and realized that they may want to go to a 4-year postsecondary school instead of going to a community college as they originally planned. One participant said that “some students think they can now go to a four-year institution.” For the most part, however, staff did not feel that there would be a great deal of change. One staff member noted:

Pretty much the same mix of kids will be going to college. I felt like it was the same mix in the past several years. I think in our high school we have a high percentage of students that are headed for postsecondary education whether it’s community college or a university. It sure feels like we have far more seniors saying, “I can do that.”

When asked about high school program changes that students were experiencing because of the increase in graduation requirements, the staff had a wide range of responses. While some staff members discussed how the graduation requirements change
altered what they were teaching, most focused on how students perceived the change. The two main themes that emerged from the conversation focused on the number of elective classes, as well as the transition to a trimester scheduling process. Two staff members mentioned in particular how the number of elective classes would diminish based on increasing requirements. One staff member noted there were simply too many electives that students would not have a chance to take because there was such an increase in core requirements: “There are too many good electives that get lost.” Over half of the staff members in the room commented how the transition to a trimester format helped save some of the elective classes that students could take. One noted, “It definitely is the best move to go to trimesters,” and another added that “taking 4 years of math, at least in our trimester format leaves some room for electives.”

The progression through the focus group questioning itinerary then shifted to the advantages and disadvantages that the staff noticed in relation to how students were dealing with a shift in requirements. When staff members expressed their opinions on the advantages for students, two main themes emerged. First, they noted how this would help better prepare students for college and life after high school. One staff member said that “it teaches them good lessons about expectations and working hard,” and another mentioned that “our kids are just better prepared.” Additionally, they noted that the increase in requirements and a variety of higher-level classes would prepare more students for a 4-year institution. “It would give students a leg up to go to college over other students in other states that don’t have these requirements,” noted one participant.
The other idea that surfaced was how students would now have to learn at a faster pace and would really learn how to work hard on their studies. One participant remarked how “the rigor is just awesome; it’s all positive.”

When shifting to the disadvantages students would experience, there was one main theme, as well as an underlying theme within. For the most part, staff suspected that the top and average students would be just fine. The disadvantage to the increase in requirements would fall on the shoulders of the students who already struggle. The main premise was that the more rigorous set of graduation requirements separated those that could from those that couldn’t. “It seems to be creating a wider void between the kids that can do it and [those that] can’t,” expressed one participant. It would be very difficult, noted one staff member, for some of the students to pass the upper-level classes. More than one staff member mentioned that not only were the overall requirements difficult for some students, but the Algebra 2 requirement, in particular, would be an extreme challenge.

One participant stated in detail the disadvantages for some students:

I think some kids’ minds just aren’t ready for some of the upper-level classes.

From a teacher’s perspective, a lot of those basic classes meet their needs, but we have kids that should take personal finance, for example, their senior year and they still can’t pass Algebra 2.

The staff members in the focus group shifted direction to whom they would involve if they were going to make a curriculum change like the increase in graduation requirements. Several different constituents were noted during this time of the discussion. While business owners and local government officials were mentioned, the
vast majority of staff fixated on the need to involve parents, educators, and students. One staff member remarked, “You should involve a wide range of children. The overachiever, the underachiever, and special-needs students [all need to be involved].”

The discussion continued with the involvement of parents, but the need to involve all types of parents was stressed as vital to the process. The main theme behind who should be involved primarily focused on all parties that are directly related to a student’s education. The need to involve staff members and parents that are internally involved in student learning was voiced.

It was evident from the statements of focus group participants regarding whom they would involve in a curriculum change like this that they view students as only part of the equation, but as an important part. Participants were then specifically asked how they think students may have been involved in this change. There were only two responses from the staff members in the focus group. The first comment that was made, and nonverbally agreed on by other members in the room, was, “I don’t think they were involved.” One member of the focus group did remark, “If they were involved, it was only at the end when the decisions were [already] made.”

With little feedback from the staff members about how they thought students were involved in this change, the focus group discussion continued with the question, “Should students have been involved?” The main theme that emerged from the focus group conversation regarding this question was simply, “No, they should not have been involved.”

This contradicted what was discussed earlier, when staff mentioned that students should be involved. This was explored more deeply during the focus group, and clarified
somewhat with further dialogue. Comments raised by the staff expressed how students, at this stage, did not know enough about their educational needs. They agreed that while students were still in school, they were a work in progress, and concluded that involving students could be beneficial, but perhaps more so once they were out of high school for 4 years. Other members of the focus group expressed the value of talking to students after they had been in the workforce and were using the skills they were taught. These participants thought that this would help gain a better understanding of what students needed in high school.

An interesting statement was made by one of the staff members who appeared to be considering the difficult economic times that Michigan was facing. The staff member noted how asking students who have graduated from high school and were currently unemployed could provide value to the conversation as they may have an understanding of what they needed in high school to help them find a job. The consensus in the room was that using current students would not be beneficial, but including recent graduates who were out there living the life that high school prepared them for could be of good value.

Finally, staff members were asked what they thought students could contribute if they were involved in this curriculum reform. Again, participants felt there was more value in involving graduates in the quest for a better understanding of a student perspective. One staff member noted that “we, as adults, would be surprised what students can contribute when asked.”

Others mentioned that the input students provided in a classroom setting could be valuable in helping teachers better understand their own teaching styles. Several staff
members had conducted surveys with students at the end of a class, in which students “expressed a desire to succeed and there are a lot of students that are honest about what they can do and they don’t mind it getting harder.” The consensus of participants was that students could be a meaningful partner in determining some of the changes that were made in our classrooms and our schools. Determining the right age, experience levels, and sophistication of the students participating may be the greatest challenge.

Parent Focus Group Findings

To gain a better understanding about how parents felt that their children were experiencing this curriculum change, I wanted to spend some time with the parents of the students who were interviewed. To gain this understanding, I established a series of questions, and several focus groups were formed based on the availability of parents. The interview question protocol is provided in Appendix D. Due to conflicting schedules with the parents who agreed to be involved in this study, I established multiple meeting times during which they could attend. With 16 student interviews, the goal was to involve all of their parents in the focus groups. Each student had at least one parent involved in one of the focus groups, while one of the students had both of parents attend.

The setting for the focus group was a meeting room located in a building separate from the high school. For the most part, the focus group meetings lasted roughly 45 minutes. However, one focus group lasted over an hour based on the value of the conversation that took place and the degree of engagement by participants. Based on parent attendance to a particular focus group, some themes that emerged may have been more developed in one group than another. To better understand how parents felt their son or daughter was dealing with these changes in curriculum, I analyzed the data from
the focus groups based on the order in which the questions were asked, as with the other participant groups and phases of this study.

Initially, parents were asked for some basic information about their son or daughter. To fully understand the parent perception of their child’s program of study, I asked participants what type of program they believed their son or daughter was following in high school. For the most part, parents felt that the son or daughter was on a college-bound track. One parent did remark that the student was planning to go directly to work after completing high school. While several of the student participants who were interviewed were not targeted as prepared for college, their parents reported that they were still on a college-bound track.

Although the program of study was important, the perception parents had of their sons or daughters, and how well they did in school, was also of interest. When participants were asked to describe their son or daughter academically, the responses began to diversify. Some parents responded with comments that suggested their [son or daughter] was a good student, they were motivated, and they did very well. Some remarked how they had a very high achiever as a student. A few parents remarked that their students really did not work hard or classified themselves as a “C” student. Some key words that were mentioned in this conversation included self-motivated, honors student, independent, and driven. “She always did very well in school,” noted one parent.

The conversation then shifted in a different direction to gain the parents’ understanding of the current high school graduation requirements. Parent participants had a broad range of responses to this inquiry. While most parents commented how they
knew there were a lot of graduation requirements, only a couple of parents truly
understood what the makeup of the graduation requirements looked like. One parent
commented, “Everything you need to know,” which was concise, yet profound.

There was common understanding that there was an increase in the math and
language arts requirements. The science increase was noted by several of the parents as
well. Two parents commented how they knew that there was an additional foreign
language requirement that would be added at some point. During each one of the focus
groups, there was a sense that, due to the graduation requirements increase, the high
school scheduling process needed to be changed. One participant noted, “I just felt from
a parent perspective that they were switching over to trimesters mostly to accommodate
the new graduation requirements.” There was a theme that emerged about the
understanding that the “transition to trimesters” in a high school scheduling process was
fallout from the increasing graduation requirements.

Parents had multiple channels through which they gained information from school
systems on changes that were being made. They were asked who their main source was
for gaining information about the changing graduation requirements. From the data
analysis, the following sources appear to be those from which parents gained the most
information. The first main source of information was a high school guidance counselor.
One parent said, “We got a lot from orientation before she went into 9th grade.” Whether
they gained this information from meeting with a counselor, attending orientation, or
reading information on the district website from the counseling department, this was one
of the main sources referenced in the focus groups of how parents were receiving
information about the new graduation requirements.
Another source of information came from other district staff members. Some information came from teachers, other information from administrators, and still some from board members. Finally, some parents commented how they never heard anything about it except through their son or daughter. They understood that the information that their son or daughter was receiving from school would be passed on to them at home.

The direction of the questioning then shifted to the impact the graduation requirement increases were having on their son or daughter. At a basic level, parents were asked if they felt the changing graduation requirements affected their son’s or daughter’s plans after high school. The overwhelming response from the parents was no; it did not affect their child’s postsecondary plans. One parent commented on how the increase in graduation requirements may have caused a change in the scheduling process (transition to trimesters), which, in turn, forced students to be more involved in their high school programming.

That’s an interesting question; I don’t know the answer. She now wants to go into counseling, and it might be because the last couple years of schooling and the opportunities that were provided to her. Maybe she had to work more with her counselor here and that’s what has driven her into possibly becoming one.

Some parents felt that it may have affected their child’s plans or choices, but very little. Several remarked that the graduation requirements were already set rather high to begin with (at this high school), so the change was somewhat less dramatic.

Specifically, parents were then asked if they felt the changing graduation requirements altered their son’s or daughter’s current high school program. This was a question that resulted in a wide range of answers. Collectively, parents expressed that,
yes, it did change what their son or daughter was planning on doing in high school. But the reasons for why and how it affected them were much more diverse. The deep conversations that took place surrounding this question provided several individual concerns about how it affected their son’s or daughter’s high school planning. Two main themes emerged from the depth of conversation that took place.

First, because of the graduation requirements, the school needed to change to a trimester scheduling format. One parent said, “The switch to trimesters is really helping kids have an opportunity to take more classes,” and another added, “Because of trimesters, it allowed my daughter to take some electives.” There was also a concern voiced by several parents that the alteration of high school graduation requirements restrained their students from taking classes that could prepare them for life after high school. One parent voiced how it affected how many AP courses her daughter could take. Another commented that the requirement to take a class in “art” had nothing to do with what her daughter wanted to study after high school.

The other theme that emerged specifically focused on the core academic content students would have to now complete. The concern that some parents expressed specifically focused on the requirement of mathematics. While getting through Algebra 2 was a concern, taking math in a student’s senior year was also voiced as an important change. One parent expressed concern for one of her children by noting “4 years of math would’ve put [my older] son right over the edge.” One parent mentioned that it did not really change her daughter’s high school academic plan, other than she would now have to take an extra year of math that she would not have taken previously. Another stated how, in the son’s senior year, “he probably would not have taken math.” More than one
parent mentioned how their sons or daughters probably would have had an easier
schedule their senior year.

The focus group question protocol continued with the discussion of advantages
and disadvantages. Initially, parents were asked to discuss some advantages they saw for
their child with the increase in graduation requirements. While some noted that they did
not feel there were specific advantages for their child, the overall consensus was that
there was a general advantage regarding making kids work a little harder. They
concluded that, with the new requirements, students were encouraged to take higher-level
classes at the high school level before they went to college. The overall opinion of most
parent participants in the focus groups was that these requirements would help push
students to be more college-ready. Some parents also noted that there were some
advantages to the requirements because they forced the school to switch to a trimester
scheduling format.

Contrary to the advantages, we began the discussion of what disadvantages
participants saw in the requirements for students. This provided a venue for parents to
express some concerns they had specifically about how this change in requirements
negatively affected their son or daughter. Additionally, two main perceptions arose from
the discussion that followed. First of all, parents expressed a concern for the
nontraditional student. One parent commented on how 4 years of mathematics might put
the son right over the edge: “Some kids just can’t handle the new math requirements in 4
years.” Participants also concurred with a concern that these requirements could put
additional pressure on students. They expressed concern that this pressure could simply
push some students away from traditional schooling.
The other perception that took shape throughout the focus group was a concern over what they expressed as “this one-size-fits-all mold.” They indicated that they were worried that imposing the same rigorous graduation requirements would pose a challenge for several different groups of students, including hands-on students, special education students, and low-achieving kids. They noted that not all students experience the same support at home that would allow them to be successful in the classroom. The fear that students could get lost in the shuffle when we try to mold them all the same was voiced by several members of the focus groups.

Three themes emerged from the conversation that followed in regard to why parents thought there was an increase in graduation requirements. One of the largest factors discussed centered on the political agenda of others. One focus group parent stated, “The governor wanted to have a legacy that she improved education in Michigan.” Others suggested that politicians were trying to make their mark in education and set Michigan ahead of others. The idea was that the governor saw businesses and families moving out of the state and “she wanted to attract companies and wanted our kids to be educated enough to work in those new businesses.”

The second theme that emerged focused on the global implications the increase in graduation requirements could have. One parent said, “We have to compete with China and their standards, and other European countries, even Canada.”

Finally, the third theme that emerged from this discussion centered on the preparation of students for college. “Michigan increased the requirements because they want all students to be college bound,” stated one parent. Others continued with that theme, but expressed that the increase in graduation requirements was not only preparing
college-bound students, but getting students ready for life after high school (as well as any postsecondary education they could receive).

With a better understanding about what the changes were, the advantages and disadvantages, and why parents thought Michigan increased the requirements, the focus group discussion moved to a discussion of how these types of changes evolved. Parents were asked, if, in the future, schools were going to make a change to the scale and scope of the increase in graduation requirements, whom would they involve in the process? Most participants agreed that teachers, other staff members, and parents should be involved in this process.

They were on two sides of the fence, however, regarding if students should be involved in the process. Some parents noted that students should be involved, while others mentioned that students should be left out. The parents who expressed that students should be involved suggested that a diverse group of students could be beneficial. The ones that wanted the student voice left out noted how most students would choose the path of least resistance. “They would look for the easiest path, and that may not always be the best.”

Several parents continued, noting that the people who set these policies should not be involved because they were so far removed from education. One parent specifically commented:

There are a lot of legislators out there who are not teachers and don’t know about schools. You really need people involved that run the schools. These decisions are made by government officials that don’t know what it takes to run a school.
Following the conversation about who parents felt should be involved in this type of curriculum reform, the question was raised concerning how they thought students were involved in this transition to higher graduation requirements. All of the parent participants in the focus groups commented that they did not think students were involved at all. Comments such as, “I don’t think they even had the opportunity,” or “I doubt they were involved at all,” surfaced as consistent sentiments by the participants. One parent did express that students were most likely disconnected from decisions made at the state level, but that parent believed that students were involved as this district made adjustments. This participant expressed an understanding that the local district adhered to the new requirements and made adjustments in the scheduling process (by moving to trimesters), and that students were actively involved in that transition.

Due to the fact that most of the parent participants did not feel that students were involved in this curriculum reform, they were then asked how they felt students should have been involved. All parents, except for one, voiced that students should have been involved in this reform. One commented, “Yes, from all over the state, they should have been involved. That’s a no-brainer.” The one parent that said “no, they shouldn’t be involved” simply implied that their involvement would not be valued by the people making the decisions.

Finally, parents were asked what they thought students could contribute if they were involved in this process. There were several answers that arose during this conversation. The main theme that evolved centered on the different experiences that students brought to the table. Parents expressed a general consensus that students could
be a creative source of information. The personal touches that students brought to the table could be valued by the people making curriculum decisions.

Students could also be a valuable partner in watching reform of this nature put into motion. Understanding and listening to students could help develop a deeper understanding of some of the struggles that they may be a part of with this type of curriculum reform. One parent commented simply, “We should treat them like adults.” Others noted that students were much more likely to be receptive to the increase in requirements and motivated to learn if they were part of the change. Students initially might not want the increase in requirements, and that could be the conversation that took place if they were involved in a process like this. However, the value that they could add to any type of curriculum reform could certainly paint a better picture of the impact this reform would have on them in the organization.

Cross-Analysis Between Findings

In attempts to gain an understanding of how students were dealing with this reform, a cross-analysis was conducted between each of the sets of data. I analyzed a comparison between students and staff, comparisons between students and parents, and, finally, comparisons between staff and parents. The profile information of each of the participants in this study was not analyzed between subgroups, as these data were not comparable outside of their own subset.

Three main ideas were explored in this cross-analysis. First of all, the similarities and differences between students and staff were explored based on what they knew about graduation requirements and how they obtained this information. Second, an analysis between the similarities and differences of “how students were experiencing this change”
was exposed. This included how the change affected not only students’ current schooling, but also their plans for postsecondary opportunities. The second level of cross-analysis looked at how the three participant groups viewed the advantages and disadvantages for the students associated with this reform. Finally, the third level of cross-analysis explored how each of the participant groups viewed who should be involved, along with the specific role of students, in shaping and implementing a curriculum change or other school reform of this nature.

**Student Findings Compared to Staff Findings**

After an investigation of what staff and students knew about the increasing graduation requirements, the knowledge of each subgroup became apparent. Whereas students thought they received a lot of information about graduation requirements from the counseling staff and other adults within the building, staff noted they received most of their information from administrators, as well as their counselors. One noteworthy connection between the two subgroups was that the counseling staff played a vital role in communicating the change in requirements. Students mentioned their individual connections with their counselors and also the information they received at orientation and other structured class meetings. Teachers commented on the role that counselors played in staff meetings and in other communications to them in regard to the increase in requirements.

To draw comparisons between how students and staff were experiencing the changes in requirements, the main theme that emerged from both students and staff was the significance of the transition to a trimesters scheduling format. Students and staff
spoke favorably about the transition to trimesters and how it would help support the additional requirements students would need to take.

Another common theme that emerged between the students and staff was that students were not greatly affected in the transition to the increased graduation requirements. Both staff and students concurred that the increase in requirements would affect low-achieving students much more than high-achieving students. One difference between perceptions of students and staff was related to elective classes that were required. Although students expressed a concern about being forced to take elective classes that they did not want to take, teachers expressed a favorable opinion in regard to requiring students to take some of the elective classes. While the differing opinions were duly noted, the overall impressions of both subgroups focused on how trimesters eased the concern of limited elective opportunities.

One downfall discussed by students and staff related to the decrease in time for some core classes. Both parties discussed how the increase in electives would ultimately mean the decrease in core academic time. This emerged as a concern specifically related to mathematics, which will be explored further in Chapter V. There were similarities that emerged in relation to the advantages and disadvantage that students experienced with this curriculum reform. Students and teachers described the increase in requirements as advantageous for students, as it would help them be better-rounded and it would result in students taking more rigorous classes. In the discussion regarding the disadvantages perceived by both parties, students were concerned about taking electives that they did not like, while teachers were more concerned with how struggling students would pass
upper-level classes. Both parties expressed the concern about all students having to
complete Algebra 2.

The final cross-analysis between students and staff focused on who should be
involved in the discussion of this type of curriculum change. Students were very clear
that they should be involved in this type of change, while staff was less convinced. Staff
members agreed that students should be involved, but focused more on students that had
already graduated from school. Students that were living this experience expressed a
desire to be involved. Three areas that both parties agreed on were (a) the involvement of
staff members, (b) the involvement of parents, and (c) the desire to not include
legislators. Students and staff expressed a concern that the people making these decisions
most often were not living the experience. Both staff and students expressed that, with
the involvement of parents and teachers and, to some extent, students, the shared
experiences of people who were living the transition to a significant curriculum change
would provide valuable information. Staff and student participants agreed that this
curriculum reform did not include feedback from students. They also agreed that
involvement of students in this or similar reforms could provide some valuable
information about how students were experiencing the change, which could be
instrumental in the sustainability of this reform.

**Student Findings Compared to Parent Findings**

This part of the cross-analysis provided a view of how students perceived the
change in requirements and how their parents perceived their son or daughter was dealing
with it. The way the students profiled themselves and how their parents profiled their son
or daughter were very similar. Students who described themselves as being a strong
student were perceived in the same way by their parents. For the students who expressed themselves as not being college-bound, their parents provided more optimism toward the direction they would go after high school. Student work ethic was perceived similarly by both students and their parents. The following cross-analysis between students and their parents was constructed based on understanding of the increase in graduation requirements, the impact it had on students, and the involvement of players in any type of reform.

The main consistent theme between students and parents regarding what they knew about graduation requirements focused on the increased requirements in some of the core classes, especially math. Both the student and parent participants credited the increase in graduation requirements as the stimulus for the high school moving to a trimester format, and both viewed this as a favorable change in mitigating what might have been a negative impact of raising the graduation requirements—the difficulty of fitting in electives with the expanded required courses. Regarding how students and parents obtained information on the increase in requirements, both parties mentioned that they received information from orientation (counselors), administration, and other staff members. One unique source of information, expectedly, was that parents received a lot of their information from their son or daughter. The trust that parents place in their child to relay this type of information home was noticeable.

Students and parents had similar feelings regarding how this increase in requirements affected them. For the most part, both parties mentioned that the increase did not affect them a great deal. Parents’ comments were consistent with the students’ thoughts on how they now had to take more electives, and they both mentioned how it
was difficult to fit advanced placement courses into their schedule. In regard to the mathematics dialogue, the requirement of taking math in a student’s senior year was consistently noted (more as a positive by parents and, to some degree, a negative by students). A common concern expressed by both parents and students, as well, was a fear some students would not be able to pass Algebra 2.

The cross-analysis between what students and parents thought were advantages to the graduation requirements increase indicated that they both believed the change was advantageous, in that it would push students a little more to take higher-level classes, help them prepare for college (or other postsecondary options), and become better-rounded students. Parents expressed some disadvantages that students did not mention. Parents had concerns for students that were in special education and indicated that the more rigorous curriculum expectations might be a struggle for students that are considered hands-on or slower learners. One disadvantage that both parents and students agreed on was the concern for the amount of pressure that the increased graduation requirements might put on students. Both the students in their interviews and parent focus groups cautioned how this increase in requirements would cause stress for students, leading to failure and/or dropping out.

There were several similarities in who students and parents would involve in this type of curriculum reform. While both parties expressed a desire to involve teachers and parents, they could not agree on how students should be involved. Students were adamantly in favor of their involvement in this type of change, and parents were less convinced, unless student involvement was at the postgraduate level where student input would not be influenced by teenage children looking for “an easy way out.” Both parents
and students did agree that students were not involved in this reform, but noted how they were involved when their high school responded to the increased high school requirements by transitioning to trimesters.

When specifically asked if students should be involved, parents were more receptive as they began to discuss within their focus group the experiences and personal side of things that students could bring to the table. Both students and parents discussed the understanding that students were experiencing this transition in the classroom and could add value to any type of curriculum change. The question that seemed to remain in parents’ minds, however, was the right point at which to involve students.

**Staff Findings Compared to Parent Findings**

A final cross-analysis between staff and parents provided insight into how these two groups perceived the relationship between the students and the increase in graduation requirements. Both groups were very knowledgeable about the increase in requirements and collectively stated that the increase impacted the scheduling process and forced the district to move to trimesters. While the teachers had a better understanding of the exact requirements, both groups emphasized that the increase was most notable in mathematics. They also agreed that the increase in requirements could adversely affect the amount of elective opportunities the students would have. The consensus between the two groups was that their district had to move to trimesters to support the elective opportunities and allow for the increase in required classes.

A comparison of how both groups received their information about the increase in requirements revealed that staff focused on communication at meetings and information they received from counselors and other administrators. Parents made more note of
information they received from their son or daughter, as well as the orientation process and communication with counselors. The common theme between the two groups centered on the pivotal role and involvement of the high school counselors in the process of communicating and helping parents, students, and staff understand the changes.

In the analysis of how staff and parents perceived students were dealing with this increase in requirements, similar perceptions were evident. Both groups noted how this change did not greatly affect students (at our school) because of the high curriculum expectations for students already in place prior to the new state mandate. Neither group thought that this change would greatly alter how a student planned to go through high school or would change their plans after high school. Staff and parents described advantages to this increase relating to better preparing students for college, forcing them to be hard-working, and allowing them to be well-rounded. They also had similar views on some disadvantages perceived. A concern that lower-level students could not pass some of the more rigorous classes was voiced by both parties. Parents and staff also discussed how 4 years of mathematics would be a concern, and Algebra 2 would be challenging for some students.

Regarding those whom staff and parents would involve in this type of curriculum reform, both groups mentioned similar groups of people. The main idea that arose in comparing the two groups’ responses focused on involving people that were directly impacted by this change. They both expressed that teachers, other staff members, and parents should be involved in the process. While both parents and staff members thought students could be involved, they expressed the need to involve them once they were out of high school. Both staff and parents concurred that involvement of graduates could
provide valuable information to any type of reform. They also both expressed a concern about involving legislators who would not be directly impacted by what takes place in a school district, or building, in response to mandated reforms.

Again, regarding the question of whether students should be involved, parents and staff commonly expressed the desire to involve students who had graduated in the recent past, agreeing that the involvement of students could provide meaningful information on what types of curriculum reform could be sustained and accepted at the classroom level. Current students may not know what it specifically takes to survive after high school, but recent graduates could provide experiences and creative approaches to how critical reform could be successful in a school district.

**Response to Research Questions**

To further explore the data, I took a closer look at how the data from students, staff members, and parents could be addressed in relation to the research questions posed in Chapter I. The research questions addressed three main categories. Each main question included subquestions to gain a deeper understanding. The data analysis is broken down by the three main questions, followed by the underlying subquestions.

**Research Question 1**

*How do students describe the ways in which their school has responded to Michigan’s new graduation requirements?*

To fully understand how students responded to the new graduation requirements, their interview responses were addressed in the five parts of this research question. For the purpose of this analysis, the following research subquestions were addressed based on the data from student responses:
a. How do students make sense of the new graduation requirements in connection with their postsecondary plans?

b. How do students describe the ways they are experiencing change as a result of their school implementing the new graduation requirements?

c. How do students describe the ways they are involved in the curriculum reform process in their school?

d. What issues do students describe as impacting them as a result of the change in high school graduation requirements?

e. How are they responding to those issues?

Students were asked a series of questions regarding the new graduation requirements and how their postsecondary plans could be affected. For the most part, students did not sense there was a large adjustment with the new requirements. Generally, students did not feel that the change in requirements would alter their postsecondary expectations. Some students felt they gained a better and deeper education with the new requirements, and even one student noted that attending a 4-year postsecondary institution did not seem out of the question.

In respect to the second subquestion above, students experienced the new graduation requirements to varying degrees. Most students made reference to how the school implemented the new graduation requirements by altering the type of daily schedule that was offered. Several students noted that, based on the new graduation requirements, the move to a trimester schedule made things more realistic and attainable. The overall sense of the students was that, since the school altered the schedule to trimesters, it allowed them to take some of the electives they otherwise would not have
been able to take. A few students did not experience the change as positively, as the new requirements did not allow them to take some of the more rigorous classes because they were forced to take state-required electives in certain areas, such as fine arts.

Students described their involvement in this process and noted that they were not deeply involved at all. As the school made adjustments to the schedule to implement the new requirements, students did not believe they were involved. Some commented that they were involved in the transition to trimesters, but not in the initial stages of how the school could implement the new graduation requirements. At a deeper level, students were basically told what the requirements were and were left to make things work from their end. Their lack of involvement in this reform resulted in what they felt was a disconnect with the implementation of the increase in requirements.

Students noted a wide range of issues that impacted them as a result of these new requirements. A large number of students mentioned that these requirements forced them to take more rigorous classes and provided them with a well-rounded education. Students noted three main issues that concerned them the most: first, the mathematics requirement (specifically, Algebra 2); second, being forced to take electives; and, finally, the increase in stress level for students. The mathematics requirement fear centered on the expectation for students to complete Algebra 2 prior to graduation. While most students interviewed were not as concerned about the requirement, their worry for fellow classmates having to meet this requirement was evident. The math requirement also forced students into taking math their senior year. Students involved in this study did not express anxiety about this expectation, as most students felt there were options at the high school level that would fulfill this requirement.
The second issue students were concerned about was having to take electives that they were not planning to take. Some of the academically high-performing students expressed some apprehension that they now had to take fine arts classes or a physical education course that would not be relevant for their future, or might interfere with their desire to load their schedule with advanced core curricular (college prep) courses.

Finally, as a result of these new requirements, students expressed a concern for the general student population, specifically, that these requirements would cause students undue stress and possibly cause more dropouts. Their concern for each other was voiced by several, with some expressing the frustration students experience from pressures at school. Student participant 2 commented that “the stress and strain on the student population could have something to do with this increase in requirements.” The increase in stress levels of students will be explored later in Chapter V.

The final part of the student research question pertained to how students were responding to the issues they described. For the most part, students follow a 4-year high school program that is laid out for them. A few students discussed how they would handle some of the conflicts or issues that they may have to deal with by meeting with a counselor. The work of their high school counselor was vital to how students were implementing these new requirements. Some worked with the school administration and counseling staff to “test out” of certain classes so they would meet the new Michigan Merit Curriculum requirements. Other students had to work with counseling staff to alter their schedule to fit requirements, even with a trimester schedule. In attempts to fulfill the requirements before graduation, some students successfully completed the prerequisites well before their senior year, even in 7th or 8th grade.
Research Question 2

*How do teachers describe the way students are responding to the increase in graduation requirements?*

Teachers played an important part in this curriculum shift, as their relationship with students was central to the educational process. The work that teachers did went well beyond the classroom walls, and the leadership and direction that they provided their students played an important role in how students responded to the increase in graduation requirements, or any other major change. In a review of the data from the teacher focus group, the three subquestions of this research question were addressed:

a. How do teachers describe the way students are involved in curriculum reform at the local district level?

b. What issues do teachers describe as impacting students as a result of the change in high school graduation requirements?

c. How do teachers believe students are responding to those issues?

A closer look at the responses the teachers provided in the focus group helped to describe the ways students were involved in curriculum reform at this particular high school. Teachers generally expressed a lack of involvement by students in any kind of curriculum reform. Teachers believed students could provide valuable insight into what actually transpires in the classroom, from a youthful standpoint. They noted how any type of curriculum reform generally did not involve students. Some did remark that with the high school transitioning to trimesters, students had some involvement, as they were surveyed by the district about this change in scheduling. To clarify their involvement, staff members noted that they were asked for input, but they were surveyed only after the
transition to trimesters was fully in motion. Generally speaking, teachers described student involvement in curriculum reform as very limited at the district or building level.

Teachers described in more detail some issues that students dealt with as a result of the change in graduation requirements. Of the multiple issues, the two main concerns expressed by teachers centered on the difficulty of passing the upper-level classes and the requirement of students having to take Algebra 2. With the expectation that students take more upper-level classes, teachers expressed their concern about ensuring that students passed the prerequisites to avoid graduation delays. Specifically, the scope and sequence that was put into place at this particular high school required students to take more difficult courses in 9th and 10th grade simply to prepare them for the requirements in 11th and 12th grade. This was noted particularly in the social studies curriculum and in the mathematics curriculum.

In math, students at this particular high school had to be successful in Algebra by 10th grade, to ensure that they would follow the scope and sequence and complete Algebra 2 by the completion of their senior year. The worry about passing Algebra 2 before they could graduate was also articulated by the students. Teachers felt that, for some students, the expectation that all students would be successful in Algebra 2 by the time of graduation was simply not reasonable. Teachers mentioned that the social studies curriculum shifted to get a full year of the increase in requirements completed in a student’s 9th grade year. Students took World Studies curriculum in their 9th grade year, which was a very challenging course, as expressed by staff.

The final part of the research question, centering on how teachers believed students were responding, provided a quite positive perception of how the students at this
high school were meeting these requirements. “Students respond much better to change than most of the adults who make these decisions,” commented one staff member. Some staff members remarked that most students would be fine with these requirements as students would find ways to work the through any challenges. It was interesting that several staff suggested the students really didn’t know any difference with these new requirements. Once the transition was complete, students realized they had a new set of requirements and they learned how to adapt. One staff member commented, “When we raise the bar, they still find ways to make it happen.”

**Research Question 3**

*How do parents describe the way students are responding to the increase in graduation requirements?*

Parents have a unique perspective in their understanding of how their students deal with the increase in requirements. Most of the information that parents receive is directly from the mouths of their students. If more information is needed, they have found it on the Internet, in the local media (newspaper), or from direct mailings from the school. As students were transitioning through the increase in graduation requirements, parents received feedback on how things were going directly from their son or daughter. The feedback from the students that the parents shared was similar to what the students shared in the interviews. The focus groups in which parents participated provided some insight on how they felt their students were responding to the increased graduation requirements. The four subquestions of this research question guided further examination:
a. How do parents describe the way their son/daughter is addressing post-secondary plans in response to the new requirements?

b. How do parents describe the way their son/daughter is involved in curriculum reform at the local district level?

c. What issues do parents describe as impacting their child as a result of the change in high school graduation requirements?

d. How do parents believe students are responding to those issues?

The first part of this research question was intended to help describe the way parents felt their child was addressing postsecondary plans in response to the increase in requirements. Most parents believed their son or daughter did not foresee making any changes to their plans after high school. One parent was pleased to hear from her daughter that the increase in requirements prompted her daughter to be more positive about what options she would have after high school. “While a 4-year institution was not in her plans, I think she might be able to do it now.”

Some parents believed the increase in requirements allowed their son or daughter to have more impressive high school transcripts, which would help them be admitted to higher-level college courses, or even more competitive schools. Others mentioned that, because of the move to trimesters, the graduation requirement increases provided their son or daughter with a more well-rounded education and an opportunity to be better prepared for life after high school.

Generally, parents had the same perceptions or how students were involved in curriculum reform at this particular high school. Along the same lines as the student and staff perceptions, parents also believed students did not play a role in this reform.
Contrary to what staff expressed, parents were also not aware of any conversations or input solicited from students in transitioning to trimesters, or any involvement in the scope and sequence of certain curriculum areas. One parent did remember the student receiving a survey on what elective classes he or she would like to see offered as the school transitioned to trimesters. That may have been limited involvement, but it did allow students to give some input into what electives could be offered for everyone.

Parents discussed several issues that impacted their child as a result of this increase in requirements. One overarching theme concerned parents—that the expectations for some students were unreasonable. They voiced apprehension that some kids would not make it, and it might push them to a point of dropping out of school or not graduating on time. The pressure that the increased graduation requirements put on students could be overwhelming. The concern for some of the special education students also was voiced by parents, as not all students learn the same way. Other discussion centered on the expectations associated with the mathematics requirement. While parents did not specifically discuss the level of math, the amount of math was of concern. Not all students could make it through 4 years of math, and not all of them planned on using upper-level math once they had graduated from high school.

Finally, parent feedback provided some insight as to how their students were responding to some of these issues. Generally speaking, parents perceived their students responded positively to the increase in requirements. They also noted that the transition to trimesters went well for most students. Some parents believed their students had to make some slight adjustments to the high school planning, but they were working closely
with counselors and administrators to make those modifications. Some students had to test out of certain classes or waive requirements in order to make their schedule work.

More than one parent believed that, because their children attended a large high school, it could offer more classes than other schools could. Some smaller schools could not offer multiple sections of classes, thus limiting student opportunities. Parents expressed the belief that the number of elective classes offered at their high school allowed their children to take a wide variety of classes. Parents also mentioned that the large school was able to offer more high-end or AP classes that enabled students to be better prepared for college.

**Revisit the Purpose of the Study**

To close this chapter on the data review, a re-examination of the purpose of this study is discussed. As discussed in Chapter I, the purpose of the study was to examine how students were experiencing and responding to Michigan’s increased graduation requirements. This analysis was intended to shed some light on whether the mandate of a set of state-required high school graduation credits played a significant role in how students understood, experienced, and responded to their high school academic experience.

Additionally, this study was designed to seek out important clues as to whether students understood the reasons for the curriculum changes and whether this understanding translated to the motivation to succeed with more rigorous curriculum expectations. Finally, this study looked for insights into how students could be tapped as important partners in achieving the goals of Michigan’s high school reform initiative within their schools. An additional component of the purpose, which will be addressed in
Chapter V, was to look for insights into how students could be tapped as partners in achieving the goals of school reform in general.

Students who participated in this study, along with their teachers and parents, responded quite well to the transition to the new high school graduation requirements. Their experiences, while quite dynamic, all centered on learning how to make adjustments during their high school time to better equip them for life after high school. The roadblocks that may have been perceived as unsurmountable were turning out to be more like speed bumps as the students pursued graduation. Students learned how to adjust their high school planning to maintain their postsecondary goals, while meeting the new graduation requirements. When a set of criteria was put in place at the time Governor Granholm signed the new Michigan Merit Curriculum, students adjusted quite well to the new expectations. Over time, students entering high school in the future will no longer consider these requirements as “new.”

Some students responded differently to the adjustment to the new state requirements. The majority of students were already on track to meet the new requirements without making major adjustments to their schedules. The transition from the old requirements to the new requirements forced some students to work closer with their high school guidance counselors and other school personnel to meet the new requirements. Some students did not look forward to taking 4 years of mathematics, and others were not prepared to reach Algebra 2 by their senior year. Students had to pay very close attention to the high school courses they “wanted” to take and the high school courses they “had” to take. The need to review the 4-year planning process for students was now more important than ever, starting before they entered high school.
The students interviewed for this study, along with their parents, had limited understanding of why curriculum changes were actually made in our public schools. The general feeling was that the people making these decisions had a limited understanding of what actually takes place in a high school, but have political agendas that support changes. While some argued for the desire to have a better educated workforce, or a more well-rounded education, other students were less certain that this change was made to actually help kids. Students understood that their role in curriculum changes like this had been very limited. They were more attuned to understanding the role once the changes had been made, and how they play an important role in the success of reform efforts once changes have been put into action. They also had a deeper understanding that the world is evolving and there needs to be change in education to support what is actually happening in the real world. Living in a global society is something current youth have been forced to adjust to. The workforce expectations and the increased competition for top-level jobs continue to be driven by the quality education provided to students.

It must be noted that the high school selected as the setting for this study was a high-performing high school with a student population that maintained academic performance levels well above state averages. Additionally, the high school did not have a significant population of students attending alternative or career and technical programs. Thus, the findings from this study are likely to be most transferable to high schools of similar student and community demographics.
Chapter IV Summary

Four major themes emerged from the study, and those themes work together to shape an overall picture of how the participants view the impact of major curriculum change for students in this high school as follows: (1) Despite limited or nonexistent involvement of students in the high school graduation requirement curriculum reform, (2) and parents, students, and staff expressing concerns that completion of rigorous high school graduation requirements may not be attainable for all students, (3) the high school that served as the site for this study found ways to alter the student schedule via creative approaches offering flexibility for meeting the new graduation requirements, and, overall, (4) students were adjusting and doing quite well with the new, more rigorous set of requirements. Study participants identified these key points as further discussion points as to how schools can move forward to better prepare all students to succeed with the new Michigan Merit Curriculum. The experiences of students and their parents, as well as staff members, provided insight about how this level of curriculum reform might continue to evolve, and what role students might play in that evolution.

The lack of involvement of students, much less their parents or other staff members at an educational facility, is consistent with past curriculum reform efforts. Entire educational systems have been devised and retooled to circumvent those who must implement and live those reforms (Houston, 2002). Defining one set of criteria for all students to reach in order complete high school could be unrealistic, according to the students, parents, and staff who participated in this study. Certain courses, such as mathematics, caused more of a concern with students, their parents, and the staff who must guide students through the curriculum requirements. Participants in this study
raised the question, “If all students are required to take upper-level courses, will some begin to look for the road less weary?”

One of the dominant themes in this study, the third major finding, does not align with previous research—that altering the student schedule did offer some creative approaches to provide flexibility to meet the graduation requirements. The transition to a trimester schedule by the high school featured in this case study provided flexibility and a sense of hope for students who had concerns about meeting the new requirements. Students, parents, and teachers all expressed an understanding that students are finding ways to matriculate through more rigorous graduation requirements and are finding ways to minimize issues that arise as they do so. The findings from this study can open and inform a discussion concerning the impact students can have on curriculum reform, which is presented in Chapter V.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study will be recapped in this chapter, followed by an examination of the three research questions presented in Chapter I and how they relate to the results. Implications of findings, suggestions for practice, limitations, recommendations for further research, and conclusions are also provided in this chapter.

Overall, this research studied how students were experiencing the increase in high school graduation requirements. The overall research goal was to examine how students were responding to these requirements and what role they played in this high school redesign. A case study approach was implemented to understand this real-life phenomenon in-depth within a bounded case. This research was conducted to understand the lived experiences of students from one high school, as they described how they responded to the increase in Michigan’s graduation requirements.

The school used in this case study is a large, high-performing school with roughly 600 students in the graduating class. The school examined in the study had implemented the new graduation requirements, as well as a shift from a semester scheduling process to a trimester schedule. In a semester schedule, students take six classes in each of the two semesters, resulting in a total of 12 classes completed. A trimester schedule allows students to take five classes each of the three trimesters, which results in 15 classes completed. In this fashion, a trimester system opens up more class scheduling slots for students to fill in a four-year plan of studies.
In this study, a series of student interviews was conducted with a selected group of students based on required criteria. Using class rank, as indicated in Chapter III, 10 students were chosen randomly from the top 100, and 6 students were chosen from the bottom 100 of the student population. Following the student interviews, the participating students’ parents were involved in a focus group to discuss thoughts and perceptions regarding how their students were experiencing the new graduation requirements. Fourteen staff members were chosen randomly from the high school to be involved in a focus group centering on how the staff felt students in this high school were dealing with the increased graduation requirements.

Several underlying theories surfaced throughout the analysis of the data obtained with these interviews and focus groups. A summary of the major findings will be presented in this chapter, as well as how these findings reinforce, deepen, or contrast with the literature. Implications of these findings, as well as recommendations, will be provided before the final conclusion.

Four major themes emerged from the study:

1. There was limited or nonexistent involvement of students in the high school graduation requirement curriculum reform.

2. Concerns were expressed by parents, students, and staff that completion of rigorous high school graduation requirements may not be attainable for all students.

3. The high school that served as the site for this study found ways to alter the student schedule via creative approaches, which provided flexibility for meeting the new graduation requirements.
4. Overall, students were adjusting and doing quite well with the new, more rigorous set of requirements. These four themes suggest a general pattern of adjustment by students, staff, and parents to the new high school requirements, facilitated by proactive measures by the study high school to maintain some level of curriculum flexibility for students through the trimester schedule. While all three groups of participants (students, parents, and staff) expressed concern over the increase in graduation requirements, and especially the increase in math requirements to include Algebra 2, none of the study participants personalized this concern to themselves or their children. In addition to the four major themes, this study also showed some ambivalence among students, staff, and parents on the best way to include students in curriculum or other school reform, although they generally agreed that (a) students are an important voice; and (b) involving students, even if it is only after they leave the high school program, is preferable to leaving them out altogether.

**Review of Research Questions**

**Research Question 1**

The initial research question focused on how students are experiencing and responding to (or dealing with) the increase in graduation requirements. This first question contained several components regarding how students described ways they were responding to Michigan’s new graduation requirements. Specifically, the intent was to see how students were making sense of the new requirements in connection with both their experience in the high school program and their postsecondary plans. Then, this study took a closer look at how students described the way they were experiencing change as a result of their school implementing these new requirements. Finally, this
study shifted focus to examine how students described the ways they were involved in this curriculum reform process and how they might be involved in future reform or change processes.

Of the 16 individuals who participated in the study, 12 responded that they were in a college prep track in high school and this increase in requirements would not affect their postsecondary plans. Thirteen of the students noted that the change in graduation requirements could change their postsecondary plans, while three of them said it helped them to some degree. Most students expressed that they were going to take these types of classes anyway and the increased requirements did not change their goals for after high school. One student did note that she was not planning to go to college after high school, but now she felt prepared for college and felt like she “can now make it.”

Students found ways to work within the requirements and still include the classes they wanted to take. While some students worked with their counselors and other school staff to do some creative scheduling, others found a way to meet the requirements within the confines of the current structure. Some experienced change in a positive fashion, others had negative perceptions of these new requirements, but most students were unfazed by the shift in requirements.

Regarding if and how students saw themselves as involved in this curriculum reform, the participants confirmed that they had limited or no involvement at all. Students continually feel left out of any process of educational reform, but expressed that the outcome of these reforms greatly affected them. Students at the high school level are more in tune than may be expected with the educational process and the curriculum expectations that those adults around them set forth. Most students in this study felt that
they would like to be involved at a deeper level when schools are dealing with curriculum reform, but some did note that there is a fine line between what type of students could be used as a partner in this endeavor. Not all students are prepared to provide meaningful feedback in curriculum reform efforts.

The general findings regarding how students described the ways the change has impacted them centers around the need to take elective courses they may not have wanted to take, or being required to take upper-level classes that they do not desire, see a need for, or feel ready to tackle. Some students were concerned for their own ability to complete Algebra 2, while others expressed a concern for other classmates who may not be able to meet that requirement. The worry that some students will not complete Algebra 2 is consistent with the views of Shanker (1984), as students will be less likely to take more difficult classes if not required to do so. Students in all subgroups of the population interviewed expressed a concern that there really is no model of a one-size-fits-all for students. Students responded to these issues in a similar way to how they have responded in the past, by not having much of a voice and working within the confines of the requirements set forth for them.

**Research Question 2**

In a review of the second research question, the focus was on how teachers described the ways students are responding to the increase in graduation requirements. Specifically, three areas were addressed in this research question. The data collected were used to gain insight into how teachers described the ways students are involved in curriculum reform at the local district level, the ways students are impacted by the
changing high school graduation requirements, and, finally, how teachers believe students are responding to those issues.

Teachers collectively described the lack of student involvement in curriculum reform at a local district level or at the state level. The consensus among the staff focus group was that students are less likely to be advocates for change. While the participants involved in the study believe students can provide quality opinions on curriculum reform, once it has been implemented, their involvement in the initial phases is less likely to be useful. Staff involved in the study suggested more meaningful involvement could come from graduated students, possibly 5 years after they have left high school.

Also noted in the data collection is the lack of involvement of students in any formal change that takes place in a secondary setting. Students are less likely to be involved in any kind of reform efforts, or even involved with scope and sequence, textbook selection, or other particulars of the high school. Staff did note that student involvement is apparent when there is a desire to increase elective opportunities for students. Most student involvement in curriculum reform efforts are noticed at the basic level, such as broad surveys of student interest.

The underlying issue that teachers described as impactful to students as a result of the changing high school graduation requirements relates to the rigor and relevance of the course expectations. The expectation that all students will be able to pass upper-level classes was identified by teachers as questionable, just as it was by the students who participated in this study. Of the concerns expressed, expecting all students to pass Algebra 2 by the time they graduate was viewed as a lofty goal. Students who have met the Algebra 2 requirement prior to their senior year still have to take a math-related class
in that final year of high school. That could be problematic in schools that do not have expanded math curriculum offerings. Raising the bar for students is causing a wider gap between those that can do it and those who cannot, either because of the school’s capacity or the student’s readiness to move at the pace and work at the depth that is required. For students who are generally top-end students, the increase in requirements is less obtrusive. For those students who have special learning needs, the change can present a daunting challenge.

The staff participants involved in this study believe that most students are responding quite well to the barriers that could be in front of them. Their understanding is that students are being expected to make adjustments in their schedule, and with the support of the counseling department and other staff around them, they are making the adjustments quite regularly. The transition this particular high school made to a trimester schedule allows students the flexibility they need to meet the requirements in a timely manner, while maintaining the option to pursue advance levels of study and a diverse curricular experience at the same time. Staff also understands they play an integral role in supporting students in this endeavor.

**Research Question 3**

The third research question was created to investigate how parents describe the way their students are responding to the increasing graduation requirements. Specifically, the findings from the data illustrated how parents described the way their son or daughter was altering either their high school course schedules or their postsecondary plans in response to the new requirements, and how parents described the way their son or daughter was involved in curriculum reform at the local district level.
Also, the parent focus group data illuminated issues that parents suggested as impacting their children as a result of the changing high school graduation requirements and described how parents believe their student is responding to those issues.

The parent participants in this study did not see a large shift in what their son or daughter was planning to do after high school based on the increase in graduation requirements. The high expectations set for their child simply supports what their expectations are at home. Some expressed that the increase in requirements is allowing their son or daughter to have a more well-rounded education. Students who already planned to go to college after high school are probably still going, and each new requirement just supports those efforts. Moreover, the findings from this study suggest that some students who were not planning on going to college may feel there is now an opportunity to attend a 2- or 4-year institution based on a deeper and stronger high school curriculum.

The involvement of students in curriculum reform efforts at the local district was not evident in the data collected throughout the study. The limited involvement that students had was more relevant in how the school actually responded to the increasing requirements. Parents noted that when this particular high school transitioned to a trimester schedule, student involvement was noticeable to a limited degree. With the increase in elective opportunities, student input was used somewhat so school officials could provide relevant elective opportunities.

The general perception that parents are recognizing issues that are impacting their son or daughter, as a result of changing high school graduation requirements, centers around two areas. Parents described one issue that has developed for their child—the
limited number of options that students now have in a high school with a traditional semester schedule. With the increasing requirements, students in smaller schools or schools with more limited means and less flexibility in their schedule have fewer elective options to pursue curriculum areas in high school that they would like to take.

The other general consensus of the parents focused on the general perception that the dramatic increase in graduation requirements may be putting too much pressure on kids and, thus, pushing some kids away from actual graduation. While the parent participants in the study did not specifically raise concerns about their own son or daughter, the concern for other students, or students with certain characteristics, was expressed, along with a concern for how the increased pressures on some students might raise the number of students who drop out of their high school education.

Parents described ways in which their students were responding to these issues in a quite positive light. The general consensus of the parent participants was that, as the requirements were put into action, the school district made modifications to schedule in attempts to diminish some of the concerns that could arise. The transition to trimesters provided the means for students to gain some flexibility in their high school scheduling to meet the change in graduation requirements. While parents were less likely to see the impact themselves, their son or daughter was experiencing this curriculum change in a more positive light based on the school’s willingness to make adjustments to the master schedule.

**How Findings Add to the Literature**

The data obtained in this study parallel and support previous literature surrounding curriculum reform. Curriculum reform has been around for hundreds of
years and the ideals behind this reform are reinforced by previous literature. Somewhat of a contrast to previous studies (Fuhrman, 1994), the requirement to increase some specific curriculum areas, such as science, was not mentioned by students, staff, or parents. This, along with other areas of the literature, will be provided later in this chapter to deepen the understanding of this curriculum reform. This study will provide a deeper look at the related literature in respect to why this reform happened, the roles that different participants play, and the impact of the actual increase in requirements and how it will influence the involvement of students in future reform.

Increasing graduation requirements is another example of curriculum reform intended to increase academic rigor. Similar to reforms of the 1980s, the main intent of this policy change at the state level was to make more students complete more challenging subjects prior to graduation (Clune & White, 1992). As this study unfolded, the data showed that students, their parents, and their educators perceived that this requirement was intended to increase the number of students who are prepared for postsecondary education and to increase the percentage of students who can become superior contributors to the workforce of the future (Landauer-Menchik, 2006). There were some perceptions that contribute to a deeper understanding of this type of curriculum reform.

While several may argue that the Michigan Merit High School Curriculum initiative was put in place only to prepare kids for college, perceptions of students and parents collected and analyzed in this study provided an insight that both expected that students would be better prepared for any postsecondary plans they had. Whether students are going into the workforce or setting their sights on a 2- or 4-year college
program, the findings from this study show that both parents and students expect increasing requirements will provide students with a more well-rounded education.

The findings from this study suggested that the involvement of counselors played an important role in supporting the students as they transitioned to the new requirements. Parents, as well as students, noted the information that they received about the increasing requirements primarily came from the counseling department. Previous research suggests that principals play a critical role in this type of reform, as they impact all aspects of school policy (Good, 2008).

Behind the scenes, the school principal may have played an important role, but in the interviews and focus group conversations with parents and students in this study, the principal did not emerge as a key player in communicating and assisting with students’ adaptation to the new high school graduation requirements. This finding suggests that the effectiveness of the school counselor may be a key factor in how students are informed, guided, and supported in the right direction to adapt well to high school curriculum reform, and/or receive the greatest benefit from that reform.

The question remains as to whether this particular reform will withstand the test of time. The participants in the study clearly expressed a change in policy was decided at the state level, limiting the local control of their school community. Without the involvement of parents, changes within a school building could have been met with resistance (Sexton, 2000).

In contrast to previous literature, the involvement of teachers in this reform policy could greatly impact the success or failure of this initiative. This reform process did not follow the recommendations of Fullan (2001), suggesting policymakers must enroll
teachers in this process to help sustain the accountability that takes place in the classroom. The need for teacher involvement in curriculum reform can often be met with the desire of teachers to not have any interest in major policy decisions (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). The staff participants in the study expressed their lack of involvement in this reform. They also expressed the importance of involving both parents and staff; however, previous research suggested that teachers traditionally are not terribly disappointed about not being involved in major curriculum reform efforts at the policy level (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). Their interest is primarily how the reforms will impact their classroom and what they need to do at the local level.

Students can have a great deal of influence on curriculum reform (Thiessen, 2006). However, the students, staff, and parents involved in this study did not perceive the students as having any significant role in either shaping the high school graduation requirement changes or influencing how their school would respond to those changes, other than to provide a few survey responses regarding elective curriculum preferences. Thus, this study shows that student involvement in this high school regarding the increasing graduation requirements was limited, if it existed at all. Policymakers seldom see students as potential beneficiaries in any change process (Thiessen, 2006). We do know that students provide a unique perspective on learning and what happens in the classroom (Cook-Sather, 2006), but there continues to be disregard for involving them in the change process. Students can provide insight on quality learning and creative approaches to reform efforts, and policymakers need to appreciate what students can offer (Thiessen, 2006).
Students, and their parents, were explicit in their concern that the mathematics requirement could be an obstacle for many students. The requirement of taking Algebra 2 prior to graduation was voiced by all levels of students, their parents, and staff members that were not specifically impacted by the math curriculum. While it is noted in the literature that students who are not required to take difficult subjects most likely will not do so (Shanker, 1984), the participants in this study remained concerned about how ready all students are to achieve the success needed to fulfill this particular requirement.

This specific concern about Algebra 2 overrode a general consensus among all three participant groups that encouraging students to complete a more rigorous course of study is, in general, a positive thing.

The concern over taking additional science classes and completing a foreign language requirement was not raised by participants in the study. The rigor of the science curriculum has certainly increased by requiring all students to take either Chemistry or Physics prior to graduation. However, study participants never mentioned their concern regarding this requirement. Possible reasons why this was not addressed, and why the increase in the foreign language requirement had a limited voice, will be addressed later in this chapter.

All three groups of study participants concurred that the transition to a trimester system that this particular high school made in response to the increasing graduation requirements allowed students greater flexibility in their scheduling and more options for completing either advanced courses or elective courses, in spite of the expansion of core curriculum requirements. The movement from a semester schedule to a trimester format
offers students additional classes that will help them meet the requirements, as well as give them some elective opportunities that they may desire.

The staff involved in the study made it very clear that they were not involved in any decision making about the graduation increase at any level. They did feel slightly involved, as the students did, in the decision to transition to trimesters. If it were not for this transition, students may have been denied some educational opportunities as a result of these increasing requirements. Policymakers are not always aware of the end product at the classroom level when these decisions are made. This policy, similar to other policies in the past, should be developed to ensure that students are not denied educational opportunities or benefits of the classroom (Riley & Cantú, 2000).

**Implications of Findings**

The following is a closer look at the findings of this study against the overarching purpose for the study, i.e., gaining insight regarding how students can be tapped as important partners in achieving the goals of Michigan’s high school reform initiative within their schools. This was the final component of the purpose statement stated in Chapter I. While local districts and state officials are less likely to intentionally plan for and obtain student input, students continue to be a valuable source of insight on all school initiatives. As referenced in the literature review (Fullan, 2005), to instill long-lasting change in an organization, valuing input from all parties is imperative.

All students can assume some sense of ownership in their education and feel they can contribute to the political process that is needed to make a substantial curriculum change, such as this increase in graduation requirements. As mentioned by students in the findings from this study, not all students are at a level of knowledge or maturity
where they can be as much of a contributor as they may think. The findings from this study would suggest some level of caution to match the degree and type of input solicited from students to the capacity of those students to provide that input in an informed and constructive fashion. For instance, older, postgraduate students who have moved into the next phase of their lives after high school may be able to provide a qualitatively different type of input than those students still enrolled and impacted by the school program on a day-to-day basis.

Students can be tapped as a reliable resource for major curriculum initiatives by simply seeking input. We have multiple ways in which both outside and inside constituents, such as students, can be involved in the school improvement process. We continue to seek input from parent organizations, school administrators, and the general public (such as business leaders). School districts, in the past, have learned how to build their strategic planning model around input from key stakeholders. The perceptions that students have in the classroom can be instrumental in the development and restructuring of what that classroom could look like in the future. How districts learn to develop the relationship with the student population, and begin to utilize them as a partner in curriculum transformation, could strengthen the sustainability of any curriculum reform initiative.

**Suggestions for Practice**

There are a few avenues with which districts can begin to build or strengthen that relationship with the student voice. First and foremost, districts can start to ask more questions of their general student population. A basic way to gain feedback from students is to develop surveys throughout the school year that describe how they are
experiencing different district initiatives. Understanding that surveying students a few years after they have graduated from high school could also provide valuable feedback, the data collected throughout the school year could help define how reform efforts are currently moving forward. With the use of electronic data collection tools, gaining feedback from students is becoming easier and easier every year. The access to technology from outside of the school environment also allows for schools to gain a pulse of the student perception throughout the course of the school year. At the district level, this is very manageable. The challenge remains how to gain thoughts and perceptions of students across the state level to better understand the general consensus of the student population. Whether this information is used to make drastic changes, or simply modifications during reform efforts, the feedback can be valuable.

Another process that schools could follow would be to form small groups of students that meet regularly to discuss instructional concerns. These get-togethers could be conducted to inspire consistent dialogue and gain regular feedback from students about their perceptions of changes. This could prove to be more of a challenge at an elementary or middle school setting, but certainly can be done at the high school level. With meetings once or twice a year, randomly selected groups of students could be tapped as a resource while having conversations and dialogue that could allow for a deeper understanding of what students are actually experiencing in the classroom. As adults, we believe we have a great understanding of what actually happens on a day-to-day basis. Actually spending time with students and understanding what they are experiencing can prove to be valuable to either confirm or modify our understandings.
Suggestions for Further Research

As this study was conducted, three concepts surfaced that could provide valuable insight about how curriculum reforms can be sustainable in the future. First, researchers need a better understanding why certain curriculum areas are identified as a concern and others are not. Secondly, we need to conduct further research on how the master schedule might play a role in successful curriculum reforms within districts. Finally, a study on the impact that the Algebra 2 requirement is having on student success with this reform, and how this could provide insight into how alterations to any reform could be successful in the future would be a useful area to investigate.

Initially, this study provided feedback on the concerns students, staff, and parents had with the new increased requirements. The increase in requirements provided conflicts for students—some that were perceived and others that were a personal reality. To better understand why some curriculum reform efforts are successful, a deeper understanding of why there was a concern with the math requirement could be of value.

While the math requirement caused some anxiety, there was no mention of the increase in requirements in the sciences and social studies, or the addition of a foreign language requirement. Students are now required to take either physics or chemistry prior to graduation, and this was not mentioned by students, staff, or parents in their interviews or focus groups. A future study could take a closer look at the student flexibility in having a choice of physics or chemistry, which may have lowered the anxiety reflected in student, staff, and parent perceptions regarding the increase in graduation requirements.
A continuation of that theme could guide a similar further investigation into how students are responding to the increase in graduation requirements in the social studies curriculum as well. Before the mandated Michigan Merit Curriculum was enacted, this particular discipline had a great deal of flexibility and has been able to retain some of that flexibility as laid out in the new state requirements. We see the same flexibility in the addition of 2 years of foreign language that was instituted with the graduation class of 2016. The math requirement specifically laid out what level students must attain prior to graduation, unlike any of the other curriculum areas. Future studies could investigate the value of flexibility in curriculum reform efforts, which could allow for sustainability of those efforts.

Another opportunity for future research would be to analyze the multiple scheduling opportunities districts use in a high school setting and examine how those scheduling formats work with expanded high school graduation requirements, such as those spelled out by the Michigan Merit Curriculum. There are several formats that schools use throughout the country, and they all have advantages and disadvantages. This particular high school chose to alter their high school schedule from a semester format to a trimester format. Some schools around the state also made changes to their schedule as these reform efforts were being put into place.

What type of scheduling could provide the optimum learning environment for students, while allowing districts to be financially sustainable? Districts have found ways to incorporate the new requirements in a semester schedule, some with a 6-hour day and others with a 7-hour day for students. There continue to be districts that use block scheduling, and a variation of a semester schedule that allows for student attainment of
the new requirements. Future research could review the academic impact that the scheduling process has throughout curriculum reforms, specifically when there is an increase in the credits students need to graduate.

Finally, future work could be done to understand the impact that the Algebra 2 requirement has on the student population in Michigan and other states that set their math requirements in this fashion. A better understanding of how this level of math impacts post high school performance could shed some light on the importance of attainment of that level of mathematics prior to graduation. This would also be an opportunity to pursue the issue of stress on students brought about by the new graduation requirements and students’ ability to meet those new requirements. The general perception expressed in this study highlighted a concern that students would have a difficult time meeting this requirement. A deeper appreciation of how the challenges of mathematics create unforeseen stress on students could help educators and policymakers implement new standards in the future.

**Overall Conclusions**

The opportunity I have had to better understand the perceptions students have regarding curriculum improvement efforts will continue to play an important role in my future educational restructuring endeavors. Reform efforts will continue to drive the educational process for years to come. Students continue to be active participants in a school setting, but more than just from a social standpoint. They can be tapped as a great resource and partner in academic endeavors. The school setting could look drastically different as we continue to look for new ways to enhance the academic programming for our student population. Students are learning more at a younger age, and the use of
technology will continue to drive reform efforts in the near future. We need to continue to look for ways to increase the student voice, seek students’ input, and understand that they can provide information that will be instrumental in the future of education. With input from students, we may be surprised at the amount of value-added knowledge that we can utilize to drive education forward for years to come.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A

Conceptual Framework
US schools have been charged with increasing student achievement levels (NCLB)

New Strategies are being used in schools to raise achievement levels (PD, Professional learning communities, RtI, etc.)

Legislation involvement in school reform has led to top-down reform initiative (Education YES)

Michigan has increased graduation requirements to push for higher achievement levels

Administrators and teachers play primary role in school reform

- Parents have small voice in school reform (drop-outs, elective opportunities, scheduling, etc.)
- Students remain uninvolved in school reform

Students can be a powerful voice in curriculum reform if involved in the process
Appendix B

Consent Form
I am invited to participate in a research project entitled Exploring Student Attitudes and Feelings towards Their Involvement in Curriculum Reform. This research is intended to examine how students are responding to increased graduation requirements and their involvement in curriculum restructuring.

I will be asked to participate in one open-ended in-depth interview that is approximately 30 to 40 minutes in length. As in all research, there may be some unforeseen risks to the participant. If an accidental injury occurs, appropriate emergency measures will be taken; however, no compensation or treatment will be made available to me. I may benefit from this study by learning about others’ feelings towards the impact of these mandates.

All information collected from me is confidential. This means that my name will not appear on any papers or tapes on which this information is collected or recorded. The tapes and forms will all be coded, and the student researcher will keep a separate master list with the names of participants and the corresponding code numbers. Once the data are collected and analyzed, the master list will be destroyed. Pseudonyms will be used for reporting purposes. All other forms will be retained for the duration of the project in a locked file in the student investigator’s home office. I may refuse to answer a question or to participate, and I may quit at any time during the study without prejudice or penalty. If I have any questions or concerns about this study, I may contact Patricia Reeves at Western Michigan University.

This project has been registered as a class project with the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.

My signature below indicates that I have read and/or had explained to me the purpose and requirements of the study and that I agree to participate.

_____________________________  ____________________
Signature                          Date

Consent obtained by: _______________   _______________
Appendix C

Student Interview Questions
Student Interview Questions

Describe the type of program you followed during high school?

How would you academically describe yourself as a student during high school?

What do you know about the current Michigan high school graduation requirements?
How do you know what you know?

How has the change in high school graduation requirements affected you?

What advantages do you see in this increase in requirements?

What disadvantages do you see in this increase in requirements?

Why do you think Michigan increased the high school graduation requirements?

How important is the change?
What does the change mean to you?

If you were going to change the high school curriculum:
What would you change?
How would you change it?
Who would you involve?

How were students involved in this change?
Should they be involved?
What might they contribute if involved?
Appendix D

Focus Group Discussion Guide
Focus Group Discussion Guide

(P) – asked only to parents
(T) – asked only to teachers

(P) Describe the type of program your son/daughter follows in high school.

(P) How would you academically describe your son/daughter as a student in high school?

(T) Describe the level of course you primarily teach in high school.

(T) How would you academically describe your students in the classroom?

What do you know about the new Michigan graduation requirements?
How do you know what you know?

How has the change in high school graduation requirements affected you?

What advantages do you see in this increase in requirements?

What disadvantages do you see in this increase in requirements?

Why do you think Michigan increased the high school graduation the requirements?
How important is the change?
What does the change mean for your student(s)?

If you were going to change the high school curriculum:
What would you change?
How would you change it?
Who would you involve?

How were students involved in this change?
Should they be involved?
What might they contribute if involved?
Appendix E

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board
Letter of Exemption
Date: April 12, 2011

To: Patricia Reeves, Principal Investigator
   Douglas VanderJagt, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: Approval not needed for HSIRB Project Number 11-04-04

This letter will serve as confirmation that your project “Student Thoughts and Perceptions on Curriculum Reform” has been reviewed by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB). Based on that review, the HSIRB has determined that approval is not required for you to conduct this project because research focuses on curriculum reform and are not collecting personal information about individuals. Thank you for your concerns about protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects.

A copy of your protocol and a copy of this letter will be maintained in the HSIRB files.