Mothers Who Choose Traditional Public Education in Times of Economic Stress, Criticism, and District Reform

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MOTHERS WHO CHOOSE TRADITIONAL PUBLIC EDUCATION IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC STRESS, CRITICISM, AND DISTRICT REFORM

by

Brian W. Davis

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership, Research and Technology Western Michigan University

May 2015

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MOTHERS WHO CHOOSE TRADITIONAL PUBLIC EDUCATION IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC STRESS, CRITICISM, AND DISTRICT REFORM

Brian W. Davis, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2015

As districts attempt to achieve higher accountability for student results while making complex decisions to balance budgets, it has become increasingly more common to restructure or reorganize educational delivery systems in ways that affect children and their families. Understanding how families and, in particular, mothers translate their experiences with structural and other changes enacted by the schools serving their children can assist in defining a new strategic direction of renewal, growth, and revitalization.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of 18 mothers, and their children, who were participants in multiple school reform initiatives in an urban school district. Using the lens of a social constructivist worldview, the focus of the study was on developing meaning to understand their views of public school choice within the historical and cultural contexts that operated within their district.

This study desired to understand the reasons why mothers chose public education for their children in the first place; the reasons for staying enrolled in a district K–12 during times of economic stress, public school criticism, and multiple restructuring initiatives; and how they described their overall personal experiences. In essence, why did they keep their children enrolled while others left the district; did they feel trapped in
the system without any choice; and if they had to do it all over again, would they enroll their children today in a traditional public school district?

Nine of the 18 participants did look at leaving the district at one time or another. Surprisingly, with all of the changes that occurred, and the experiences over a 10-year period of time, 15 of the 18 participants said that they would enroll a child in the district again if they had a kindergarten student today. The three mothers who did not, indicated that they would do more research today about school-of-choice options in comparison to what they did initially before making a final decision.
The completion of a dissertation is no small task. Not only does the individual require a strong sense of self, strategic goals, endurance, and time, he or she also needs a strong support system to keep focused and on task. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge those individuals who have supported me throughout this process. This work would still be an idea filed away in a cabinet in my home office if it were not for their help and support.

My parents have served as a tremendous support system throughout my educational and professional career. From the first trip to Central Michigan University to begin my undergraduate degree, to the final stages of setting aside long periods of time to complete my dissertation research, they have been a quiet but firm voice of steadiness, reason, and love. They have enjoyed the journey of watching me grow from a student, to a teacher, to a superintendent. We have shared a lot of discussion relative to public education and the foundation that it provides to our country and local communities. They have instilled in me a strong work ethic, integrity, task completion, perseverance, and relevance.

I am grateful to my dear friends Dr. Audrey and Dr. David Heining-Boynton. Two academic scholars themselves, they have taken me under their wing as they would their own child. They have fostered in me the sense of accomplishment and opportunity that the completion of something of this magnitude brings. Scholarly work is somewhat parallel to traveling around the world. As seekers of information, we are always looking
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I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues in the field who hold the title of superintendent. I hold so much respect for each one of them. The challenges that are faced each day by these amazing men and women and their advocacy for public education for ALL children is commendable. I continue to learn a great deal from each of them through their published work and accomplishments. Thank you for the honor of being named the 2011 MASA State Michigan Superintendent of the Year and for inspiring me to keep continuing on in my professional career and focus on continuous improvement for all of our public education students and staff.

To my administrative team at Holland Public Schools, thank you for your support during my time away from the district to finish this research. I could not have completed this without your support and leadership during my absence. Great leaders surround themselves with a great team to carry forward the vision. You are a great team. I am truly grateful to work with each one of you. We have accomplished significant things together and our work is just getting started.
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I am forever grateful for my academic advisor, Dr. Patricia Reeves, who provided me with hope, inspiration, accountability, mentoring in the role of superintendent, a strong sense of ethics and professionalism, and, above all else, a profound intellect of research and best practices. She is an exemplar of public education and instructional leadership. I am so fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with her during the coursework and research required to complete this dissertation. I also wish to recognize my other doctoral committee members: Dr. Dennis McCrumb and Dr. Janet Dalman. Dr. McCrumb has provided me with the practical essence of doing the work by understanding what really matters and setting a course for completion. His class on facilities in Sangren Hall provided the inspiration for me to take forward a $73 million bond proposal that was supported with great success, using many of the ideas I gleaned from our work together. Dr. Dalman has been a great colleague, mentor, and friend. Through her profound ability to listen, synthesize, and problem-solve, I have been able to make the most difficult decisions that will have positive lasting impact. Her knowledge of school improvement, curriculum development, and instructional pedagogy has assisted me greatly. My learning from these two individuals assisted in many of the reform efforts that took place during the reform efforts mentioned in this dissertation.

To the professional staff of Holland Public Schools, I am humbled by your service to public education. Your dedication and commitment to the youth in some of our most challenged schools in the state is respected and admired. Your perseverance through all of the district’s restructuring, despite public school criticism and accountability changes, was the glue that kept the district together. Thank you for your continued service.
Acknowledgments—Continued

I dedicate this dissertation to the Board of Education of Holland Public Schools and the class of 2014. The support that was provided to me for the completion of this research, which included time away from work in the form of a sabbatical, was critical to my success. I thank you for allowing me to serve the families of our community, to make difficult decisions with the resources available, and for allowing me to bring strategic reform initiatives to our district. It is my hope that the information found as a result of this research will be helpful to you and others that are charged with shaping public policy and instructional programs.

To the class of 2014, you are an amazing alumni class of Holland Public Schools. You have developed resiliency, adaptability, and perseverance as a result of living through all of the changes during your educational career. For those of you who never got to be the “top dog” of your school, I apologize. Nonetheless, I am confident that each of you will become “top dog” in your chosen professions, careers, and the communities where you live, work, and play. You have developed life skills beyond your academic potential that will serve you well.

Brian W. Davis
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION AND STUDY OVERVIEW

As the nation closed in on the anniversary date of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* and the need for all public schools to have 100% student proficiency, many educators, legislators, and members of the business community expressed frustration and concern that little progress had been made with past efforts to reform public education in the United States. Current national debate is pushing for academic reform. This is driven by overall poor performance on state and national assessments that identify achievement gaps within different populations across ethnic and socioeconomic groups. States have adopted common standards and assessment measures to address the achievement gaps. These efforts have been aligned with performance measures to evaluate teacher effectiveness in the classroom. At the same time, economic conditions have worsened, forcing district leaders to restructure their infrastructure and consolidate programs to meet deficits in school budgets. As parents assess the education options for their children under these conditions, there are many factors that go into their decision-making about what kind of school to attend and where.

 Debate continues on the perceived advantages and disadvantages of parental choice and the impact that it has on sending and receiving schools in communities. As public school districts align with economic and academic reform initiatives, understanding why mothers choose traditional public education for their children will be essential to those who shape public policy. It is even more important to understand why
parents persevere through these reform initiatives and keep their children enrolled in traditional public school systems when many are exercising choice options and leaving. Mothers are of specific interest to this research, given their current role and involvement in selecting schools, teachers, and the programs for their children. The engagement of mothers in the education of their children has had historical significance. As more mothers now engage in their own professional objectives, their involvement in the selection of schools for their children becomes of even greater significance as they balance their careers and their families’ needs, and respond to the relationships with other working mothers that once networked and volunteered in greater capacity in their schools.

Urban schools districts, like Holland Public Schools (HPS), continue to experience a cycle of change and restructuring efforts. The onset of this spiral begins with a decline in enrollment. This decline could be attributed to a variety of factors, but for the purposes of this research, the decline will be directly related to mothers exercising schools-of-choice options for their children. As families leave and abandon a district, revenues associated with each student also leave. Over time, the operational performance of the district becomes ineffective and district leaders must restructure or right size the system by closing programs and school buildings. These actions create a sense of financial stability for a short period of time before the impact of decline in enrollment and loss of revenue causes this cycle to continue again.

Running parallel to this economic state of affairs is often a spiral of lower student performance. This is often caused by changing demographics within the system and reductions in programs that are underfunded and necessary to address achievement gaps.
As choosers leave the district, this begins to impact the social, racial, and economic demographic makeup of the student population. This instability perpetuates a self-fulfilling prophecy of continued stereotyping, low expectations, and further segregation of students based upon ethnicity and socioeconomic class. Once a tipping point is reached, the downward spiral continues at an increasing tempo, making the changes needed for operational effectiveness more severe.

Gladwell (2000) described the phenomenon of a tipping point as “the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point” (p. 12). Gladwell went on to further assert that human behavior is sensitive to and strongly influenced by its environment. Applying this principle to public education, this power of context can greatly influence school choice and the decisions that mothers make on where to send their children to school.

As policy leaders, boards of education, superintendents, and community leaders in urban city centers address the societal impact of a tipping point, they will need to analyze how and why some families survive this urbanization of communities, neighborhoods, and schools while others do not. Understanding the experiences of families who stay in these neighborhoods and local schools and the impact of this change on their lives needs to be studied and understood to assist in defining a new strategic direction of renewal, growth, and revitalization of community. HPS, and the changes that have occurred over a time period of 1994–2011, exemplifies the cycles of change common to urban school settings and their perceived destiny for deterioration.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework used for this research presents the relationships among economics, public school criticism, and performance; restructuring efforts to reform
America’s schools; and school choice and the impact of change on communities and individuals that live within these communities. The Parental Choice Framework in Appendix A outlines the context, problem, outcome desired, and research questions that were used as part of this study. Mothers have multiple school choice options for their children. These schools may not necessarily be in their immediate neighborhood anymore. In fact, there are at least nine different reasons why mothers consider sending their children to different schools (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Factors driving the consideration for school choice. (Amour & Brett, 1998; Bainbridge & Sundre, 1991; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000; Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1996; Schneider, Marschall, Teske, & Roch, 1998; Schneider, Teske, & Marshall, 2000)

Each of these factors is meaningful in different ways to different mothers, and they can vary by context, education level, region, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES). A more detailed discussion of the factors associated with school choice is
presented in Chapter II and in Chapter V. Once decisions are made to exercise school choice or to stay within a school district, mothers can experience a broad range of feelings. Much like the factors associated with school choice decisions, these feelings are uniquely meaningful and impact individuals differently. The Interrelationship Among Economics, Criticism, Restructuring, Choice, and Change in Appendix B illustrates the inquiry related to this research study and the relationships among each of these factors. The conceptual framework discussion that follows will dive deeper into the conditions related to economic stress, public school criticism, the school choice movement, and the impact of change to individuals and systems.

**Economic Stress**

For Michigan’s public schools, it was a decade (2000–2010) of change and challenge. The economic, political, and demographic issues that leaders were facing in Michigan drove conversations not only at the policymaking table in board rooms, but also at the dining room table, as parents considered the best school options for their children. Economic stress driven by global restructuring and bankruptcy, the collapse of the domestic automobile industry, bank and home foreclosures, decline in property values, high unemployment rates, increased expenditures in legacy costs of health benefits and retirement, and increasing costs in energy were all impacting operational expenditures for school systems (Birkett, 2011; Crouse, 2011; DeBoer, 2011). Specifically in school finance, public school districts in Michigan were facing an economic crisis never before felt since the passage of Public Act 145. In 2002–2003, the state of Michigan spent $11.33 billion in the school aid fund. In 2007–2008, the state spent $11.42 billion—a difference of $90 million or about a 0.8% increase over a 5-year period of time. During
this same time period, the state spending increased by 9.2% and the Detroit Consumer Price Index rose by 11.9% (White, 2008). Local Education Agencies (LEAs) were asked to operate in 2011–2012 at the level of funding present in 2005. Economists predicted that the school aid fund would not be able to support public education through the 2011–2012 school year without significant reform in expenditures, revenues, programs/services, and consolidation of systems. As a result, LEAs were challenged to redefine the infrastructure that would support the operational expenditures required to deliver learning that would prepare all students to be competitive in a 21st century global learning community.

Public School Criticism

The Michigan Department of Education worked over the past several years to revitalize education in Michigan and stimulate economic growth and development with a plan to “reimagine” Michigan’s educational system to meet the needs and challenges of a “21st century global knowledge economy” (Flanagan, 2008). This reform included the adoption of the Grade Level Content Expectations for grades K–8, the Michigan Merit Curriculum for grades 9–12, college and career readiness standards, a transition to Common Core State Standards, and applications to federal dollars through the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act’s Race to the Top dollars. State Superintendent Mike Flanagan (2008) was quoted as saying, “We must set our goals high and challenge every student to surpass them. We have to get out of this old way of thinking and create a new normal.” Even President Barack Obama (2010) expressed in his inaugural address the need for change. “The ground has shifted beneath us . . . and we will transform our schools and colleges and universities to meet the demands of a new age.” Despite these
high ideals and goals, public education in the United States and Michigan continues to be held under a microscope of criticism. Student performance has not significantly increased in comparison to its international peers. Additionally, minority children and children from families of low socioeconomic status continue to perform at significantly lower levels compared to their White counterparts.

According to a study completed by Powell and Powell (2010), more than 13 million American children live in poverty. Over 30% of teenagers drop out of high school every year, including half of all minority and low-income students. In effect, an entire graduating class of students is lost every 3 years. Less than 70% of graduates reportedly do not possess the skills they need for college and career readiness. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009), if dropouts from the class of 2009 had graduated, they would have had an earning potential of $335 billion over the course of their lifetime. Consequently, dropouts earn considerably less than college graduates and rely more on state programs and social services for survival. Several state and national test results point to the poor performance of America’s public school children.

According to the 2007 National Assessment of Education Progress in reading, only 32% of entering high school freshman read proficiently. Whatever the causes may be, the nation, Michigan, and local LEAs like HPS can no longer afford to have one third or more of its students leaving high school without a diploma.

The School Choice Movement

In 2009, over 4,900 charter schools in 40 states served over 1.5 million students. When put in perspective, this was more than the number of students served in public schools in the entire state of Kansas. In 46 of the 50 states, some form of open
enrollment policy allows thousands of children to attend any public school with room to accept them. To assist in choice options, over 150,000 students participated in publicly funded voucher programs. To apply for a distribution of $4.35 billion in federal Race to the Top funds, some states had to change their policy with regard to school choice. Many states lifted caps on charter school development as a means to address school reform and failing schools (Stover, 2009).

As school choice policies become more common practice and gain greater political acceptance across the country, public school leaders are going to have to take a second and more serious look at their response to an increasingly competitive education marketplace. What may be happening across the nation is a strategic move by policymakers to force low-performing schools to respond with school reform efforts of improved services and increased proficiency in student achievement through competition among schools (Stover, 2009). While the final verdict is still out on the overall success of the charter school movement, one thing is certain, if policymakers are not careful, they might find that school choice will simply perpetuate the reality. Those with resources will continue to abandon low-performing schools, and those without resources and those already trapped in the system will remain there.

**The Impact of Change**

Economic stress, public school criticism, and poor academic performance all contributed to HPS finding itself with an urgent crisis to restructure, reinvent, and reform. This was needed to meet the challenges of a 21st century learning organization and to retain and attract families. Students and their families over the past 10 years had witnessed and participated in four different phases of school restructuring. Several new
grade-level infrastructures were implemented over four phases of school reorganization since the onset of school choice. Several new instructional initiatives were also inaugurated during the same time period. Some argue that there have been too many changes resulting in innovation fatigue and a lack of clarity and focus around a shared vision.

A variety of state reporting measures under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) identified schools in HPS as reward schools (schools that academically outperform their peer group with similar demographics) and/or focus schools (schools that have an achievement gap between the top 30% and bottom 30% of learners). These designations spotlighted areas of strength as well as areas of shortcomings. Achievement gaps between the highest and lowest performing students were noteworthy. In addition, the high school received state and national recognition for beating the odds for academic performance when compared to other high schools with similar demographics. The reform efforts associated with these designations produced continuous improvement and measurable results. Despite improvements over time, the school district remained as a net loss school-of-choice district.

**Focus of the Study**

In this section, a detailed description of the focus of the study is assembled. The purpose of this research was to understand the lived experiences of mothers who had children enrolled in an urban district that underwent several different reform and restructuring initiatives and the impact of this school change on their lives and those of their children. The Logic Waterfall included in Appendix C served as the basis for the identification of the problem, purpose, and identified gap in the research.
Problem

A growing number of scholars, governmental officials, and political commentators have concluded that the U.S. public school system is failing and that it can only stand to be corrected by fundamental changes in the institutions that govern education. For some, the theoretical rationale for reform of public education in the United States is that public schools are fundamentally deficient in comparison to the 21st century learning being applied and achieved in other developed or developing countries (Christensen, 2011). There are three arguments that are commonly held as to why the U.S. school system has failed: (a) there has been a steady decline in the performance of American students on standardized assessments, especially that of minority children; (b) American children perform worse in comparison to their international counterparts of developed/developing nations; and (c) the existing system fails to utilize the resources available and produce measurable continuous improvement (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The impact of available resources is of even greater concern during an era of increasing transparency and accountability reporting for measured student achievement and diminishing resources available to schools.

Chubb and Moe (1990) argued that “existing educational institutions cannot solve the problem, because they are the problem.” President Barack Obama, Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan, Governor Rick Snyder, and State Superintendent Michael Flanagan have all called for significant reform in public education and re-imagining how we do “school” in America and, more specifically, in Michigan (Duncan, 2009; Flanagan, 2008; Obama, 2009; Snyder, 2011). There has been a renewed interest in public school
academies and a call to action to provide all parents with increased choice and opportunity for their children to escape failing schools.

Running parallel to this academic crisis is an economic crisis that began with the 2008–2009 economic depression. Schools across the nation were faced with deficits not seen in decades, and a funding cliff was perceptually unavoidable in the following years, despite the billions of dollars that were infused into schools through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and the Race to the Top Initiatives of 2010 (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, n.d.). In Michigan, public schools faced an economic challenge that placed their funding for 2011 back at the funding levels of 2005. Escalating costs in retirement and health care benefits added to the financial burden. The shifting of school aid fund dollars to support higher education contributed to a growing deficit created by the elimination of the Michigan Business Tax (Bowerman, 2011).

A focus on economic development resonated across the country, and education was at the heart of this improvement effort. Market forces identified as competition, consumer choice, and economic development had the capacity to engender organizational change and, in turn, foster innovation and improvement (Wagner, 2008). In the new global educational marketplace marked by 21st century learning, quality schools that demonstrated performance would attract families, while schools that do not demonstrate performance would be forced to either improve or inevitably go out of business. As resources decline and the cost of doing business potentially increases, districts would be faced with the challenge of balancing their operational budgets by reduction of staff, elimination or consolidation of programs, and potential closing of schools. All of these
decisions have a negative impact on parents and where they elect to send their children to school.

Public schools in Michigan had to balance expenditures and revenues to meet the impending funding cliff for 2012–2013. This required strategic planning initiatives that redefined the infrastructure to support operational and instructional expenditures. The new infrastructure had to be transparent and accountable, and had to support the collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity required to prepare students for 21st century learning and competition within a global learning community (Wagner, 2008). Time, resources, and current conditions were critical data sets to define the infrastructure needed to support learning for all students. This required input from community stakeholders, specifically decision-making parental units.

As schools create a new infrastructure that redefines the overall operational efficiencies in program and seek to improve academic performance, decisions must be considered for the impact on parents in a highly choice and competitive marketplace. These actions must be transparent. The local media often exacerbates the decline in school districts and decisions made that may not be popular or held within the standards of expectations of commonly held beliefs. District leaders must be aware of the conditions created surrounding these decisions and the potential impact and experiences that parents and children will have in these new structures. As more parents, specifically those who have not been represented at the policymaking table, become more informed consumers of the perceived advantages and disadvantages of school choice, and better understand the marketplace malpractice that may be occurring, they will become a voice to be reckoned with. Choice redistributes authority for decision-making where it
belongs—in the hands of parents and students (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Lieberman, 1989). Fortunately, many parents are exercising their decision to stay in the traditional public school setting.

The continued downward spiral of decline in enrollment, loss of associated resources, abandonment from districts by other parents exercising school choice, the right sizing of districts to become more efficient, and often a continuation of this cycle over and over has created instability in urban schools. This instability perpetuates a self-fulfilling prophecy of continued stereotyping, low expectations, and further segregation of students based upon ethnicity and socioeconomic status. This study seeks to understand why mothers chose traditional public school for the educational needs of their children during these times of economic crisis, criticism, and district reform. We don’t know why some mothers chose to keep their children enrolled in traditional public schools when large numbers of parents do not and exercise other school of choice options.

**Purpose**

As district leaders define new program infrastructure and consolidation of programs and services to meet these challenges, attention must be given to address the reasons why mothers choose to send their children to traditional public schools in a highly choice and competitive marketplace.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of mothers, and the impact of change on themselves and their children, who were participants in four phases of school reform initiatives at HPS. This inquiry articulated the essence of impact in the mothers’ lived experiences when their children attended
multiple schools within HPS as part of large-scale restructuring and realignment of
district programs. I wanted to understand and capture the essence of how they interpreted
and articulated the impact of change on themselves and on their children. Using the lens
of a social constructivist world view, the focus was on developing meaning through the
lived experiences of these mothers as I sought to understand the participants’ view of
public school choice and the historical and cultural norms that operate in their individual
lives, including (a) the reasons why they selected a public school district in the first place;
(b) their reasons for staying during economic stress, public school criticism, and
restructuring; (c) how they described their personal experiences and those of their
children; and (d) the impact of change on their lives.

I applied basic assumptions to this work as it related to school choice. First, as a
result of the before-mentioned conditions, parental choice has become a focal point of
educational reform today because parents, community leaders, business leaders, school
officials, and state/national officials are all frustrated over the apparent failure of previous
school reform efforts. Second, the recent national and state interest of the current
administration in parental choice, transparency, and accountability for performance
reflects a growing frustration and influence of “business as unusual” in the educational
reform movement. Third, district leaders will continue to be faced with continued
economic stress, increased accountability for achievement, and increased transparency in
public policy. This has the potential to exacerbate the impact of the school choice
movement. Finally, parental choice has become a controversial topic with perceived
advantages and disadvantages of proponents and opponents who have differing agendas.
Rationale/Significance

The description of these experiences will assist in understanding why some mothers survive the urbanization of school districts and reform initiatives while others do not. This district under study, and the changes that occurred, exemplified the cycles of change common to urban school settings and their perceived destiny for implosion. Extracting these experiences will assist in shaping public policy regarding schools of choice and informing district leaders of the core values that mothers share and the expectations they have of public education for their children.

The intended audience for this study included local boards of education, district leaders, community leaders, and state officials. As policy leaders in urban city centers address the societal impact of urban school districts, they will need to analyze how and why some families survive the urbanization of communities, neighborhoods, and schools while others do not. They will need to understand why some families stay enrolled in their local school community while others exercise choice options. This will assist in defining a new strategic direction of renewal, growth, and revitalization of communities.

The study was significant for several different reasons:

1. It identified and analyzed the general reasons why parents, specifically mothers, chose traditional public schools as the first choice for their child’s education.

2. The core values of parental choice and expectations for underrepresented groups and the expectations that they have for their children in a 21st century learning community were brought to the forefront.
3. It described why parents stay in a traditional, urban public school district, even during times of economic stress, public school criticism, and district restructuring.

4. The textural, structural, and composite descriptions in the findings provide an essence of what these mothers, and their children, experienced and the level of impact on them.

5. The relationships between parent–student, parent–teacher, teacher–student, and parent-to-district administration during reform initiatives were highlighted.

6. The findings will assist school leaders in understanding the familial, academic, cultural, or economic factors that impact the ability and decision for parents to exercise school choice.

7. The findings will assist in establishing policies around school-of-choice options and the decisions related to redistricting neighborhoods and communities.

8. The lived experiences provide a framework for understanding the importance of defining a decision-making and communication process to involve the stakeholders in a community that needs to initiate change.

### Research Questions

Qualitative research employs a variety of types of methods and interview questions to gather information. Marshall and Rossman (2006) described four basic types of research questions as exploratory, descriptive, explanatory, and predictive that can all be used for the collection of information depending on the purpose of the study.
For the purpose of this phenomenology, the following central questions and subquestions were answered:

Central Question:
How do mothers of school-aged children who are enrolled in an urban district that has undergone several rounds of significant change experience, understand, and connect that change to their own lives and their decision to keep their children enrolled?

Subquestions:

1. How do mothers describe their experiences through each of the district’s four phases of school reorganization? (Exploratory/Descriptive)

2. How do mothers describe their child’s experience in the school district through each of the phases of school reorganization? (Exploratory/Descriptive)

3. What contexts or situations do mothers describe as having typically influenced or affected their experiences in the district over the course of the last 10 years and their decision to keep their children enrolled in the system? (Explanatory)

4. Why did mothers enroll their child in the district (public school) in the first place? (Explanatory/Descriptive)

5. How do mothers describe or explain their decision to maintain enrollment in this district for their children since kindergarten, and how do they feel about that decision? (Descriptive)
Methodology

The research design for this study was qualitative, using a transcendental phenomenological approach to inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). Ontological assumptions (Creswell, 2007) were the basis for philosophical implications of practice utilizing a social constructivism worldview (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Neuman, 2000; Schwandt, 2001). Ontological assumptions seek to define the nature of reality for the participants. In other words, reality was subjective and multiple, as there were 18 different participants in the study (Creswell, 2007). I sought to understand the level of awareness that the participants had during the restructuring initiatives and the connections that were made with the district as they made sense of what was happening to and in the schools around them. As a result, I used multiple quotations based on the actual words of different participants to provide evidence of different perspectives. In this study, the different perspectives came from mothers who represented different economic levels, ethnicities, and academic abilities of their child.

Using a social constructivism worldview, I relied as much as possible on the participant’s view of a defined situation. Meaning was formed through the interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operated in individual lives. Participants described their experiences after having shared a common lived experience of enrolling and staying enrolled in a traditional public school district over a 10-year period of district reform and restructuring. The individual experiences were reduced to a textural and structural description that resulted in a final “composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the participants” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). The descriptions consisted of “what” they experienced, “how” they experienced it, and “why”
they continue in the experience (p. 98). Marshall and Rossman (2006) described the importance of understanding these lived experiences. The value of this approach is to develop a worldview that rests on the assumption that there is a format and essence to shared experiences that can be narrated. It also focuses on the “deep, lived meanings that events have for individuals, assuming that these meanings guide actions and interactions” (p. 105). Through an interview process, I focused on the past and present experiences to describe the essential experience overall. The participants got to make meaning of the experience, interpret what was happening around and to themselves and their children, and describe the decision-making process that was used to keep their children enrolled in the district.

Definition of Terms

Holland Public Schools (HPS). The school system, defined as the setting for this phenomenology. HPS is an urban school district nestled in a suburban community. HPS is an LEA with an enrollment of 4,132 students at the time of this research. The demographics of the district are included in Figure 2 and Figure 3.
Figure 2. Ethnicity representation for Holland Public Schools. (Holland Public Schools, Spring 2011 Count, internal data)

Figure 3. Special program representation for Holland Public Schools. (Holland Public Schools, Spring 2011 Count, internal data)
**Intermediate school district (ISD).** A collection of LEAs as established under Part 7 of the Revised School Code. There were 57 ISDs in Michigan at the time of this research sharing these common characteristics: (a) has an elected school board, (b) receives state and federal school aid, (c) is required to submit an annual financial audit, and (d) includes multiple constituent local education agency (LEA) and public school academy (PSA) districts to which it provides direct support and instructional/program services (Educational Entity Master Definitions, 2008).

**Local education agency (LEA).** A school district as defined under MCL 380.6 and as organized under MCL 380.11a or under part 6 of the Revised School Code. There were 552 LEAs in Michigan at the time of this research sharing these common characteristics: (a) required to elect a local school board; (b) receives state aid based, for the most part, upon pupil membership; (c) required to submit an annual financial and pupil audit to the Michigan Department of Education; (d) required to pay teachers; (e) governed by a publicly elected school board that is responsible for educating pupils, assigning staff, good stewardship of funds, establishing curriculum, and all policies of the district; and (f) oversees second layer entities labeled as schools (Educational Entity Master Definitions, 2008).

**Magnet schools.** Magnet schools are public schools with specialized courses or curriculum drawing students from across the normal boundaries of a school district or from several districts in a regionalized format. These schools emerged in the 1960s as one way to address racial segregation in public schools. Magnet schools are found often in urban centers with a primary vision to eliminate, reduce, and prevent minority group isolation. This is accomplished through a strong curriculum of academic subject and
vocational skills sometimes with a specialty focus like math, science, or technology (Educational Entity Master Definitions, 2008).

**Michigan Department of Education (MDE).** The state agency responsible for all matters of education within the state of Michigan. It is overseen by a publicly elected state board of education and state superintendent appointed by the governor’s office (Educational Entity Master Definitions, 2008).

**Non-public school.** A non-public, private, denominational, or parochial school that does not meet the definition of a public school or public school academy and can include parents who home school their children (Educational Entity Master Definitions, 2008).

**Open enrollment.** The opportunity for students to enroll in any school within their LEA or ISD provided that there is space and availability for such enrollment (Educational Entity Master Definitions, 2008).

**Public Act 145.** In 1994, the voters of Michigan passed Public Act 145, which changed the funding of public schools in the state. The proposal promised a minimum per pupil foundation allowance to create more equity among local school districts, lower property taxes for homeowners on their primary residence, and increase school accountability. This foundation allowance was based upon the number of students that a district had enrolled during two different count dates (winter/fall) with the year preceding (10%) and the current fiscal year (90%) to determine the total state funding. This allowance, based upon enrollment, impacts the overall revenue for a district. As part of the adoption of this proposal, the sales tax rate was increased. State taxes, instead of local property taxes, provide funding to local school district operating costs. Publicly
chartered schools were included as a reform initiative, and the beginning of “schools of choice” in Michigan was born (Lockwood, 2002).

**Public school.** This is a school that serves as a government agency subject to constitutional law and provides instruction to students. It is operated primarily by a publicly funded educational entity (MDE, ISD, LEA, PSA). The school is overseen by an administrator (principal) who reports directly to the chief executive officer (superintendent). The results of instruction are communicated via a state-issued Michigan School Report Card for the determination of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The public school receives funding through the LEA from the federal and state government, as well as revenue from the school aid fund generated through property and local sales tax revenue under Proposal A. The policies and programs are often determined by a combination of the federal/state legislature, the state department of education, and the locally elected board of education (Educational Entity Master Definitions, 2008).

**Public school academy (PSA).** A PSA is a school that has been established under part 6a of Michigan’s Revised School Code. It is authorized by a university, public school, community college, or intermediate school district. The school board is determined by the chartering agency and is responsible for educating pupils, assigning staff, good stewardship of funds, and establishing curriculum. Revenue is generated primarily through the school aid fund based on pupil membership (Educational Entity Master Definitions, 2008).

**Reform.** Reforms generally change some procedure or rule that affects how a school operates (Newmann & Wehlage 1995).
**Restructure.** A significant impact to districts that may involve building closures, changes in grade levels that are served within a specific building, or consolidation of programs (Newmann & Wehlage 1995).

**State agency.** Michigan had 19 state departments in operation at the time of this research. These state departments are directly operated entities and provide educational services (Educational Entity Master Definitions, 2008). The Michigan Department of Education was the state agency for this research.

**Twenty-first century learning.** Twenty-first century learning includes an education paradigm that has curriculum outcomes with a focus on communication (oral and written), critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration (Wagner, 2008).

**White flight.** White flight is the phenomenon, departure, or abandonment from communities and school systems where White middle-class families flee neighborhoods as a result of urbanization and increasing diversity (Merriam-Webster, 2001).

**Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of mothers, and the impact of change on themselves and their children, who were participants in four phases of school reform initiatives at HPS. This inquiry articulated the essence of impact in the mothers’ lived experiences when their children attended multiple schools within HPS as part of large-scale restructuring and realignment of district programs. I wanted to understand and capture the essence of how they interpreted and articulated the impact of change on themselves and on their children. Extracting these experiences can assist in shaping public policy regarding schools of choice and
informing district leaders of the core values of mothers and the expectations they have for their children.

In Chapter II, I will provide a review of the literature with a focus on the economic recession and its impact on schools, performance data related to public school criticism as a driver to the restructuring reform agenda, examples of school reform and restructuring initiatives, priorities and characteristics of mothers who exercise school choice options, and the way in which individuals manage change.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this review was to address what the scholarly literature and others in the field had to say about the phenomenon being studied, then to fill in any voids that may be present and/or to bring a voice for individuals that may not be well represented. Barritt (1986) suggested the following:

The rationale for qualitative research and inquiry is not the discovery of new elements, as in natural scientific study, but rather the heightening of awareness for experience which has been forgotten and overlooked. By heightening awareness and creating dialogue, it is hoped research can lead to better understanding of the way things appear to someone else and through that insight lead to improvements in practice. (p. 20)

Using phenomenology as the research method for this study, it was my intent to present information to the readers so that they better understand the precipitating contexts that are driving restructuring efforts in urban school districts and the impact of change it is having on mothers who elect to keep their children enrolled in these systems.

Overview of Literature Review

The literature review follows an intentional presentation showing the interrelationships among the economic forces, public school criticism, and lack of performance variables that are driving restructuring efforts in public education in the United States today. The review begins with the economic driver, as it was my
contention that if schools continued to have all of the resources they once had, many would not be considering any reform initiatives at this time and would merely work to maintain the status quo. In addition, if performance were not as transparent as it had become, there would not be public school criticism and the push to shape public policy around the success of schools and accountability of the use of resources. The restructuring efforts, focused on high-stakes accountability for academic reform that is impacting school choice and the systems that parents decide to enroll their children for K–12 education, are then shared. Finally, the review concludes with a discussion on how individuals manage transitions and the impact that change has on one’s life. This creates a real lived experience as part of restructuring efforts. Figure 4 provides a representation of these interrelationships of driving forces. The reader will notice that the sections on economics and public school criticism in the literature summarize state and national reports that have been conducted with each topic respectively. Scholarly literature is introduced during the discussion of school reform efforts, school choice, and the impact that change has on individuals.

Let’s begin with a discussion on the first driver of the restructuring and school choice agenda—the recession. This driving force is presented as it was my belief that if there were not an economic necessity to restructure, reinvent, reform, or simply change the way we do business to increase student achievement, there would be little discussion around the board table to make these kinds of sweeping changes.
A Recession and Its Impact on Schools

The global recession of 2008 was felt in local communities across Michigan. While the total impact that it had is unknown at this time, one thing for certain is that the impact to schools will be felt for years to come. This section describes one of the greatest impacts to the economy in Michigan relative to the collapse of the automobile industry. Increases in energy costs are highlighted, along with a discussion on reduction in state aid funding for schools. The section concludes with a review of an increase in charter schools and decrease in traditional public schools in Michigan.

Collapse of the Automobile Industry

Beginning in 2008, a global-scale recession negatively impacted the economy of the United States. A combination of several years of declining automobile sales and the difficulty in getting credit by consumers led to a crisis in the U.S. auto industry of
escalating proportion, not seen since the Great Depression. Each of the “Big Three” U.S. automakers, General Motors (GM), Ford Motor Company, and Chrysler, were in great trouble, and ultimately GM and Chrysler filed for bankruptcy. While there were several debates in the U.S. Congress about what should be done to assist in the bailout of this industry, one thing was certain: it was having an impact on the U.S. economy. This impact spanned the globe as the auto industry was a key component of the U.S. economy. The economic effects of a decrease in automobile sales meant lost jobs, diminished revenues, and large-scale impact to the stock market (Lister, 2010). The impact was being felt at the local level as well in the suburbs and communities surrounding Detroit, Michigan, with impacts on enrollment in classes at the K–12 and collegiate level (Moltz, 2009). The loss of jobs was estimated at over 3 million. The impact to already high unemployment was having devastating effects. One in 10 jobs was estimated to be tied in some fashion to the automobile industry (Wikipedia, 2011). While the total impact is still not known at this time, the impact to Michigan will be great and will continue to affect the recovery for many generations. The collapse of this major economic driver in the country began to have a sweeping impact on homeownership and property values, especially in the counties of the east side of the state. This impact spread across Michigan to the many auto parts suppliers and their communities—the result, a decline in the property tax base.

**Decreasing Property Tax Base**

Two phenomena placed local governments and school districts in difficult financial positions. The first was the burst in the housing market bubble in 2007–2009. This led to a decline in home and other real estate prices, resulting in a substantial decline
in the property tax base. This affected the ability for local governments, including schools, to be able to provide the same public goods and services with fewer resources. Second, with the recession of 2008–2009 came stimulus in the form of dollars from the federal government. While this provided short-term relief, the stimulus funds were temporary in nature and ended abruptly, creating increased pressure on policymakers to make extreme financial decisions (Anderson, 2011).

The economic climate in Michigan induced a downturn in property values. This impacted nearly every city, township, municipality, and home or business owner in the state. Since the enactment of Public Act 145 in 1994, taxable value has been the base for figuring property taxes in Michigan and, in turn, funding for the state’s schools. The Citizens Research Council of Michigan (2011), in a study of economic conditions, projected that the property tax base would continue to decline for the next several years. This would likely be the case as the property value base typically takes much longer to recover after a recession. There were several factors that contributed to this, including (a) a decline in manufacturing and automotive sector employment, (b) a nationwide housing slow-down, and (c) an overall real estate collapse driven by foreclosures and demand for second homes. These factors, combined with an exodus of the general population out of the state, indicated that the recovery would be prolonged and difficult. The repercussions of this included foreclosures; many homeowners would be trapped in their homes as they now owed more than their original loan purchase, and there stood to be a good chance for loan defaults. Statewide, the taxable value was projected to be down by 20% by 2013 (Citizens Research Council of Michigan, 2011). Local governments, including schools, would have severe revenue complications as they related
to accumulated school debt and the amount that had to be levied to pay off existing bonds, the impact on operational levies such as sinking funds, and the difference that the K–12 School Aid Fund would have to make up in the state’s per-pupil foundation grant to schools for public education funding. As this revenue stream relative to property taxes declined, so too would the resources available to schools (Anderson, 2011).

In addition to the decline in the property tax base, a combination of other factors was contributing to the budgets for school operations. One of the factors that was universal, and had an impact of global proportion, was the rising costs in energy.

**Increases in Energy Costs**

The rise in energy prices had affected the manner in which households in America spent their income, saved, and planned for the future, both short- and long-term. The price of gasoline, natural gas, coal, and electricity all impacted the operations and cost of a home. This was magnified for schools. Real household income had grown less rapidly in the past few years than it would have without the rises in energy costs. The same was true for schools. Schools would likely have more in their overall operational budgets if they had not experienced increases in energy costs at the same time they were receiving flat or declining revenues in state aid funding. As reported by Xcel Energy (2007), the nation’s schools were failing “Energy 101.” Schools were challenged to serve growing student populations and rising community expectations with aging buildings, stressed operating budgets, and increases in energy costs. Each year, taxpayers spent over $6 billion on energy for these schools. This is more than what is spent on textbooks and computers combined.
Friedrich, Eldridge, York, Witte, and Kushler (2009) presented the results of nine leading states that are aggressively implementing energy efficiency goals as part of their strategic plan initiatives. Real savings can be appreciated. According to the Congressional Budget Office (2006), households in America were spending over $200 billion more per year in 2006 than what they were in 2003. This means that the annual spending per household increased by $1,700 annually. Increases in energy prices can mean that households have less disposable income available for purchasing. This had a direct correlation to the Michigan sales tax and associated funding to schools. The United States imported a substantial amount of the total energy needed as a country. Energy price increases have a larger negative impact on the standard of living of U.S. residents in comparison to the level or real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita and thus the standard of living is lower (Congressional Budget Office, 2006). The rising costs in energy were also having an impact on construction for schools, as the costs for labor, materials, and equipment were increasing. This was impacting the overall completion of new construction projects or renovation of facilities as alternative plans were made to maximize the dollars available.

The American Association of School Administrators (2008) surveyed its members to understand the impact of rising fuel and energy costs. Results indicated that there was a general concern across the country by district leaders. The increased costs forced leaders to take closer looks at all of the operational program costs. Some of the conceptual changes included alternative school calendars, changes in transportation policies, bidding out of services once held by the district, and looking at alternative fuels. All of these alternatives to operations are examples of reform efforts beyond the
academic reform that were impacting the school system. The rise in fuel costs impacted changes in transportation services, which had an impact on the decisions that families made relative to where their children attended school.

The collapse of significant manufacturing, business, and industry; loss of jobs and stock market share; increasing operational costs; reduction in household spending on goods; and decreases in property tax bases were all contributing to the stress being placed on the general fund budgets of all levels of government.

**Reduction in State Aid Funding**

Governor Rick Snyder of Michigan established a May 31, 2011, deadline to have the 2012 fiscal year budget complete. The Michigan House and Senate gave final approval of this budget on May 26, 2011 (Martin, 2011). While having this budget in place assisted in the planning of expenditures and revenue for the 2011–2012 school year, there were many challenges that school districts had to address. One of the condemning complaints of the budget was that it used $400 million of school aid dollars for higher education, up from $200 million used in fiscal year 2010. However, the largest impact overall was the reduction in the per-pupil foundation grant that was used to fund schools. The foundation grant for 2011–2012 was reduced $470 per child, thus reducing the minimum foundation allowance from $7,316 to $6,846 (Bowerman, 2011). Public schools in Michigan had the opportunity to recover $200 of this reduction for 2011–2012 through an average $100 additional one-time funding to offset retirement rate increases for 2011–2012. An additional opportunity to earn $100 for the implementation of four out of five best practices related to school finance was made available for districts that could demonstrate compliancy (Wolenberg, 2011). Nonetheless, schools had
significantly fewer resources available to operate their programs during a time of increased transparency and accountability for increases in student achievement. The approved budget spawned budget shortfalls for schools across the state. Local boards of education had to make significant reductions in spending and/or spend down their fund equity. Headlines across the state described building closures, elimination of teachers, reductions in programs and services, increases in class size, and deficits in the millions, district to district (Bouffard, 2011; Cammel, 2011; Hare, 2011; Jaska, 2011; Linebaugh, 2011; Moore, 2011; Scott, 2011a, 2011b). This decline in revenues contributed to the overall need for school districts to consider restructuring plans for operational purposes. Academic reform initiatives related to increasing student achievement were also demanded by the legislature and Michigan Department of Education under No Child Left Behind.

This reduction in state aid left school districts hamstrung in their efforts to provide the programs and resources critical to the success of urban children (Crouse, 2011; DeBoer, 2011). In a majority of states, schools with the poorest children receive less funding per pupil than schools with the fewest low-income students. For example, the Education Trust (2006) found that the bottom fifth of schools, determined by the number of students who qualify for free or reduced school lunch, received $906 less per pupil than schools in the highest income quartile. This disparity becomes even more alarming considering the fact that federal guidelines state that low-income students require 40% more than state average per-pupil spending to perform satisfactorily on standardized measures (Education Trust, 2006). The actions to balance the budget in
Michigan for the 2011–2012 fiscal year will likely have lasting impact on urban school districts like HPS for generations to come.

As local school districts needed to balance their operational budgets and restructure district level programs, it came at a cost to building-level programs and closure of schools across the state. This happened at the same time that there was a rebirth in the school choice movement. The focus was on lifting the cap off of charter schools to introduce more options to parents who had children attending failing schools.

**Increase in Charter Schools, Decrease in Traditional Public Schools**

Since 1977, the number of intermediate school districts (ISDs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) or traditional public schools across the state of Michigan remained constant (Michigan Department of Education, 2013). However, the number of public school academies (PSA) has risen sharply since their inception in 1994. Correspondingly, this increase in the total number of public schools happened during an overall decline of pupils across the state enrolled in public education. Excluding the number of ISDs, there was an overall increase in the total number of public schools by 203, largely PSAs, or approximately a 35% increase. During this same period of time, the total number of students declined by 19% or 375,102 students (see Table 1). It should be no surprise then that LEAs were forced to re-examine their infrastructure, operational expenses, sources of revenue, and program offerings. As districts across the state continued to experience loss, individual traditional public schools were closing at the same time that the number of PSAs was increasing. This trend would likely continue. The recommendation of an expansion of charter schools as a school-of-choice option to address traditional public school failure and low student performance in Michigan was
put forward by the Michigan legislature and supported in 2011 by Governor Snyder with Public Act 277.

Table 1

Growth of ISD, LEA, PSA, and Total Public Schools in Michigan With Fall Pupil Count

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Intermediate School Districts (ISD)</th>
<th>Local Educational Authorities (LEA)</th>
<th>Public School Academies</th>
<th>Total Public Schools</th>
<th>Fall Pupil Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1977-1978</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>2,023,944</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978-1979</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>633</td>
<td>1,965,685</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1979-1980</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>632</td>
<td>1,910,385</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-1981</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>631</td>
<td>1,859,934</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-1982</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>631</td>
<td>1,792,331</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-1983</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>1,742,831</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983-1984</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>1,712,103</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984-1985</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>1,678,458</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985-1986</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>566</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>1,666,281</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986-1987</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>621</td>
<td>1,657,423</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-1988</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>1,657,844</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-1989</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>619</td>
<td>1,640,294</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989-1990</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>619</td>
<td>1,637,592</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-1991</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>561</td>
<td>618</td>
<td>1,651,502</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-1992</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>559</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>1,673,020</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992-1993</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>559</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>1,675,465</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-1994</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>557</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>1,667,041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994-1995</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>557</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>1,653,949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-1996</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>1,673,879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-1997</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>690</td>
<td>1,680,693</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997-1998</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>1,694,320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-1999</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1,710,365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>1,714,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2001</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>795</td>
<td>1,720,335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>1,731,151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>799</td>
<td>1,750,631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>809</td>
<td>1,734,019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>825</td>
<td>1,723,087</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>834</td>
<td>1,712,133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>838</td>
<td>1,693,436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>839</td>
<td>1,661,414</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. Information for school years 1977-1991 was obtained from the publication *Condition of Michigan Education*. Information for school years 1992 forward was obtained from the SADATA.dbf files. Pupil count information is taken from the Bulletin 1011 published annually by the MDE. Bulletin 1011 has not been published for Fiscal Year 2008.
According to the 2009–2010 Bulletin 1011 Analysis of Michigan Public School Districts Revenue and Expenditures (MDE, 2011), the total number of school districts was 783 for 2009–2010 with a total pupil membership of 1,605,971. This was a net loss of an additional 42,871 students over the prior year. Yet, federal advocacy efforts continued to defend the opening of more schools of choice despite continued decline. This came from the encouragement and support of the Obama administration. This administration viewed charters as a key component of education reform. A number of states changed policy to lift the cap on charter schools, while others reversed their policies altogether on charter school expansion (Stover, 2009). In addition, some states announced plans to open and support more online schools. All of these changes would have an impact on the traditional public school setting.

When parents exercise school choice, there are several factors that are considered when selecting a school for their first-time enrollment or abandoning one system and moving to another. This discussion continues every spring and fall when parents consider enrollment for the next school year. This is also the time of year that test results are often published at the national, state, and local level, drawing attention to public school criticism and underachievement across the country. The next section describes the nomenclature of some of this public school criticism debate.

**Summary**

Clearly, an economic recession had and continued to impact the available resources for public education and quality of services that a district was able to provide. It will likely be some time before this trend is reversed. The infusion of one-time funds again through stimulus doesn’t seem likely to correct the current financial resource
shortage. Consequently, school leaders will have to continue to assess programs and service delivery.

**Public School Criticism Driving the Restructuring/Reform Agenda**

A growing number of scholars and political commentators have drawn the conclusion that the American system of education is flawed. Some argue that improvements can be achieved only by reform through the fundamental institutions that oversee their services (Chubb & Moe, 1990). This conclusion was supported by three general arguments: (a) data show that there has been a steady decline in the performance of American students on standardized tests and the achievement gap between children of color and low socioeconomic status is growing, (b) American students perform worse than their international counterparts, and (c) the existing system fails to use the resources available for evidence-based practices of reform to produce measured growth rather than legacy and operational costs. The sections that follow share student performance data that contribute to this conclusion of failure.

**National Student Performance Data**

In 2011, the Institute of Education Sciences–National Center for Education Statistics released a report titled *The Condition of Education 2011*. This report summarized that, in 2009, the average National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scale score for fourth grade students was not measurably different from the scores achieved in 2007. Between 2007 and 2009, the average Grade 4 reading score showed no measurable change and the average Grade 8 reading score increased by 1 point. At Grade 12, the average reading score increased by 2 points between 2005 and 2009 (p. 4), as shown in Figure 5.
“From 1990–2009, average grade 4 mathematics scores increased by 27 points and average grade 8 scores increased by 20 points. At grade 12, average scores increased by 3 points between 2005 and 2009” (Institute of Education Sciences, 2011, p. 6), as shown in Figure 6. When demographics of ethnicity are studied, unfortunately the data continues to demonstrate that Black, Hispanic, and American-Indian students still score consistently lower than their White counterparts.
In 2007–2008, only about 75% of high school students in the United States graduated on time with a regular diploma. The graduation rate reported for Michigan during the same time period was 75.45%. In general, the dropout rates for White, Blacks, and Hispanics each declined from 1980–2009 (see Figure 7). However, in each year during that same time period, the dropout rate for Whites and Blacks was lower than Hispanics.

Approximately 60% of White, 40% Black, 49% Hispanic, and 67% Asian first-time college students who enrolled at a 4-year institution in the fall of 2002 completed a bachelor’s degree. These numbers are lower for students enrolled in a public university in comparison to a private not-for-profit institution, as shown in Figure 8.
Figure 7. Status dropout rates of 16- through 24-year-olds in the civilian, noninstitutionalized population, by race/ethnicity: October Current Population Survey (CPS), 1995–2009

NOTE: The status dropout rate is the percentage of 16- through 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in high school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate). The status dropout rate includes all dropouts regardless of when they last attended school. Data for American Indian/Alaska Natives in 1999 have been suppressed due to unstable estimates. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity.


Figure 7. Status dropout rates. (Institute of Education Sciences, 2011)

Figure 8. Bachelor degree completion. (Institute of Education Sciences, 2011)
The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics 2011 (Institute of Education Sciences, 2011) summarized additional important developments and enrollment trends in education using the latest available data. Some additional facts from this report that contributed to the debate of public education and its ability to be successful and meet the needs of all learners included:

- From 1999–2000 to 2008–2009, the number of students enrolled in the United States in charter schools increased from 340,000 to 1.4 million students.
- Private school enrollment in prekindergarten through grade 12 increased to a high of 6.3 million in 2001–2011 down to 5.5 million in 2009–2010. Almost 10% of all elementary and secondary school children were enrolled in private schools in 2009–2010.
- In 2009, 11.2 million or 21% of children ages 5 through 17 spoke a language other than English at home. In addition, 2.7 million spoke English with difficulty, requiring additional language services, with the primary second language being Spanish.
- The number of children receiving some form of special education services in 2008–2009 ages 3 to 21 increased to 6.5 million students or approximately 13% of all public school enrollment in the United States.
- In 2008–2009, a higher percentage of Black, Hispanic, and American-Indian/Alaska Native students attended high-poverty elementary and secondary public schools than their White or Asian counterparts.
• Between 1989 and 2009, the percentage of White students decreased from 68% to 55% and the percentage of Hispanic students doubled from 11% to 22%.

• In 2009, over 19% of children ages 5 to 17 were from families living in poverty, up from 15% in 2000.

• In 2007–2008 approximately 36% of undergraduate students in 4-year universities took a remedial course in college, while 42% of students did in public 2-year institutions.

According to studies completed by ACT (2006), 50% of all college students lack the reading skills necessary to succeed in college. Increasing numbers of college students must also take remedial courses. This was scrutinized as a consequence of underperformance in high school or lack of availability for higher level courses. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006) also found that 3 in 5 students at 2-year colleges and 1 in 4 students at 4-year colleges needed one year or more of remedial coursework. The taking of remedial courses was shown to severely reduce the likelihood of college completion.

Despite these sobering statistics, parents still rated their public school systems satisfactorily and in high regard. These perceptions are discussed in the next section.

National Community/Parent Report Card

According to a Gallup Poll (Newport, 2009), 3 out of 4 American parents (76%) were satisfied with the quality of education that their children were receiving in their schools. This was in stark contrast to the 45% of the general public who were satisfied with the state of schools in the United States (see Figure 9 and Figure 10). These
percentages have not changed significantly since 2003. Newport (2009) states that it is not uncommon to find that the general public ranks aspects of society at the national level more negatively than they do at the local level. Education is a notable example of this phenomenon. The percentage of parents who say they are completely satisfied with their own child’s education at the local level has averaged 77% since 1999. This is 31% higher than the average satisfaction rating all Americans gave to education in the United States. Given this high percentage, the vast majority of school-aged children K–12 still attend public schools in comparison to private, parochial, or home schools, although the numbers have slightly declined in recent years (see Figure 11).

*Satisfaction With K-12 Education in the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% Satisfied with own child's education*</th>
<th>% Satisfied with U.S. education**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
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<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on parents of children attending K-12 this fall  **Based on national adults

**GALLUP POLL**

*Figure 9. Satisfaction with K–12 education in the United States. (Newport, 2009)*
**Satisfaction With Own Child’s K-12 Education**

Asked in reference to oldest child attending K-12

- % Completely satisfied
- % Somewhat satisfied
- % Somewhat dissatisfied
- % Completely dissatisfied

![Bar chart showing satisfaction levels for K-12 education for all K-12 parents and public school parents.](chart)

Gallup Poll, Aug. 5-9, 2009

**Figure 10.** Satisfaction with own child’s K–12 education. (Newport, 2009)

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**Will your oldest child attend public, private, parochial, or home school this year?**

- % Public
- % Private
- % Parochial
- % Home school

![Line chart showing percentage of children attending different types of schools from 2000 to 2009.](chart)

Gallup Poll

**Figure 11.** Public, private, parochial, or home school attendance. (Newport, 2009)
A report by Civic Enterprises (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Streeter, & Mason, 2008) for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found that, generally speaking, parents in the United States had high aspirations for their children, knew that children needed parents engaged in their high school experience, and understood that the current workforce and economy required more education for their children. However, parents saw two different school systems in the United States: (a) one that was largely encouraging and supporting academic achievement in their students and one that was not; and (b) one that is effectively engaging parents in their child’s academic lives and another that is not. The findings in this report also showed that, regardless of income, education level, and performance of their children at the school, parents believed that their involvement was central to their child’s academic success. Parents with less education and lower incomes and those who had children in low-performing schools were the most likely to see a rigorous and challenging education and their own involvement critical to their child’s success (Bridgeland et al., 2008).

The same report (Bridgeland et al., 2008) further shares that 61% of all demographic backgrounds believed that what their children had to learn to graduate, attend college, and compete in the workforce was much different from what it was when they were children. Ninety-two percent of African-American parents and 90% of Hispanic parents reported going to college as very important, compared to 78% of White parents. Given these high aspirations and expectations, only 15% of parents with students at low-performing schools felt that the school was doing an excellent or very good job of challenging students and providing learning with high expectations, in comparison to 5% of parents who had students at high-performing schools. School
performance was found to drive parent satisfaction more so than a child’s grade. Forty-three percent of parents whose children received bad grades but attended a high-performing school reported that they were satisfied with how the school was preparing their child for the future, in comparison to only 35% of parents whose children received good grades but attended low-performing schools.

A 2010 study conducted by Chingos, Henderson, and West found that the public, and especially parents, grade their local schools on the basis of student achievement and not on the demographic makeup of the school related to the number of students who are African-American or Hispanic. The study also revealed that poor and minority families and less educated citizens were just as informed about school quality as the public as a whole. However, both parents and the general public gave lower grades to schools with a high percentage of students from poor or low-socioeconomic families. Additional key findings of this study emphasized that neither school size, class size, nor pupil–teacher ratio was an important factor when considering school quality. Schools with larger class sizes received higher overall ratings by parents and the public perhaps due to a belief that effective schools attract more families to a neighborhood, or more families are choosing a specific school based upon quality indicators related to school performance resulting in higher class sizes.

The ability to measure growth and achievement has increased substantially over recent years as a result of advances in technology, a greater calling for transparency and accountability, and the capacity development at institutions to collect, analyze, and understand how to use performance measures to increase productivity and results. Lewis and Burd-Sharps (2010) presented the key findings of research that has focused on
aspects of human growth and development in *The Measure of America 2010–2011: Mapping Risks and Resilience*. The findings in this report provide measurements of key indicators of human development, including education and the access to knowledge. All children, regardless of background, must have equitable access to knowledge.

Education provided in suburban, rural, and urban America takes on a different form and function. Achievement rates can range from very good to very bad. Specifically, in times of budget reductions and hard choices that must be made, the access to good data is critical to make decisions that are likely to have lasting impacts for generations to come. The section that follows takes a look at the growing concern of the achievement gap that exists among ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and geographic region of the country.

**The Gap in Achievement Among Ethnicity, Class, and Geography**

According to the findings of Sohoni and Saporito (2009), schools tend to be more racially segregated than the neighborhoods in which they are actually located. This was true for the district under study in this research. This is often a direct result of White residents abandoning their local neighborhood schools for magnet, charter, or private schools. Districts that attempt to respond to this migration and correct programs internally can find themselves with unintended consequences that generate greater migration out of the district (Card & Rothstein, 2007). Card and Rothstein found that when this happens, while holding other factors constant, the racial makeup of a school appears to have little influence on student outcomes, even among students in racially diverse schools where de facto segregation tends to occur by nature of the programs and courses offered and the ways in which students enroll in these programs. Echenique and
Fryer (2007) argued in their findings that schools were more socially integrated when minorities were relatively low in number. The minority and White students interacted more closely together with each other. Once the proportion of minority population reached a critical mass of 25%, interaction between minorities and Whites fell significantly.

This phenomenon played out at HPS through researcher observations of student participation in classes, participation in extracurricular activities, and even where students ate lunch on campus. Figure 12 shows the balance between White and minority students for HPS and the changes in ethnicity over time since 2001. In 2005, a tipping point occurred when the collective minority became the majority. This pattern was also reflected in each of the four phases of reorganization in the district when families were asked to attend different schools in different neighborhoods. During Phase I when children attended “focus schools,” the racial balance was split evenly across the district. Families who had never had their children in diverse schools before suddenly found themselves enrolled in schools with greater percentages of minority and low SES students. This increased the migration from the district, and in one year, the district lost over 600 students.

The shift in demographics of HPS, as well as the shifts in which neighborhoods had schools open for business, had a profound impact on the culture of the district. Ainsworth (2002) found that the neighborhood in which a student comes of age exerts the second most powerful influence on a child’s success later in life. Family background is the first. Three in five students in the United States go to school in one of the country’s 50 most populated metropolitan urban areas where residential segregation remains the
strongest (Zhou, 2003). The manner in which individuals view their community and the residents that live there may then be a reflection of the schools they attended in their community.

Figure 12. Holland Public Schools changes in ethnicity over time.

Policymakers are eager to break the link between poor neighborhoods and low-performing schools. Unfortunately, the findings of DeLuca and Dayton (2009) show that researchers have yet to find the reform initiative that will yield improved results. The majority of reform initiatives tried to date—neighborhood relocation programs, magnet schools, school vouchers, and school choice—have all produced mixed results. The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (2009) pointed to the findings of a 2009 Stanford University evaluation of the country’s charter schools, where the gains in student achievement of charter schools was only 17% better than the performance at regular public schools. In fact, 37% performed worse and the remainder performed no differently. Nevertheless, Hanushek, Kain, Markman, and Rivkin (2003) found that evidence does clearly show that students perform better in high-achieving schools than in low-achieving schools. Krueger and Whitmore (2001) found that capping class size at 15
students is similarly shown to significantly reduce the gap in test scores between White students and minority students, although the effects of small class sizes are strongest not at the secondary level, but rather in the first years of elementary school (Aos, Miller, & Mayfield, 2007).

There has been a great deal of attention focused on the achievement gap between White and African-American students. A growing body of data is beginning to show the impact and differences between White and Latino students. The difference between White and Latino students was important to this study given the demographic makeup of HPS. Unfortunately, large disparities exist between all races and their access to knowledge.

Latinos consistently are showing lower levels of school enrollment and degree attainment than all other American racial and ethnic groups. The findings analyzed by Lewis and Burd-Sharps (2010) showed that 39.2% of Latinos had less than a high school diploma and only 4.0% had a graduate or professional degree, compared to their White counterparts of whom only 9.9% had less than a high school diploma and 11.4% had a graduate or professional degree. Thirty percent of Whites had at least a bachelor’s degree compared to only 12% of Latinos. In the United States, native-born Latinos were 19% more likely to have a higher education degree than foreign-born Latinos. Nationally, Latinos had the weakest performance on every aspect of the Education Index used when addressing education levels achieved for adults. In addition to race, another factor that contributed to this significant achievement gap was socioeconomic class. The findings show that education is clearly linked with socioeconomic status (SES), geographic
location, parents’ education levels, and immigration patterns (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2010).

The SES of individuals was found to impact the overall education level achieved. There was also a strong correlation between children’s SES and the educational attainment of their parents (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2010). Given the findings of education levels of Latino parents and immigrants, it was no surprise that children of many Latino immigrants faced obstacles when it came to enrollment, perseverance, and completion of school in the American public education system. In 2008, nearly 25% of Latino families were living below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The findings of a survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center (2009) found that 75% of Latino high school dropouts cited the need to support their families financially as a reason for not continuing with their own education (Lopez, 2009). Limited English proficiency was also associated with dropping out of school, with nearly 50% of Latino children in schools classified as learning English as a second language (ESL) (Lopez, 2009).

The problem persists for Latino children and their education when approximately 25% of the country’s high schools educate more than 85% of the country’s Latino children. These same schools educate only 29% of the country’s African-American children and only 18% of the nation’s White children. These schools were disproportionately large in building size and class size, had fewer resources, and were located in central cities (Fry, 2005). One final item of significance related to Latino children and their education is public policy. Despite new laws in many states that allow undocumented young people and the children of immigrants to receive financial aid for
college, the incongruity between federal policy and local policy remains (Erisman & Looney, 2007), leaving many students with a high school diploma and little to no opportunity to continue on into postsecondary education.

**Summary**

The achievement gap persists across America and Latino students, in particular, are being left behind their White, African-American, and Asian counterparts. When socioeconomic status is added as an additional factor, the achievement gap widens. Unfortunately, HPS was characteristic of this type of school environment. Data from the district’s annual report illustrated that there was an achievement gap between White and Hispanic students, as well as an achievement gap between classes of socioeconomic status. Geography is also important to take note of, as more and more urban centers are becoming increasingly less diverse as White families and families of economic class, regardless of ethnicity, are abandoning city schools and leaving their poor minority friends behind. This migration of students impacts economic and academic reform that is critical to success. This disparity in achievement was important to highlight for the rationale and purposeful selection of mothers in this study, described in Chapter III.

Schmoker (2006) argued,

Imagine a time in the near future . . . when people speak matter-of-factly about how dropout rates and the achievement gap are inexorably shrinking, when record numbers of students are entering college, and when professors are noticing how much more intellectually fit each year’s freshmen have become. Imagine palpable, irrepressible hope emerging in our poor and urban schools. All of these improvements result from a candor that has emerged in education and a
willingness to see that historic improvement isn’t about “reform” but something much simpler: a tough, honest self-examination of the prevailing culture and practices of public schools. (p. 2)

Martin Luther King, Jr., (1967) said, “The job of the school is to teach so well that family background is no longer an issue.”

The merit of the public school system in the United States rests on the access to free, quality, and high-performing education. Public education serves to function still as a social contract between families and society (Christensen & Karp, 2004). Parents send their children to schools with the expectation that they will be given every opportunity to do their best and succeed. Attempts over the past several decades to renew America’s promise to its children and provide quality education for ALL children continue to fall short.

This criticism of public education in America and real gaps in achievement between ethnicity and class, combined with the current economic conditions impacting the resources available for schools, were driving reform efforts with the intent to restructure the system significantly. The restructuring efforts themselves can be polarizing and political in nature. The focus on this restructuring was met with academic reform focused on standards-based curriculum and high-stakes testing in an increasingly transparent and accountable system to produce results. The economic reality of downsizing of education in America resulted in changing systems significantly by closing schools and realigning district programs.

In the next section, several restructuring initiatives are highlighted. These include some of the significant school reform and restructuring initiatives that have taken place in
recent years, their apparent failure, a look at standards-based curriculum and high-stakes assessment practices that are driving increased accountability and transparency, a look at the opposite side of the testing and standards movement with a call to provide education initiatives that focus on 21st century learning, and the recognition to include parents as stakeholders in this process.

**School Restructuring Initiatives**

In 1983, Americans were warned in *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) that a rising tide of low performance or mediocrity threatened the nation’s security and position in the world. Since then, there have been several publications and research initiatives centered around the idea of fixing public education in America through a series of reform and restructuring initiatives. While *restructuring* has multiple meanings and is often interchangeably called *reform initiatives*, for the purpose of this research, the terms will suggest that public education needs to be comprehensively redesigned in comparison to simply improving parts or functions of a school. The restructuring initiatives must introduce substantial departures from the conventional practices that have been in place.

**The Failure of Restructuring Initiatives**

The effectiveness of any restructuring movement depends on how well the initiatives are used in a specific context and how well it “organizes or develops the values, beliefs, and technical skills of educators to improve student learning” (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). School restructuring is not a new consideration. In fact, schools have been changing in some way since their inception.
The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (as cited in Christensen & Karp, 2004), in a study of reform interventions under No Child Left Behind, found that some 50% of mandated reform efforts were failing. There have been some successful turnaround efforts, but success is not the norm. Additionally, they found that no specific reform was more successful than any other. Further, intervention efforts were difficult to sustain without the necessary resources available for districts already at risk of failure.

Christensen and Karp (2004) put forward a dual character phenomenon that was taking shape in schools across America. On one side, public schools remain our most democratic institution to preserve the ideals of our country while providing free education to society. At the same time, these same public schools have preserved the reproduction of class and race privilege as it exists in the larger society. In many ways, they are producing the very inequality that they were designed to overcome. The growing gaps in student achievement based upon race and class and the resources to support urban school districts and communities seem to support this duality of thought, albeit controversial.

True reform and restructuring efforts must then deliver more democratic classroom experiences, more equitable results, and outcomes across the system that can be sustained. Status quo is not only unacceptable, it is not tolerable for parents of choice. The reality is, schools are going to be expected to produce greater results with fewer resources (Pritchett & Pound, 1988). Restructuring efforts are often centered around two variables: economics and low performance.

The elimination of low-performing schools is not a one-time event. It is an initiative that occurs over several years with a long-term commitment to change. Sometimes, organizations undergo repeated restructuring to achieve the desired results.
Approximately 70% of true turnaround projects aimed at turning bad organizations into
great organizations fail the first time around (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Kotter, 1995). With
each attempt at restructuring, schools will make improvements over the prior initiative if
they are focused on clear performance goals and commit to identify and promptly address
failure. This requires sound leadership. Districts that possess firm leadership,
instructional priorities, and a vision set firmly on increasing student achievement for all
students will have a better chance of eliminating low-performing schools. This is
completed with focused efforts by reducing or eliminating internal and external
detractors. These detractors often come from the local community, that is, parents,
community members, and traditional special interest groups. It is imperative that the
leader stays focused and on strategic direction (Learning Point Associates, 2010) and
learns from restructuring or reform efforts that have proven successful.

The attention to the literature on leadership and lessons that have been learned is
the focus of the next section. The success of any restructuring effort is based upon the
craft of the leader to impact performance.

**Lessons Learned: Leadership Matters**

There are many lessons that can be learned from the prior experiences of school
leaders and organizations that have made or have failed to make the improvements
necessary for increased student achievement. These lessons have been organized into
four basic categories by Learning Point Associates (2010). They are (a) governance—the
selection and management of each school’s leaders and the policies affecting them both
during and after the change process; (b) leadership—the individual in charge of each
individual school; (c) environment—factors that are external to the school and, to some
degree, out of the leader’s control; and (d) organization—the common practices or working culture of the school system.

The most successful and noteworthy large-scale improvements of restructuring have been preceded by a change in the direction and control of the district or school and how that control was used. In this research on HPS, there were several leadership changes, including the school board, superintendent, all three secondary administrators, three out of the four K–7 school principals, and members of the central leadership team, including the offices of human resources, business services, curriculum, and technology.

The right leadership can affect enormous improvements, no matter how low the odds of success (Learning Point Associates, 2010). Replicating and sustaining large improvement is unlikely without districtwide governance changes.

Jacobson (2010) examined the effects of leadership on student achievement and sustained school success specifically in urban school settings with high poverty. Jacobson found several key variables essential to impact student achievement. They included (a) strong vision/direction setting, (b) the development of people, (c) redesigning or restructuring the organization, (d) distributed leadership roles across the system to include teachers, and (e) a change in organizational governance. These types of changes were more successful after trust was established through creating an environment safe for all learners (students and adults), as well as the engagement of parents and the larger community as a whole. In addition, district- and building-level leaders work decisively to set clear instructional objectives, set and expect high learning expectations for everyone, increase time on task, and develop positive relationships between school and home (Kotter, 2008).
Although teacher quality has been found to have the greatest influence on student motivation and achievement, Fullan, Leithwood et al., Marzano et al., and Sergiovanni (as cited in Jacobson, 2010) have all described the premise that the quality of leadership matters in determining the motivation of teachers and quality of their teaching. This in turn affects student performance. Scheerens and Bosker (as cited in Jacobson, 2010) concluded that these indirect effects are especially important in schools serving high percentages of low socioeconomic students who are often at greater risk of low performance and academic failure. Quality school leadership is no longer about position, but rather skills in instructional leadership focused on curriculum knowledge, evaluation of instructional practices, and the ongoing monitoring of student achievement data driving staff development and school improvement efforts.

Unfortunately, too often the urgent management takes priority over the important instructional issues. This is why so many district and building leaders report they spend too much time on administration, budgeting, scheduling, and other school management issues and not enough time working on instructional issues (Southworth, 2003). Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) in their book School Leadership that Works: From Research to Results, identified 21 leadership responsibilities that have a significant effect on student learning, along with a correlation of each responsibility to academic achievement gains based upon 69 studies conducted since 1970. They contend that if building leaders are able to focus on these 21 responsibilities, they will be able to dramatically improve student achievement across the board. Some of the highest correlations included (a) situational awareness (.33); (b) flexibility of leadership (.28); (c) discipline—protecting instructional time (.27); (d) monitoring and evaluating
performance (.27); (e) knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment (.25); (f) serving as a change agent (.25); and (g) focus—establishing clear performance goals (.24).

Results of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) (as cited in Jacobson, 2010) found additional skills of building-level administrators who work in high-poverty communities to be successful. In these communities, principals all had a common commitment and passion for the socially just treatment and equitable education of the children and communities that they served. These leaders all desired to make a difference in the lives of children and had knowingly assumed leadership roles of a school that had high needs. Their passion was accompanied with persistence, and they leveraged resources to overcome resistance, particularly among teachers who questioned the ability levels of children who live in poverty. These leaders also worked hard to involve parents and other members of the community. Connecting their school to the community was critical to their school improvement efforts, as found by Jacobson et al. (2005) and Ylimaki, Jacobson, and Drysdale (2007, as cited in Jacobson, 2010).

Cuban (as cited in Lawrenz, Huffman, & Lavoie, 2005) pointed out the influential and critical role that building-level leaders have in any reform effort. Howard and Howard (as cited in Lawrenz et al., 2005) found that the attributes of successful and sustainable reform efforts are bound in accountability, decision-making, information, access to resources, and knowledge, as well as Ellsworth’s (as cited in Lawrenz et al., 2005) comprehensive review of resistance to change. If there was acceptance that change was required for improvement, principals were able to empower and elicit the support of their teaching staff more efficiently and effectively. Fullan (2002) established four
conditions that yield positive results as a result of reform: (a) improving the social and moral environment of the school or district, (b) creating professional learning communities for staff, (c) developing leaders across the building, and (d) improving working conditions. All of these are responsibilities of building-level leadership.

This brief overview of the literature supports the critical role that building leaders play in restructuring efforts and development of learning communities in their schools, especially for children attending urban schools. While restructuring efforts can be mandated through changes in policy and legislative action, without the buy-in and support of building-level leadership, the reform, even if proven to be successful in other settings, will not be implemented with credibility. Any reform effort not implemented with fidelity will impact performance. Concerned parents will question if this is the correct action for a district to take in the educational process for their children.

Not only do parents become critical of performance, they can easily become cynical of change. In the next section, a discussion is presented of the impact of restructuring reform from two different perspectives: (a) restructuring based on economic necessity, and (b) restructuring based upon low performance and the need for improved results.

**Restructuring: Economic Forces**

The rationale for restructuring schools based upon economics is tied to finances, building capacity, or social implications (National School Board Association, 1976). Financially, this may be a result in increased operational costs without assimilated increases in revenue. Financial can also include extreme reductions in federal- or state-level funding through legislative action, or a result of decline in revenues associated with
a decline in student enrollment. Space issues are related to excess buildings or excess space in buildings that has resulted from decline in enrollment. To reduce operational expenditures, the best course of action is to consolidate and restructure programs. Social implications include the disruption to a community that has been brought upon by school choice as families exit or abandon the district for other educational options, resulting in a decline in enrollment. As demographics change, the implications of social conditions become greater. Families who may have left relative to quality may now exit based upon the desire to flee schools comprised largely of minority students, or minority students fleeing schools comprised largely of low socioeconomic students. This phenomenon will be discussed in greater detail in the literature review section on school choice.

**Restructuring: High-Stakes Standards-Based Curriculum and Assessment**

Over the last decade almost every state government in the United States has embraced some form of standards-based reform as a strategy to improve the quality of education and close the achievement gaps that exist between Caucasian children who do not live in poverty and children of color who do live in poverty. Murnane and Levy (2001) studied examples of these reform efforts and found four common threads. First, they all had curriculum frameworks with statements of the skills that students should master in each subject and at each grade level. Second, they all had assessments that provided some level of information as to whether students have demonstrated proficiency. Third, there was an unfortunate pattern of high stakes for performance for students and their teachers. Finally, there was evidence of efforts to increase the capacity of schools to help students in meeting the learning outcomes.
While some have argued (Education Trust, 1998; Taylor, 2000; as cited in Murnane & Levy, 2001) that this reform effort will improve the performance for children of color by ensuring that all students have access to the same quality education to deliver these results, opponents like Kohn (2000) contended that this will not be the case and the gaps will actually increase. Her argument rests on the fact that the more these children fill in bubbles on worksheets through drill exercises, the further they will fall behind affluent children who already possess rudimentary skills and get involved in lessons of deeper thinking and problem solving. Meier (as cited in Murnane & Levy, 2001) argued that shifting good instructional practices to larger policymaking bodies of state government undermines the capacity for schools in a democracy to teach the responsibility of developing ideas, negotiating differences, and considering others’ points of view in decision-making.

Thompson (as cited in Diez, 2002) described the standards-based movement as a return to a factory-model of schooling, where students are being asked to simply memorize many expert-prescribed facts of information and regurgitate them back on standardized tests. The curriculum and assessment practices thus become high-stake and norm-referenced on limited skill sets that are not equipping students with the skills necessary in the 21st century. The curriculum, as a result, is becoming much narrower in focus (Diez, 2002). To combat this issue, the experts have prescribed more facts, making it almost impossible for any teacher to make the curriculum available to students for real learning versus mere coverage of the facts. This narrowing of the curriculum and high-stakes transparency and accountability are leading away from true reform efforts that are
central to moving forward—thinking skills, problem solving, communication skills, and critical thinking (Newmann, Bryk, & Nagakla, 2001).

The requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the need to have all students proficient in academic achievement by 2014 resulted in many school districts across the country returning to standards-based curricular reform efforts. Lawrenz, Huffman, and Lavoie (2005) described standards-based reform as a process-driven framework that explicitly links schooling and policy to student outcomes, the goal being to change both the concepts and skills taught to improve student achievement. This team studied the initial implementation and sustainability of major national standards-based science education reform at the ninth grade over a 6-year period. The data from the study were used to develop a model that could be applied for sustained implementation. The results found that the sustainability of standards-based curriculum was greatly affected by external pressures, power structures in the system, availability of support, and the desire for change. In addition, if the same teachers continued to teach the same reformed curriculum in the same buildings and grade level, student achievement was more likely to improve. Unfortunately, in urban school settings that are declining in enrollment and implementing restructuring efforts impacting grade level reductions or school closings, professional staff members’ assignments can change on a regular basis, impacting sustained implementation and staff development needs. This phenomenon has been prevalent in HPS through the past decade as changes were made on a regular basis.

May and Supovitz (2006) studied the longitudinal effects of a major educational reform initiative on student learning through the America’s Choice comprehensive school reform in Rochester, New York. The value of this longitudinal study over an 11-year
period assists in measuring and understanding the effects of complex changes over multiple years. The America’s Choice School Design K–12 comprehensive school reform model was developed by the National Center on Education and the Economy. It is a well-established reform model implemented in thousands of schools nationwide. Key elements of this reform model include internationally benchmarked expectations for student performance and a strong belief that all students can meet these standards. School-embedded professional staff development is ongoing to monitor student work and achievement in relation to these standards and to use this information to develop lessons specifically tailored to the learning needs of the students. School leadership teams coordinate the work by establishing performance targets, adjusting school schedules as necessary, and defining tiered levels of intervention and support based upon their responses to interventions already in place. Purkey and Smith, and Reynolds and Teddie (as cited in May & Supovitz, 2006) affirmed that these elements are generally associated with characteristics of effective schools.

The results of this reform effort become relative for urban school district consideration, given the demographic breakdown of students in the study. Over 87% of the students qualified for free and reduced lunch and over 78% of the students were minorities. Results showed that minority students, both Hispanic and African American, made significant growth over time under these conditions in comparison to their peers in schools that were not part of the reform initiative. The net result was that the achievement was cumulative over time (May & Supovitz, 2006).

Volante and Ben Jaafar (2010) studied the impact and social consequences of external testing of policymakers or federal/state departments on students, teachers, and
systems. They looked at high stakes that focus on graduation requirements, merit pay for teachers, and rating of school systems. First of all, they did find some positive consequences for high-stakes testing. In some systems, they found that achievement results of students in some grades did increase substantially. Roderick, Jacob, and Byrk (as cited in Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2010) argued that this may be only a result of teaching to the test itself and no real increases in learning. Phelps (as cited in Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2010) found increases in motivation to study and to attain goals. Ysseldyke, Dennison, and Nelson (as cited in Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2010) suggested that when teachers are confronted with high-stakes testing, higher expectations for learning increase with children of disabilities, and they receive better instruction. Earl and Torrence (as cited in Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2010) found teachers participating in more staff development in tested subject areas to improve their content knowledge and instructional effectiveness.

In contrast, extensive research and studies have documented negative social consequences associated with high-stakes testing. Boe and Shin (2005), Gipps (2003), McNiel (2000), Scoppio (2002), and Valencia and Villarreal (2003) (all cited in Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2010) found little evidence to suggest that the achievement gap is closing or will ever close as a result of test-based accountability. In fact, some research indicates that the gap is growing between low- and high-achieving students and that these tests and curriculum to support them may be standing in the way of minority students graduating from high school. Amrein and Berliner (2003), Hauser (2001), and Volante (2008) (all cited in Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2010) provide evidence that indicates high-stakes testing policies are contributing to increased dropout rates. Amrein and Berliner (2003), Hursh
(2005), and Kornhaber (2004) (all cited in Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2010) found a trend toward more grade-level retentions for low-performing students even before they got to the high-stakes testing grade levels, perhaps to ensure that these students were properly prepared to pass the test.

Several negative impacts are also reported with regard to teachers and their performance in the classroom. Falk (1996) and McNeil (2000) (as cited in Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2010) found that multiple-choice high stakes tests constrict the curriculum and instruction that is provided in the classroom. Teaching to the test actually discourages teaching more relevant and rigorous lessons and content in science or social studies. Electives such as music, art, language, and physical education take a back seat during the testing of reading and math (Bottrell & Ling; Burroughs & Webeck; Earl; Grahanam & Neu, as cited in Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2010). Gipps, Lashway, and Simmer (as cited in Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2010) even found multiple cases of cheating by teachers and other personnel by adjusting students answer sheets or providing answers to ensure greater success. Finally, and worst of all in this writer’s opinion, Berlak, Delphi, Hargreaves, and Fink (as cited in Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2010) found that the ranking of teachers and schools that goes along with high-stakes testing is driving the most qualified and competent teachers out of schools serving the most vulnerable students, who need them the most.

Skria and Scheurich (2001) studied four school districts in Texas and found that, while under the pressure of high-stakes testing as part of a statewide initiative, the test scores of minority and second-language students were narrowed between White and non-White achievement. The high-stakes component of the tests and how the results were
going to be used forced the schools to change their deficit-thinking model of non-White students. While not widespread, the researchers were able to identify such districts. This overemphasis on standards-based curriculum, and high-stakes accountability measures that go along with it, is diverting attention from the goals of education that is needed for the 21st century. This includes skills like higher-order thinking, technology literacy, ethical citizenship, collaboration and working on project teams, and problem solving. They went on to argue that the economic health of a nation suffers when systems fail to foster innovation and creativity within the education system. A call for more project-based learning and authentic learning experiences is now being driven by the members of the larger community, including business and industry, to reverse the impact on declining economics.

Eisner (2001) argued that, from a scientific standpoint, high-stakes tests can’t do all that policymakers want them to do. The high stakes that are attached to the tests shift the intention of the policy of continuous school improvement to one that values highly what can be measured and, even more problematic, the system then values most highly the measurement itself. The conversation surrounding performance and school success in communities about the meaning and value of education can’t take place without the standardized tests and results taking center stage. As a result of the high stakes attached to the tests, the debate of success of public education and the many factors that contribute to its success by policymakers will continue. This includes having the necessary resources, strong instructional leaders, effective classroom teachers, global curriculum and learning outcomes, and authentic learning experiences that are measured beyond high-stakes standardized tests. The success—or lack thereof—of a district can impact the
resources that it continues to receive. It can also impact the families who decide to enroll their children in its schools. Finally, the growing student achievement gap among children of color and socioeconomic status will likely contribute to the continued abandonment of schools in urban neighborhoods. The net result is the need to restructure its schools not only from an academic and program perspective, but from economic necessity. This results in building closures or redistribution of where students across buildings attend.

One state organization is seeking to propel education reform by focusing on the key elements that it believes will be essential for children in the future. It has put forward a report calling for a comprehensive redesign of the education system in Michigan. In addition, the National Center of Education and the Economy outlines several reform efforts that policy leaders will have to come to terms with. These two positions are discussed in the next section.

A State and National Organization’s Perspective

In response to public school criticism and the call to action for reform, the Michigan Association of School Administrators (MASA), with the assistance of Reeves (2009), presented their insights and recommendations for a comprehensive redesign of the education system in Michigan.

MASA believes that comprehensive redesign of Michigan’s public education is more than a nice idea or even a prudent strategy to assist in Michigan’s economic recovery. We believe that retooling and reshaping Michigan’s public education for the reality of contemporary life and the prospect of future global prominence
is both a moral imperative and an expedient response to the challenge of our times (p. 3).

The report identified nine different imperatives that call for instilling the joy of learning back in schools by replacing outdated and static systems with more flexible and adaptable systems that foster creativity and innovation. They call for greater accountability and transparency of results demonstrated through evidence-based strategies with school governance in place to hold high standards of performance. Resources must be secured in a stable fashion that will assist to attract, maintain, train, and expect highly qualified teachers and administrators to be lifelong learners. Fiscal management and stability must be in place while addressing legacy costs and overall operational management. Finally, they believe it involves the system retooling itself with 21st century technologies to support 21st century learning. Public education must be at the forefront of this work to meet the common good in an equitable, free, and democratic society.

The National Center of Education and the Economy (2007) firmly advocated that it will not be possible to get the current system where it needs to be by simply filling in the gaps with new programs. There are not enough resources/revenue available at any level of our intergovernmental system to fix this problem by spending more on the system we have. The only way to fix the system is to abandon the system and put a new one in its place. The National Center of Education and the Economy outlined several reform efforts that policy leaders will have to come to terms with:

1. An inherently inefficient system is getting progressively more inefficient over time.
2. While the standards movement has produced real gains in recent years even for minority and poor children, the results are leveling off while the costs for such increases continue to rise annually.

3. There is a growing inequality in family incomes that is contributing significantly to the disparities in student achievement.

4. The current system has failed to engage students in relevant and challenging coursework.

5. The current testing system in the United States rewards students for being good at routine work, rather than assessing learners on their ability to cooperate, create, communicate, and critically think through difficult tasks.

Restructuring of this magnitude requires the involvement of several key stakeholders. Parents and community must be part of this ongoing dialogue if they are going to continue their investment in the system. Before sharing the final driver of my interrelationship among economics, public schools criticism, and restructuring efforts—school choice, I want to briefly highlight why parents should become an integral part of this process of reform, as the involvement of parents in shaping public policy becomes a focal point of this research. This rationale is described in the section that follows.

**Restructuring Schools—Parents and Community**

As shapers of public policy respond to public school criticism, declining revenue, and new demands of a 21st century for restructuring efforts, enlisting the assistance of parents and community is fundamental to make this happen. In *Restructuring Our Schools—A Primer on Systemic Change*, Dolan (1994) describes four compelling reasons why this is the case. First of all, a leader needs the expertise of these outsiders of the
organization. They bring two types of expertise to the table—a parent of a particular child who knows that child in and out like nobody else can; and a parent who is a customer, making choices about where to send his or her child to school. This makes the gathering of feedback from them about their ongoing experiences in the district of great importance.

The second reason to involve parents in the process is that they are paying taxpayers. Twenty years ago the customer was a given; since 1994, the customer is no longer a given and it is no longer a guarantee that you have their support for what you are doing. Accept it or not, we are in an international marketplace of increasing proportion competing for their support during a time of shrinking resources and increasing demands.

The third reason why parents need to be brought in and listened to is that a leader needs their permission, permission to make decisions that will significantly impact the system. This was an essential component of communication for the mothers who had their children enrolled for the past 10 years in HPS. Restructuring and real change will not occur unless you can bring parents along with you in the process with a clear vision, purpose, and measurable outcomes.

The fourth compelling reason is related to marketing. If the parents are with you, they will bring the rest of the community along as well through testimonies of the experiences that they are having with their children. Leaders need their energy and their support when public attack begins on the horizon of change.

The more deeply that external group of parents and community is empowered to participate, the greater the power for change it can and will generate. But this is true only if the system views them with respect, sees them as the reason it exists
in the first place, and invites their input, their data and their collaboration. (Dolan, 1994, p. 158)

Summary

Change merely for the sake of change is not the intended outcome. Given, the current economic landscape in public education programs may need to be consolidated, services may need to be reduced or eliminated, and grade levels or buildings may need to be reorganized or even closed. However, the focus of these efforts must also contribute to the reform essential for all children to acquire the global workforce and 21st century skills needed to be effective contributors in society. This will be imperative to preserve and protect the American society and quality of life that we have enjoyed for centuries. Learning and knowledge will continue to be moving targets with increasing expectations. What is acceptable today will no longer be acceptable into the future as knowledge increases exponentially and more complex and critical thinking will be required for student success. The involvement of mothers in this process and bringing their voice to the table to assist with shaping policy is more important than ever, especially those voices who have not been represented well in the past.

In the next section of this chapter there is a focus on school choice. This discussion will include topics related to the priorities that are associated for school choice, characteristics in the context of the common school choice environments, characteristics of parents who exercise choice options, and the roles that mothers play as part of the decision-making process.
School Choice

The United States has made progress in recent years to expand the educational opportunities available to a growing and increasingly diverse population. Even with these improvements to access and quality, parents continue to exercise school choice for a variety of reasons. It is important to understand each of these variables, as there were over 48.5 million children enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in 2007–2008 in the United States (see Figure 13). Each of these children came from families who were taking many things into consideration when electing which school to attend for their educational career. Researchers at the Center on Reinventing Public Education (as cited in Viadero, 2007) found that families rely on multiple sources of information to make their school choice decisions, including visiting the school; meeting with staff, both teachers and administrators; reviewing printed materials such as report cards, curriculum, handbooks, and student handbooks; and talking with other parents about their levels of satisfaction. This section will examine the cumulative effects of school choice on student achievement, reasons that are documented as to why parents exercise school choice, the priorities associated with school choice, the characteristics of parents who chose which schools their children attend, and why mothers are often the decision-makers when it comes to making decisions relative to their child’s education.
Priorities Associated for School Choice

The increased mobility of many families, combined with the school choice movement, has contributed to an increasingly large number of families who are searching for schools that will meet their needs. Bainbridge and Sundre (1991) found in their annual SchoolMatch surveys that just as no two children are the same, no two families have the same definition of what an ideal school system is. The general preferences regarding academic rigor, school system expenditures, school/class size, and community characteristics all take on different meanings of importance by family. Appendix B presents a summary of factors that are taken into consideration when selecting a school. Bainbridge and Sundre argued that school policy leaders need to conduct local market research regarding the factors that parents consider in their own communities to truly
understand the culture and climate at work in their region. At the request of the Educational Research Service, results of Bainbridge and Sundre’s 1990 study revealed the following by level of importance to parents when making decisions regarding schools of choice and enrollment for their children: (a) school system expenditures on pupil instruction, (b) education level of community members, (c) pupil performance on scholarship exams, (d) school system expenditures on teacher salaries, (e) per capita income, (f) award winning schools, and (g) home property values.

The school choice literature demonstrates that parents make decisions about where to send their children based on a strong emphasis on academics, convenience, school characteristics, and safety (Amour & Brett, 1998; Kleitz et al., 2000). These studies also indicate that there are slight differences between White parents and non-White parents when academic priorities are considered. Non-White are slightly less likely to identify academics as the most important factor in choosing a school. Convenience is a priority for many families because many school choice options do not provide transportation. Convenience is described as the distance to and from school. Kleitz et al. (2000) found that a majority of parents across ethnic and socioeconomic groups indicate that school location is very important to them. Those who cited convenience and location as very important to them were also those least likely to have the resources available to provide daily transportation for their students on their own. Additional school characteristics, aside from location, that are important when making a decision include school size, school neighborhood, and the diversity of the school to some choosers. Minority and lower-income parents were much less likely to report that school values and racial diversity were important to them, while parents with a college
education cited diversity and teaching values as important considerations (Schneider et al., 1998; Schneider et al., 2000). Figure 14 illustrates parents’ top priorities in choosing a school, as found in a study by Haynes, Phillips, and Goldring (2010).

![Figure 14](image)

*Note. Composite score ranges between 1 and 4.*

*Figure 14. Top priorities in choosing a school.*

Safety of schools was another factor that parents consider depending on family makeup and neighborhoods (Schneider et al., 2000). Lee et al. (1996) found that safety is more of a concern for minority and low-income parents than it was for middle-class White households, largely due to the neighborhoods in which they live.

Following the discussion on priorities for school choice, these priorities are applied into the context of the different school choice options commonly available in communities.
Characteristics Studied in School Choice Context

The Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice (2008) published a policy brief with the results of an empirical study that focused on the demographic characteristics of students and families who actively engage in school choice in addition to the preferences, motivations, and specific behavior of families who actively choose schools. The school choices of this study included home schooling, private schools, vouchers, and public school choice programs that included controlled choice districts, charter schools, and magnet schools. They found that private school choosers were predominantly White and middle-class, which was likely related to the cost of this option. Families who used vouchers to attend private schools tended to be poor and minority, which was congruent with the design of these programs intended to serve low-income and minority populations in urban areas. Charter schools, due to their increase in number (some 4,900 charter schools in 40 states serving over 1.5 million students), were more widely accessible. Due to their location in many urban areas nationwide, the demographics of these schools tended to be minority families. In contrast to where families send their children and the differences in demographics, there was one common theme as to why parents and students exercise choice—perceived academic quality. In addition, White parents tended to avoid schools with high minority concentrations, and minority parents tend to avoid schools with high percentages of low-income students. As a result, school choice programs have the potential to contribute to an already racially and economically segregated system.

Those who support school choice (policymakers and government leaders) have different reasons for doing so with the common agreement that the ultimate goal is
improved student learning. An economic impact runs parallel to choice based upon principle of the marketplace. If parents can choose among schools, school will then likely compete for students, and the competition should drive all schools to improve their programs and curriculum to attract more parents and students. If all schools are improving, student achievement should go up. This theory depends on a number of assumptions. The basic assumption is that parents will choose the best school that is academically superior and that there is enough information available to make that decision. It is also important to note that choice is limited for most people based upon money, time (travel, distance), limited space availability, and the selective admissions process at many schools (Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, 2008). Table 2 describes the characteristics of families by school of choice and the basic reasons for selecting this school.

Coleman (1988) found that social networks or social capital impacts school choice related to the ability to gain access to resources by virtue of one’s membership in social networks and social structures. Social networks have increasingly impacted schools-of-choice decisions. They first act as a filter to sort out schools that parents should not consider, while informing parents what schools to consider and for what reasons. Word of mouth parent-to-parent information is another information-rich source for parents in the selection of schools. Fewer decisions are based anymore on a school visitation and tour.
Table 2

Characteristics of Parents and Rationale for Choosing Different Types of School Choice Options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Characteristics of Parents</th>
<th>Rationale for Choosing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Private           | • 76% White  
• 9.5% Black  
• 8.8% Hispanic  
• 14% bachelor’s or graduate  
• 4% high school diploma  
• 90% two-parent families  
• 3% living in poverty  
• Likely attended private also  
• Likely to be religious | • Values  
• School culture  
• Environment  
• Safety  
• Status  
• Student body composition  
• Buy home in area |
| Vouchers          | • Overwhelming poor  
• African-American and Hispanic                                                          | • Mothers tend to have a high degree of education and want to escape the failing schools in their neighborhood |
| Charter Schools   | • Mixed demographics based upon region of the U.S.  
• Michigan is largely minority and low-SES students                                       | • Varies  
• Escape failing schools  
• Location  
• Quality of programs |
| Home School       | • Large families generally with three or more children  
• Two-parent families  
• 74% White  
• Black/Hispanic 10%/6%  
• 19% poverty  
• Parents have more education than public but generally less than private school parents  
• Baptists much more likely to home school than other religions | • Control curriculum and experiences  
• Values  
• Shelter children from the mainstream  
• Concerns for safety and exposure to drugs and peer pressure  
• Low confidence in public schools or private to meet their specific learning needs  
• High distrust |

Overall, the motivation for school choice includes academic reputation, good teachers, safety, class size, location, friends at the school, better curriculum, religious
education, test scores, discipline, school racial/ethnic characteristics, teaching of moral values, convenience, similar peer group, and neighborhoods for housing. In contrast, the study found that the actual behaviors were a result of (a) White families transferring to schools with higher proportions of White students; (b) minorities transferring to schools with smaller proportions of low-SES students; (c) charter school choosers, in some cases, actually choosing a charter school with lower average test scores than their previous public school after listing test scores as their most motivating factor to choose; and (d) racial composition and similarity to own family as a strong indicator for charter schools. These findings are “provocative: parents cite academics as primary but decisions are linked to race, suggesting that parents might be using race as a proxy for academic quality” (Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, 2008).

The impact of No Child Left Behind is also seen in different reasons parents make school choices. Parents in failing schools (NCLB-sanctioned schools) were less likely than expected to opt to choose another school. Low-income families in non-NCLB sanctioned schools were more likely to choose highly selective schools. This points to the confidence that some families, even when given choice options, elect to stay in their assigned schools regardless of what may or may not be happening (Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, 2008).

Kleitz and colleagues (2000) professed that preferences of parents for school choice do not differ by race, ethnicity, or social background, and that all parents are most importantly seeking schools of high quality education. Any differences that are observed are the result of “real world” contexts, options, and limitations. It could simply be that
parents find themselves in situations they just don’t like and that any other school is better than the one that they are in.

Schlechty (2001) described increasing parental choice based upon a shift from a culture in which efficiency and standardization were greatly valued now to a society where quality, choice, and customization are core values. The onset of technology is making this readily available through module learning; distance learning; and learning anytime, anyplace, and at any pace. No longer do students have to sit for hours on end in the classroom to acquire the skills that they need. Younger Generation X parents desire more technology and second-language development for their Generation Y children to be more competitive in a growing global learning community.

In the next section, the discussion related to characteristics of the learning environments shifts to the characteristics of the parents themselves who exercise school choice options.

**Characteristics of Parents Who Exercise School Choice**

There is a growing body of literature that focuses on educational choice but little that addresses how educational choices are made within families specifically. Reay and Ball (1997, as cited in Reay & Ball, 1998) examined family dynamics embedded in school choice through an analysis of 137 interviews with parents choosing a secondary school option for their children. They found that class, gender, and race all contribute significantly to choice options that are made. Families from lower socioeconomic status preferred local schools, as did their children, to maintain security, relationship, and friendship with community. The students were more part of the decision-making to keep their friendships in place.
In a 1997 study, Reay and Ball (as cited in Reay & Ball, 1998) found that many working-class parents appear to feel less skilled to make school choice decisions and, as a result, attended the local school without assessing other options. A power shift likely occurs in working-class homes as children become more educated, in some cases, than their parents and assume more decision-making ability, as was found by Walkerdine and Lucey (as cited in Reay & Ball, 1998). This phenomenon is even more prevalent in working-class immigrant families where adult passivity, lack of social power, and lack of educational knowledge are more prevalent (Reay & Ball, 1998). This was not found to be the case in middle-class families where parents clearly saw themselves as the experts and made the decisions relative to school attendance. While their children had input into the process, the adults ultimately made the decision. This dynamic also played out in their findings as they saw working-class families focused on happiness in life in the here and now, whereas the focus in middle-class families was related to future happiness. Educational success was equated with happiness.

Velez, Schiefelbein, and Valenzuela (1993) and Walker and Smrekar (2003) contended that the parents’ own educational level of achievement greatly influenced children’s education achievement. Parents with more education were more likely to place higher value on education, and, as a result, their attitudes and actions tended to be reflected in their choices relative to education (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Given their education, they were more likely to seek out information on the varieties of educational choices and were also more likely to find themselves in positions where they could make informed decisions regarding their child’s education. Parents who held at least a bachelor’s degree were more likely to apply for schools of choice, especially to magnet
programs (Goldring, Hoover-Dempsey, Rowley, & Pachucki, 2004). Parents who had a high school degree or less were generally invited to participate in school choice programs rather than seeking them out on their own (Goldring et al., 2004).

Family income has been positively related to choosing schools, as it is often related to an indicator of resources that a family has to follow through on a choice decision (Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). Schneider, Schiller, and Coleman (1996) also concluded that families with more resources were more likely to send their children to schools of choice in comparison to lower-income families. Smrekar and Goldring (1999) found in their work that there was a correlation between income and choice, where the higher the family income, the higher the participation in school choice.

In their study of magnet schools and choices of Latino parents, Haynes, Phillips, and Goldring (2010) found the factors that influence Latino parents in exercising school choice options. Latino parents who do chose magnet schools, in particular, came from very different educational backgrounds, tended to be a strong middle-class family, and were either second-generation immigrants or married to one.

If the generational status was first generation (i.e., adult immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers born outside of the United States who have left their country of origin to settle permanently in the United States), families were often fractured and there was a high cost personally and financially for this transition (Putnam, 2000). Any additional transition relative to school choice was unlikely. If the generational status was second generation (born in the United States to at least one foreign-born parent), the family and social ties were not as fractured and resources were not as stressed (Pew Hispanic Center & Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002). Generational status, then, influenced parents’
educational achievement, English language development, family income, and, ultimately, class status (Portes, 1996; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). All of these factors, in turn, influenced the amount of information that Latino parents had to make informed decisions.

All in all, there appears to be consistent evidence that when given the chance, parents choose to avoid schools with high percentages of low-income students, and that White parents avoid schools with high percentages of minority students. Parental choice does not happen in a vacuum. It happens in multiple social, political, and cultural environments. The evidence is substantially clear as well that technology is playing a greater role in school choice through social networks, which describe the effectiveness or not of one given school program to another.

For purposes of this study, specific attention to the mother as a decision-maker relative to school choice was of interest. A basic assumption is that, generally speaking, mothers are able to be more involved in their child’s education, volunteer in schools, and attend school-related activities. As a result, they often have more information about the reality of the school, its performance, its teachers, class size, and its programs to make decisions relative to enrollment and attendance. A look into the research to substantiate this assumption and to better understand the changing roles of mothers over the past several years will shed light on this topic, as discussed in the next section.

**Change in Mothers’ Positional Authority and Their Roles as Decision-Makers**

Data from the American Community Survey as part of the U.S. Census Bureau (2008) found that, nationally, women were more likely to have a high school diploma and to be enrolled in school than men (90.8% and 84.0%, respectively), while men were more
likely to have a bachelor’s or advanced degree (39.2% and 36.6%, respectively).

Washington, D.C. and Utah were the only two areas where men did better than women with regard to access to knowledge. Beginning in 1982, women surpassed men in bachelor’s degree conferrals and their rates have remained higher ever since. In 2007, women also began to surpass men in graduating with master’s and doctoral degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). While the data in this report measured the cumulative attainment of the entire adult population and not just those who have graduated recently, it will still be a few years before the proportion of women with advanced degrees surpasses that of men in the general population, but the trend-line is certainly headed in that direction. This shift in education has contributed to a cultural change resulting in greater parity between the genders, job advancement, earning potential, and greater avoidance of discrimination (Dougherty, 2005). Findings also show that women continue to show higher innate and non-cognitive abilities in comparison to their male counterparts and achieve higher grades in school (Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006), lending to the cultural shifts in educational attainment today and a shifting of involvement and power base in the workforce. This positional power translates itself into the family when making decisions relative to where their children attend school.

Ribbens (as cited in Reay & Ball, 1998), through her research and findings, proposed a three-fold typology of how mothers view children and, in turn, make choices for them. Mothers view their children as “little innocents, little devils or little adults.” “Little adults” are common in working-class and immigrant families, where the knowledge and power base shifts to the children as they become more educated than their parents and can speak the language, if there are differences in social and academic formal
interaction. The children often are able to better understand the cultural expectations and requirements to fit in. “Little innocents” take on two types generally in middle-class families: those who are fragile with special attention needed, and those viewed as lacking knowledge and needing more guidance. Boundaries and parameters are established for these children with some choice, but ultimately mom makes the decisions, even if it comes through persuasion, negotiation, or sometimes even bribery. “Little devils” have little choice and need much stronger boundaries.

David and Reay’s (as cited in Reay & Ball, 1998) work on gender found gender to play a significant role in family dynamics of school choice. Regardless if the child was a boy or a girl, and regardless of social class boundaries, it was primarily mothers doing the groundwork necessary to make informed decisions relative to school choice. Mothers were found to visit the schools, talk more with teachers, talk more with other mothers, talk more with their own children about what they preferred and what was important to them, and organize events where their children and their friends came together in social settings. One respondent actually referred to this phenomenon as “the mothers’ mafia” and a force to be reckoned with. This process begins as early as pre-school in selecting the “right” school to lay the foundation for later success.

Relative to positional authority in the family, as mothers become more informed of the school choice process, the options, and knowledge of what is available under each option, they, in essence, become the experts and fathers end up waiving the responsibility to them. The authors also presented the notion of mothers needing to take charge and forcing their husbands to become involved in the process. Giddens and Reay (as cited in Reay & Ball, 1998) cautioned that family interaction needs to be put into the context of
larger cultural understandings that recognize unequal power relationships which exist in families, not only between spouses, but with children as well. Dornbusch, Ritter, Mont-Reynaud and Chen (1990) also compared family structure to school choice and further substantiated that mothers were more involved in the decision-making relative to school choice matters. Not surprising though, in cases of father and stepmother families, fathers were reported as being more involved in the decision-making process.

Belch and Willis (2001) continued the work of the 1970s and 1980s studies that examined the role of decision-making in the family to see if it held true in the 21st century. Since this time, significant changes have occurred in the American family and these changes may have impacted decision-making in the home. They tested several different hypotheses with 458 men and women and found that there have been significant changes in the roles assumed in the decision-making process, with the mother gaining more influence in all decision areas. A study by Ahlburg and Devita (as cited in Belch & Willis, 2001) found that not only are decisions made differently, but the makeup of the family structure is different as well. Many modern families were described as “one in three Americans now a member of a blended family (step family), and that blended families will continue to be a dominant force in the lives of children for the future” (p. 112). Marriage rates continue to fall, divorce rates are rising, and over 25% of babies are born to unwed mothers. Clulow (as cited in Belch & Willis, 2001) found that the family dynamics in industrialized countries—Australia, Western European countries, and the United States have changed as a result of many factors, most notably, two-income households. This has increased the status and options for women. This phenomenon has generated uncertainty about gender roles and responsibilities. In addition to areas of
education, women are taking greater roles in determining major purchases and expenses of the family finances.

Wilkins (2011) studied the impact of the decision-making process for school choice and that of mothers. Studying mothers from a variety of different social classes and racial backgrounds, he examined the dilemmas in which mothers engage in their roles as choosers of education for their children. Interestingly and connected to this research, he sought to understand the reconciliation process for competing rationalities of choice and trying to manage contradictions. The political landscape is fostering trends in choice including consumerism, individualism, and competition.

Reay and Ball (as cited in Wilkins, 2011) pointed to one contradiction that mothers of working-class families have. With a concentration on individualism and self-interest, moving away from the neighborhood school through choice results in a systematic denial of what is important as part of a working-class experience, the value of strong comfort, familiarity, security, and connection from being part of a community. Community-building practices, important to these families then, are in conflict with the act of consumption of education options. Clarke et al. (as cited in Wilkins, 2011) found that the mobilization of some citizens in a community through consumers of choice has resulted in community members being viewed differently as active or passive participants in education, deserving or undeserving subjects depending on their capacity to choose, when this is not the case. It is not about not wanting to be involved in education or caring. It is just the opposite. There is great care and regard for preserving the value that local communities bring.
I’d always dismissed the rumors flying around—people moving house or shifting their front gate a foot to one side to fall within the good catchment areas; parents lying about their postcodes, selling body parts to pay for private school, tutoring their children into nervous breakdowns—all that seemed so over the top, belonging to the realm of those over-perfect, over-zealous parents who have a ten-year plan for their five-year-olds. I always thought Mike and I were more hands on than that, wanting the best for our son, but just trying to play it straight. . . . But apparently I need to be a more active, play the game a bit more the way everyone else does. (Tucker, 2007, p. 16, as cited in Wilkins, 2011)

Bernard, Lucey, and Reay (as cited in Wilkins, 2011) described that this tension created among involvement, consumerism, and community creates a difficult environment full of anxiety and difficulty for working-class mothers. Wilkins found that working-class mothers describe and rationalize their decision not to choose based upon the “seduction of community.” Community brings solidarity, shared experience, security, and connection. Community is seen as a means to bring stability, predictability, and security for families. Choice involves bringing outsiders in and encourages insiders out. The parallel analysis is to the internal divorce of a family.

In choice, families divorce the family through a process of abandonment. Clark (as cited in Wilkins, 2011) shared that the defining feature of the consumer is the act of purchase or choosing, which, according to Needham (as cited in Wilkins, 2011), is essentially motivated by self-interest. Ball, Gewirtz, Reay, and Lucey (as cited in Wilkins, 2011) defended that, while working-class parents are thought to be at a disadvantage in a competitive consumerism choice environment, these families instead
want to invest in “collective associations of locality.” Bauman’s (2001) shaping of community and choice involves the idea that it is only when people are no longer sure what sense of security that community brings or its fundamental existence do they question their role in it. It is important that policymakers and practitioners in local schools recognize that parents who elect to stay in their local schools do not do so “passively or indiscriminately” (Wilkins, 2011, p. 11).

**Summary**

The range of choices available to families and the ways that they are dealt with are a reflection of a wider social and cultural social power or powerlessness outside of the home that would require further research and inquiry. In addition, as middle-class families often possess more skills to navigate this process than their working-class counterparts, perhaps the decision-making process for these families is about power, class, positional authority, and privilege, while the other is not seen as a failure to engage, but rather a pragmatic decision based on a realistic grasp surrounding the working-class choice (Reay & Ball, 1998). The impact of a new century is also having an impact on the choices that families make. The one given here is that there is change and change is happening at a very rapid pace. The next and final section of this literature review will address how individuals respond to change and the transitions that are necessary to move from one place to another.

**Managing Transitions**

In discussing the impact of change to an organization and to the individuals who are part of that organization as employees, clients, or customers, Bridges (2003) described that it is not the changes that are difficult, rather it’s the transitions that occur
during times of change that can be detrimental to success if not managed well. Change is situational, such as the reorganization of a professional staff and their teaching responsibilities, or the establishment of new district boundaries for attendance areas of elementary schools.

Transition is psychological. Transition includes a three-phase process that people go through as they internalize and come to reality with the details of a new situation that change will bring about. The first phase involves the process of letting go of the old systems, procedures, and protocol that were in place and the identity that people had in each. It is a time of ending. The second phase is described as the “neutral zone” or an in-between time and place where the old is gone but the new is not well established. It can be a time of uncertainty, fear, anger, and bewilderment, as it is not quite clear what the purpose or final outcome will be. Finally, the third phase is the making of a new beginning. This is the time when individuals develop a new identity, fully experience the new system, and understand its purpose to make it work. Stated another way, “Transition starts with an ending and finishes with a new beginning” (Bridges, 2003, p. 5). Bridges likens change without transitions to the mere rearrangement of chairs in a room. “Just because everything has changed, don’t think that anything is different around here” (p. 3).

Organizational change typically begins, out of the control of an individual, by an environmental shift, which then leads to different responses or outcomes. Through this kind of change, there is an intention to alter key organizational variables that then affect the members of the organization and their performance. This change, depending on its magnitude, can be viewed as a critical life event that has the potential to evoke many different feelings. Ashford (1988), Begley (1998), Callan (1993), Carnall (1986),
Gemmil and Smith (1985), Jick (1985), Nelson, Cooper, and Jackson (1995), Olsen and Tetrick (1988), Sagie and Koslowsky (1994), Schweiger and Ivancevish (1985), and Sverke, Hellgren, and Ohrming (1997) (as cited in Jimmieson, Terry, & Callan, 2004) have all concluded that because organizational change is not linear in fashion and several new changes can spiral from one change, the most frequent psychological state resulting from organizational change is uncertainty.

Jimmieson, Terry, and Callan (2004) studied organizational change over an 18-month period and then a 2-year follow-up to assess efficacy and job satisfaction. They found that the communication of information about the change and new expectations for behavior played a critical role in making the transition possible. Further, the self-efficacy of individuals played a significant role as it related to their own personal beliefs that they could execute the changes necessary. Stress and coping skills played significant roles as well.

Terry and Callan (as cited in Jimmieson et al., 2004) noted that it is necessary to consider not only the characteristics of the change events themselves and coping resources that people have, but also how individuals interpret the change taking place. They call this “situational appraisal.” Individuals reflect on the relevance of their well-being during the change and take stock in what they have to do to manage the change if no other choice is provided or available. Over time, the individuals all responded to change uniquely around common themes and characteristics based upon their own personal level of self-efficacy. There was an emphasis of greater efficacy and transition related to their involvement in decision-making during transitions and their abilities to fully understand what was happening.
This adaptation to change over time in HPS and interpretation of the events that were happening are evident in the opportunity for and level of involvement of key stakeholders from Phase I to Phase IV. Phase I of the reorganization had a lot of items in the neutral zone as parents were adapting to new school boundaries, new transportation requirements, new principals, new teachers, new routines, and even new buildings. The professional staff were also adapting to these neutral zone changes while advocating for parents to remain enrolled. The administration in Phase I had many feelings as well with attempts to fix unanticipated problems while trying to bypass the real work necessary to bring the organization to its real purpose in the new design. The community applied pressure to the superintendent to escape, perhaps prematurely in Phase II, from the neutral zone and redefine a new system based upon compromise.

Understanding organizational change is critical to any system contemplating making restructuring decisions. It is critical to understand this level of interpretation and self-efficacy in addition to the specific ways that individuals may respond to change, as discussed in the section that follows.

**The Impact of Change on Individuals**

Schools in the United States have worked relatively well for students who have needed only access and opportunity in order to succeed. As long as there were no social or economic consequences and graduates or even dropouts could get a well-paying job and have a good life, society has been able to turn a blind eye to the fact that schools were not serving all students well. Today, not all students enter school ready to learn, and the demands of schools with students entering with a wider range of learning needs—physically, socially, emotionally, and mentally—are increasing annually. The standards
that all students are expected to meet with proficiency today, just a generation ago, were only for those relatively few college-bound. The business of schools have changed, the work has changed, the expectations have changed, and when change can be embraced as an opportunity rather than coped with as a problem, great results can happen.

Many educators believe that the criticism that they are now subject to is unjustified. As a result, common responses include expressions of hurt, anger, bewilderment, and lack of worth and value (Schlechty, 2001). Nikolaou and Vakola (2005) studied organizational change as one of the major issues in organizational life and found that there is a link between attitudes of the individual with stress and commitment. Highly stressed individuals demonstrated decreased commitment and increased reluctance to accept the change or interventions to assist them through the transitions.

Given all of the public criticism and publicity around failing schools, it is no surprise that many parents are beginning to feel stressed and question whether the system is broken. Considerations for other school-of-choice options become thoughtful and reflective as concern is raised for their own child’s performance. This can create feelings for parents of bewilderment, anxiety, concern, doubt, and even anger if they feel that their public school system has failed them. These same feelings can occur if they stay in a district that goes through substantial change.

change suggested that negative feelings can be an indicator of an individual’s lack of support for the change. As a result, Kiefer (2005) set out to understand the dynamics of ongoing change and the relationship to negative emotions that exist, what they are about, how they impact everyday experiences, and the impact that they have on the system as a whole. The results found feelings of anger, disappointment, anxiety, and unfairness prevalent. These feelings were associated with everyday conditions, personal situation and future, and how the individuals were treated by the organization. Negative emotions were found to predict trust in the organization and whether individuals would withdraw from their investment, both in the short and longer term. Everyday changes impacted the level of trust over time.

Bridges (2003) described the reaction to a change in another way. He broke the feelings down to the premise that changes cause transitions, which, in turn, can cause some form of loss. It is the loss, not the changes, that individuals react to. When there is a change, or an ending, typical reactions are anger, sadness, fear, depression, or even confusion. These feelings are similar to the grieving process when someone loses a special loved one. These emotional states in an organization can be confused with low or bad morale. These feelings may not surface right away during the transition process once the change has been announced due to denial. Individuals can’t believe what is happening, and their only way of coping with the change is to deny that it is happening. Once they have accepted that the change is real, a new chain reaction of feelings takes form.

Bridges (2003) described anger as often the first response. It is an emotion often misdirected toward the leader of the organization as he or she is the one who initiated the
change. When they understand that they really aren’t angry with the leader, the process of bargaining begins. Bargaining is the unrealistic process in which individuals attempt to get out of or change the situation to make it go away by offering other alternatives. Others take on the feeling of anxiety, a very real feeling associated with not knowing how the new change will look when fully operational. Sadness is a natural feeling as well, as individuals mourn the loss of community, their neighborhood schools, and staff members with whom they have developed close personal relationships over time. Even the best and brightest individuals can feel a state of disorientation or confusion until the purpose is fully realized and short-term results begin to come in. Finally, depression can set in with associated feelings of hopelessness.

Chamberlain and Leahy (2008) substantiated these similar feelings in a case study of organizational change that identified feelings of change as relief, shock/surprise, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, experimentation (after inward reflection of acceptance moving to thinking “out there” and that some of the changes may be worth thinking about), and discovery (as the change takes place, realizing that some things are not as bad as imagined). In each of the four phases of reorganization of HPS, while not fully documented, there are apparent feelings of each of these emotions that were firmly held by community, staff, parents, and students. This research proposed to collect these feelings and bring voice to those who might not otherwise share their experiences and feelings.

Sutton (as cited in Cunningham, 1997) discussed the impact of downsizing due to lack of leadership, economic forces, or ineffective performance. An organization’s death can even be about “disbanding and reconnecting in response to shifting goals and events”
(p. 472). Cunningham (1997) studied the demise of a private community recreational facility and the organization’s death as a disconnecting experience, where individuals were forced to rethink their values and working norms. New relationships had to be formed, reconnecting people to new people and organizations. This experience was traumatic for some members. The emotional process was very similar to the death of a loved one, including feelings of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, recovery, and survival for those who stayed on. Interestingly, several individuals were able to take positive action before the organization was fully closed. They were more adept at dealing with their reactions and open to developing a positive framework for responding to the organization’s death and responding to feedback about how to adapt to the new future. In looking at the experiences of mothers in HPS, I was interested in understanding their journey of survival and what made the restructuring survivable.

During the transition process and going through the neutral zone described prior, Bridges (2003) described additional responses that can take shape. These reactions are applicable to HPS and its staff, community, and stakeholders. When anxiety rises, motivation falls. People can feel disoriented and self-doubting. They become resentful and self-protective. Energy is drained away from implementation and redirected to coping behaviors instead. Individuals become overloaded and can disengage from the system altogether. And, given all of the uncertainty, it is easy for people to become polarized and separate into two different groups: those that want to rush through the change and push things forward, and those who desire to go back to the way that things were. Under this kind of pressure, it is difficult to reach any level of consensus with the two groups and further discord can arise.
This research sought to understand the level of discord that occurred and why parents elected to stay in the district and push through the transitions with their children. Finally, and unfortunately, what happened to HPS is the last reaction that can occur during this time in the neutral zone—attack from the outside (Bridges, 2003). The school system was vulnerable to attack from its competitors. Disorganized, tired, immobile, and lacking strategic direction, the response to the required elements of change was slow and decline in student enrollment continued at an expedited pace.

What can be done during this time in the neutral zone to address these feelings and responses of individuals, especially if change is likely to continue, creating a whole new set of transitions? Bridges (2003) identified many strategies. One of particular awareness rests on establishing purpose and vision. Research has shown that individuals can accept and deal with a lot of change if it is “coherent and part of a larger whole. But unrelated and unexpected changes, even small ones, can be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back” (p. 45). In the study of HPS, the researcher identified what could cause the parents to leave the school district after the past decade of change and ongoing transitions, despite their decision to remain in the district during the same time period.

Phase IV of HPS brought about a new beginning for the district and community. To make a new beginning and mark a new future, according to Bridges (2003), people need the Four P’s: purpose, a picture, the plan, and a part to play. This is a time of celebration and success, as the reward of everyone’s effort becomes practical and in place, setting the stage for further growth and development. A new energy is present and the shift, subtle but profound, begins to move to how things should be done in an
organization like this, rather than waiting for the next shoe to fall—the next change to be announced. The passing of a $73 million bond proposal in HPS was evidence after all of this change and transition; the community was able to withstand a decade of change and redefine their part to play. This followed a presentation of a purpose, picture, and plan.

**Dealing With Nonstop Change**

The hardest thing that individuals have to deal with in regard to change is not the pace of change in the 21st century, but rather the changes in the “acceleration of that pace” (Bridges, 2003, p. 102). This profound acceleration of change is marked by accelerated transitions and more cycles of psychological reactions. Any change, even a deceleration, can cause disruption. A lack of change would be a change in and of itself. Fortunately, Bridges reminded us that the human capacity over time has the ability to adjust to new and higher levels of change.

Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton (2000) and Reilly, Brett, and Stroh (1993) (as cited in Kiefer, 2005) relinquished the fact that ongoing organizational change has become increasingly common for the 21st century. Systems are engaged in multiple and ongoing change events all of the time. The potential impacts can be both positive and negative. Research focusing on the negative impact of change includes topics such as “survivor syndrome, injustice, fear of job loss, decreased commitment and motivation” (p. 876).

**Summary**

The research implications of managing transitions, the impact of change to individuals, and dealing with non-stop change are significant. This research focus was to understand the experiences of mothers who have undergone significant change in an organization and why they elected not to abandon the system.
Summary of Literature Review

Leaders charting the new course of education in the United States must be keenly aware of the current performance of all students in real terms, must identify the best evidenced-based reform practices that will produce substantial increases in student achievement for all students, and must secure the systems and infrastructures necessary to provide a world-class 21st century learning curriculum. Systems that fail to do this nationally, at the state level, or at the local level will continue to contribute to the public criticism, exacerbate the choice movement away from low-performing schools to higher-performing schools, further segregate the classrooms and playgrounds of America, and fuel the decline in resources that are attributed to enrollment and performance. This cycle ends and then begins a new cycle of restructuring efforts.

Are reform efforts focused on 21st century learning merely rearranging the chairs on the deck of a sinking ship that is left without any lifelines, as other ships have left the harbor with names of S.S. Schools of Choice? Is our curriculum focused on a balance of academic content mastery as well as communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity? Are the high-stakes tests used to report out on performance measuring the right things? As these tasks are brought to the forefront and put to strategic action, a silent but growing minority voice needs to be heard to understand their experiences as part of this system and the impact it has had on their lives and their children through these change initiatives. Today’s schools are reeling from the human impacts of the changes that have been put into place by new technologies, international competition, and changing demographics. What is the prescription for this dilemma? Likely more change. However, if one asks parents who have participated in this change which conditions and
which restructured plans within the school system have helped and which have hindered their ability to let go of the old, live with a confusing time in the neutral zone, and make a solid new beginning, they can tell. One just needs to listen to them (Bridges, 2003).

This literature review has been presented in a very intentional fashion related to the phenomenology proposed. Understanding the impact, interpretation, and understanding of the shared experiences of these mothers requires understanding of a complex system and several driving forces over the past decade and preparing oneself to truly see the essence described in Chapter IV.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in response to the challenge that district leaders, local boards of education, policymakers, and state officials face as they re-imagine public education across America. A parallel crisis of economic disparity and academic underachievement is sweeping the nation in many of our traditional public school systems. The identified achievement gap between many different subgroups of students is gaining national attention and debate. Leaders must define a new infrastructure, consolidation of programs, elimination of programs, and new ways of innovation to meet these challenges. As this occurs, district leaders will need to be mindful of the preparation necessary to achieve a competitive edge in a global learning community while addressing the underachievement of many students in city school districts. Consequently, attention must be given to the parental unit that will be responsible for selecting the best learning environment to meet the needs of their children.

Mothers play a key role in how and where children receive an education. Leaders of traditional public education institutions need to better understand why mothers chose public education in the first place for their children. It will also be helpful to know what programs or services are imperative to keep in place for parents to choose to stay enrolled in a district during times of economic stress and district reform, when multiple choice options exist in a community. Finally, as parents persist to keep their children enrolled in traditional public education during these challenging times, understanding the
experiences of being a parent in the system and how any changes impact their family structure, resource allocation, and relationships with others will be helpful.

The continued downward spiral of decline in enrollment, loss of associated resources, abandonment of districts by other parents exercising school choice, the right sizing of districts to become more efficient, and a recurrence of this cycle create instability in urban city schools. This instability perpetuates a self-fulfilling prophecy of continued stereotyping, low expectations, and further segregation of students based upon ethnicity and socioeconomic class.

The focus of this study, knowing how mothers describe and interpret their experiences during times of change and what contexts or situations drive these experiences, was important for this research. Studying these lived experiences, I was able to understand the familial, academic, cultural, or economic factors that impacted the decision to maintain enrollment in the district. Further, I was able to learn how mothers, in particular, feel about their decisions to keep their children enrolled in the public schools where they live, even when the schools undergo repeated rounds of financially and educationally induced educational reforms and restructures. The description of this experience assisted in understanding why some mothers survive the urbanization and reform of school districts while others do not. Extracting these experiences assisted in defining parameters for consideration in the shaping of public policy regarding schools of choice and informing district leaders of the core values that mothers have and the expectations they have for their children.

The district studied, and the changes that occurred, illuminate the cycles of change common to urban school settings. During an enrollment period from 2003–2014,
HPS experienced a 35% decline in student enrollment, reduced over $15 million from its annual operating budget, reorganized the district into three separate grade-level infrastructures, closed and/or repurposed nine different schools, experienced over a 200% increase in students qualifying for free/reduced lunch, experienced a significant change in ethnicity where the collective minority is now the majority, and had 10 different high school options within 15 minutes from its secondary program, each offering choice options outside of the public school district.

The next section discusses the research design employed to study a sample of mothers who have children enrolled in Holland Public Schools, utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach to inquiry. The mothers recruited for this study represent families that maintained enrollment of their children through a 10-year period, during which the public school district enacted a series of restructuring changes that affected their children and, thus, their families. This study is the story of their experiences throughout this period of structural change and the meaning these changes have for these mothers and their families.

**Research Design**

The research design for this study was qualitative, using a transcendental phenomenological approach to inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). Ontological assumptions (Creswell, 2007) were the basis for philosophical implications of practice utilizing a social constructivism worldview (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Neuman, 2000; Schwandt, 2001). Ontological assumptions seek to define the nature of reality for the participants. In other words, reality was subjective and multiple, as there were 18 different participants in the study (Creswell, 2007). I sought to understand the
level of awareness that the participants had during the restructuring initiatives and the connections that were made with the district as they made sense of what was happening to and in the schools around them. As a result, I wanted to use multiple quotations based on the actual words of different participants to provide evidence of different perspectives. In this study, the different perspectives came from mothers who represented different economic levels, ethnicities, and academic profiles of their children.

Using a social constructivism worldview, I relied as much as possible on the participant’s view of a defined situation. Meaning was formed through the interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operated in their individual lives. Participants described their experiences after having shared a common lived experience of enrolling and staying enrolled in a traditional public school district over a 10-year period of district reform and restructuring. The individual experiences were reduced to a textural and structural description that resulted in a final “composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the participants” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). The descriptions consist of “what” they experienced, “how” they experienced it, and “why” they continue in the experience (p. 98). Marshall and Rossman (2006) described the importance of understanding these lived experiences. The value of this approach is to develop a worldview that rests on the assumption that there is a format and essence to experiences that can be narrated to reveal common elements that characterize the experience with a specific phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon is keeping children enrolled in an urban public school system despite the existence of other options that would offer an alternative to multiple rounds of restructuring that move children from school to school and create new configurations of schooling. It also focuses on the
“deep, lived meanings that events have for individuals, assuming that these meanings guide actions and interactions” (p. 105). Through an interview process, I focused on the past and present experiences to describe the essential experience overall. The participants got to make meaning of their experiences, interpret what was happening around and to themselves and their children, and describe the decision-making process that was used to keep their children enrolled in the district.

In the next section, I discuss the data collection methods, procedures, and implementation steps that were used to collect the lived experiences of these mothers.

**Data Collection Methods, Procedures, and Implementation**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of mothers, and their children, who were participants in four phases of urban school reform initiatives at HPS. The study addressed why they chose public education in the first place and why they chose to keep their children enrolled despite economic stress, public school criticism, and restructuring initiatives.

**Research Questions**

Creswell (2007) described three different types of research questions. Each of these three types was asked as part of this study for the purposes of understanding the defined phenomenon. Explanatory questions were used to identify plausible causal networks shaping this lived experience. Descriptive questions were used to document a circumstance of interest and an understanding of what happened during each of the school restructuring plans. Exploratory questions were used to better understand the phenomenon of which we know little about—why mothers elect to keep their children enrolled in school districts that experience multiple changes that impact the family.
structure at home. Table 3 provides the types of research that can be used in qualitative studies with examples of the purpose for using each type.

Table 3

*Types of Research and Purpose in Qualitative Studies (Creswell, 2007)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Research</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory (Research)</td>
<td>• To investigate a little-understood event, situation, or circumstance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• To identify or discover important variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• To generate hypotheses for future research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive (Research)</td>
<td>• To document an event, situation, or circumstance of interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanatory (Research)</td>
<td>• To explain the forces causing an event, situation, or circumstance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• To identify plausible causal networks shaping an event, situation, or circumstance</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

For the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study, the following central question and subquestions were used:

*Central Question:*

How do mothers of school-aged children who are enrolled in an urban district that has undergone several rounds of significant change experience, understand, and connect that change to their own lives and their decision to keep their children enrolled? (Explanatory)
Subquestions:

1. How do mothers describe their experiences through each of the district’s four phases of school reorganization? (Exploratory/Descriptive)

2. How do mothers describe their child’s experience in the school district through each of the phases of school reorganization? (Exploratory/Descriptive)

3. What contexts or situations do mothers describe as having typically influenced or affected their experiences in the district over the course of the last 10 years and their decision to keep their children enrolled in the system? (Explanatory)

4. Why did mothers enroll their child in the district (public school) in the first place? (Explanatory/Descriptive)

5. How do mothers describe or explain their decision to maintain enrollment in this district for their children since kindergarten, and how do they feel about that decision? (Descriptive)

This phenomenology was unique in its purpose, setting, and potential use under the social constructivist worldview utilized. The uniqueness came from the fact that it included an urban school district that experienced several restructuring initiatives. The district was led by the principal researcher, who was present during the same transitions over the same period of time as the participants of the study. A backyard approach was used to address this uniqueness, as discussed in the next section.

Backyard Research

This qualitative study used a backyard research approach. Backyard research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) involves studying the researcher’s own organization. In this
study, it involved my own school district, where I was an elementary principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. This district’s recent history of multiple rounds of systemic and structural change made it an ideal context in which to find mothers who experienced the phenomenon of maintaining enrollment for their children throughout a 10-year period of structural changes that affected the families and children attending school in the district. Although data collection was convenient and the information derived from the study can assist in district policy and further analysis of school reform, as well as add to understanding how parents of school-aged children experience major structural changes in the schools that serve their children, this type of research did present immediate issues that had to be resolved.

First of all, conducting a study with parents in a school district where I, as the researcher, also hold the position of superintendent raised power issues for participants. These power issues could have been an influencing factor in recruitment of participants, collection of data, analysis of data, and use of data. To reduce the impact of a power dynamic resulting from the researcher also being the school district superintendent, I opted to use a surrogate to assist with participant recruitment and to conduct interviews with the study participants. For this purpose, I had to identify and train an individual who met all of the regulations of Western Michigan University and the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board to collect the data. I also identified and trained two individuals to serve as reviewers for the data analysis after the process of horizontalization took place. Additionally, I ensured that during the recruitment process subjects fully understood, prior to data collection, that their participation or lack thereof in no way would impact future class assignments, schedules, access to programs, etc., for
their student. I also used multiple strategies of validity to create reader confidence in the accuracy of the findings.

The choice of instrumentation for this qualitative study was of great importance to yield the results critical for understanding the essence of this shared lived experience. Interviews as a data collection tool are discussed in the next section on instrumentation.

**Instrumentation**

Interviews were the primary data collection tool. Participants were also asked to complete a participant survey, found in Appendix D. The survey was used to collect descriptive data regarding each participant, as discussed in the data analysis section of this chapter.

According to Patton (2002), the purpose of a qualitative interview is to capture how those that are being interviewed view their world. My purpose in this study was to learn the participants’ terminology and judgments and to capture their experiences, that is, how they lived it (Patton, 2002). In this research, I wanted to be able to have the participants express their own understandings, feelings, and experiences in their own terms as much as possible regarding the personal and family impact of the changes that occurred in the district. I wanted them to be able to interpret what was happening and to see what kind of connections were made with their understanding of what was happening in the district and why. An interview was chosen because it offered face-to-face, in-person interactions that provided excellent historical, familial, social, and cultural accounts of the desired phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). It was my intent that these person-to-person accounts take on a narrative dialogue or conversation format—a
conversation with a purpose (Dexter, 1970). In essence, each of these participants had a story to tell, and I wanted to hear their story.

The interview was preferred, as I was not able to observe thoughts, feelings, or intentions relative to school choice during the time period outlined outside of my own personal experiences in the district. Other data collection methods were not selected. I could not observe behaviors that occurred in a previous time period. It would have been difficult to observe the behaviors of the participants outside of the school setting. I was unable to collect accounts in artifact form over time that had already passed. Finally, as a researcher, I did not have the ability to observe how people organized their world and the meanings that they attached to their experiences. Questions had to be asked of them as they allowed me to enter into their world of experiences through the interview process.

Given the strengths of interviews in the collection of qualitative data, there were limitations with this form of instrumentation. The most significant limitation to the interviews was that the participants were asked to recall events over the past 10 years, and each participant was not equally articulate and perceptive (Creswell, 2003). To assist the participants in the chronology of events and each of the phases of district reorganization, the “Holland Public Schools History of Infrastructure” (Appendix N) was used by the interviewer. It was my hope that the interviewees would be honest and not be tempted to give what they believed to be socially acceptable answers or try to emphasize support for or against a design or a feeling more so than what happened in actual reality.

In-depth interviews lasting approximately 1 to 1½ hours were conducted using an interview guide (Appendix E) and an interview protocol (Appendix F) (Patton, 2002). The interviews were conducted by a trained interviewer—a doctoral student at Western
Michigan University. This process was used as I could not interview the subjects myself due to issues of power and relationship to the district. The interviewer was someone from the district who had a basic working knowledge of the events that occurred, but not someone who was impacted in a personal or professional manner. The interviewer was female, possessing the attributes characteristic of the mothers in this study, who have made decisions relative to their own children’s educational experiences. The interviewer was not bilingual; however, a trained bilingual interpreter from the school community was available upon request. The ability to have an interpreter available with the possession of linguistic and cultural capabilities was important, given that the potential subjects that could be recruited as part of the sampling process included mothers from the district’s considerable Hispanic population. This interviewer was selected after the original interviewer selected was unable to fulfill his responsibilities due to a lapse in time for data collection. The in-depth interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed by three separate transcriptionists for analysis.

A combined instrumentation approach was selected. First of all, an outline summarizing the history of the infrastructure and grade-level changes that occurred in the district from 2003–2009 was presented. This outline provided a way for the interviewer to keep the interview focused, as well as providing a visual memory cue for the participants to recall each of the phases of the reorganization plan. This outline is provided in Appendix N.

An interview protocol was used with a standardized open-ended interview format. The interviewer explored other topics at her discretion through the use of probes included on the interview guide and through her own capacity to build upon memories or
experiences that were shared. Merriam (1998) defined probes as additional questions or comments that follow up on something that has already been asked as part of the standardized interview. It was not possible to anticipate every question to be asked, as part of the interview related to the experiences or feelings held by each participant. Probes were helpful as each participant could respond to specific questions differently. Consequently, the interviewer had the ability to make adjustments in how the interview proceeded based on the information gained as each interviewee told her own story and the story of her family. This strategy allowed for flexibility in probing and determining when it was appropriate to explore certain subjects in greater depth, or even to pose questions about new areas of inquiry that were not originally anticipated in the development of the interview protocol. The interview guide and interview protocol were successfully field tested.

This type of interview approach was selected based upon its characteristics, strengths, and weakness (Patton, 2002), as shown in Figure 15. Typically, in interviews using phenomenology as the research design, the interview involves an informal, interactive process, and utilizes open-ended comments and questions. From this framework, I developed a series of questions “aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the person’s experience of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114).
Standardized Open-Ended Interview (Patton, 2002)

| Characteristics | • The exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advance. All interviewees are asked the same basic questions in the same order. Questions are worded in a completely open-ended format. |
| Strengths | • Increasing comparability of responses; data are complete for each person on the topics addressed in the interview; reduces interviewer effects and bias; permits evaluation users to see and review the instrumentation used in the evaluation; facilitates organization and analysis of the data. |
| Weaknesses | • Little flexibility in relating the interview to particular individuals and circumstances; standardized wording of questions may constrain and limit naturalness and relevance of questions and answers. |

**Figure 15.** Standardized open-ended interview characteristics.

Merriam (1998) described four types of questions to stimulate responses from participants, including hypothetical, devil’s advocate, ideal position, and interpretive (see Table 4). For the purpose of this study, examples of each of these types were used as part of the interview process. The goal was to be able to explore, probe, and ask questions that would “elucidate and illuminate” (Patton, 2002, p. 348) the experiences of the participants in this setting.
Table 4

Types of Interview Questions

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Type of Questions</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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| Hypothetical (Interview)        | • To ask the respondent what he or she might do or what it might be like in a given situation  
                              |   • “What if,” “Suppose”                                                |
| Devil’s Advocate (Interview)    | • To challenge the respondent to consider an opposing point of view      |
| Ideal Position (Interview)      | • To ask the respondent to describe an ideal situation                  |
| Interpretive (Interview)        | • To ask the respondent for a reaction to the interviewer’s tentative interpretation of what the respondent has been saying as part of the interview |

For example, participants were asked, if they had a kindergarten student, would they enroll them in HPS (hypothetical)? This was a probe that was added to Question #11 as part of the field-testing process. Question #11 from the interview protocol took on the devil’s advocate perspective, as participants were asked to address the quality of education received in urban school settings and their decision to keep their children enrolled. Question #10 addresses an ideal position, as participants were asked to address the factors that would be important to them when choosing a school if they had a kindergarten student ready for enrollment. Questions #1 through #8 were interpretive in nature. In the section that follows, I provide a more detailed description of the interview protocol I used for data collection.

**Interview Guide Approach and Interview Protocol**

An interview guide approach (see Appendix E) was used to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry were used with each participant. This was important, as I did not
conduct the interviews. The interview guide provided topics or subject areas for the interviewer to explore, probe, or even ask more questions about, which would “elucidate and illuminate” the particular phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Patton described the characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of an interview guide approach, as shown in Figure 16. The strength of this process was that it brought a consistent and systematic approach to the interview, producing more comprehensive data and descriptions to analyze.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Guide Approach (Patton, 2002)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Characteristics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Topics and issues to be covered are specified in advance, in outline form; interviewer decides sequence and wording of questions in the course of the interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strengths</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The outline increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collections somewhat systematic for each respondent. Logical gaps in data can be anticipated and closed. Interviews remain fairly conversational and situational. Effectively uses the time available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weaknesses</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Important and salient topics may be inadvertently omitted. Interviewer flexibility in sequencing and wording questions can result in substantially different responses from different perspectives, thus reducing the comparability of responses.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 16. Interview guide approach.*

The interview guide and the interview protocol found in Appendix E and Appendix F were used to conduct the interview. The process for data collection is summarized in the next section.
Procedures

1. Access was obtained from the Board of Education of HPS as defined in Appendix G.

2. HSIRB (Human Subjects Institutional Review Board) permission was granted to conduct the research study with special attention noted for inclusion of minority representation that could include Spanish-speaking families. This permission was granted and timelines extended due to the researcher taking time away from the data collection and change in principal interviewer. (Appendix H)

3. Training of the interviewer and signing the confidentiality agreement in Appendix I.

4. Training of three transcriptionists on the process of transcribing the taped interviews into written form and signing the confidentiality agreement in Appendix J.

5. Potential participants were recruited from the pool of subjects as defined in the sampling process for field testing and inclusion in the research.

6. Field testing was successfully completed with two subjects.

7. Sixteen participants were recruited using the identified subject recruitment process. Two additional subjects were recruited after the pool of candidates from some identified categories had been exhausted, for a total of 18 participants.

8. Recruited participants were sent an Invitation to Participate included in Appendix K.
9. Eighteen participants signed and completed the Participant Consent form included in Appendix L.

10. Seventeen out of 18 participants completed a Participant Survey, included in Appendix D. The purpose of the survey was to collect basic demographic information about each as a participant in the study. The survey was a voluntary component of the study.

11. The interviews were all conducted in English, with assistance from a translator with participants who speak Spanish as a first language and are not fluent in English. There was not a need for any translation, even though five of the participants spoke a language other than English in the home.

12. I met with the interviewer when half of the interviews had been conducted to discuss the process and the results in order to ensure fidelity to the process.

13. Three trained transcriptionists transcribed the interviews verbatim.

14. Member checking was offered to all participants.

15. Validation was completed by two external auditors.

The interviewer offered to meet the participants at the local library off of the school campus. This location was chosen due to its accessibility to subjects by both private and public transportation, the neutrality of environment free of power struggle or possible negative experiences of school, and the availability of private confidential meeting spaces. When the interviewer contacted participants to schedule meeting times, this location was named as the primary location to meet for the face-face interviews. When participants learned that the interviewer was the principal of one of the local K–7 schools, the parties all agreed to meet on-site at the principal interviewer’s location.
Consequently, all 18 interviews were conducted on the campus of the interviewer’s administrative building in a secure and confidential conference room.

The next section of this chapter details the significance of the setting, the process for gaining access, and the process of participant recruitment and consent.

**Sampling, Subjects, Access, and Setting**

**Sampling Procedures to Identify Subjects**

A qualitative inquiry approach was used for an in-depth study of a relatively small sample selected purposively. The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting “information-rich” cases where one can learn a great deal about issues of central purpose (Patton, 2002). The study of information-rich cases in this study produced insights and in-depth understandings of the lived experience. The results obtained using this method illuminate the questions under review in this study.

Four purposeful sampling variables of ethnicity, type of secondary program attended, economic status, and academic proficiency were used. This created eight different categories, indicated by the bottom row of Figure 17. Figure 17 provides an illustration of the sampling process that was defined.
Note. To consider a mother as a potential participant, her child must have been enrolled in Grade 12 in the 2013–2014 school year and have been enrolled in the district consecutively since kindergarten. White = 8 subjects, Hispanic = 8 subjects, all other ethnicities = 2 subjects. Total participants = 18.

Figure 17. Illustration of participants representing each of the four categories of ethnicity, high school program, SES status, and academic proficiency status.

The selection criteria were intentional to ensure that a social justice frame represented the voice of parents who are minority and are considered at-risk in qualifying for additional academic services based upon the qualification for free/reduced lunch and lack of proficiency on the eighth grade MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Program)—two factors to determine eligibility for federal program services.

Purposeful sampling was used so that the researcher could intentionally inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of this study (Creswell, 2007). Four variables of ethnicity, type of secondary program attended, economic status, and academic proficiency were used as factors to describe the lived experience. This allowed the ability to bring voice to populations that are often not present in the shaping of public policy and school choice. An additional criterion that was identified for the creation of the pool was that the potential subjects must also come
from a group of mothers who had children that were consecutively enrolled in the district from the 2001–2002 through the 2013–2014 school year. This means that their child was enrolled in the district consecutively from kindergarten through Grade 12. In the original research proposed, this included the 2011–2012 school year. This meant that their child was enrolled in the district from kindergarten through Grade 10. The 10-year period of reform and transformation began when the students were enrolled in the district beginning with their Grade 3 year. The delay in collecting the research actually is perceived as a benefit to the research. The children of the participants were now seniors and prepared to graduate from the district. This provided the opportunity to describe the overall experience in the district.

These enrollment criteria ensured that the participants were enrolled in the district to experience all four phases (Phase I, II, III, and IV, as will be discussed in the “Setting in Historical Context” section) of school restructuring/reform. Enrollment criteria assisted in understanding the phenomenon or lived experience of these subpopulations over time, while analyzing any separate or overlapping themes from a social constructivist view. Mothers were purposefully selected as the subjects, as they are the most likely individual of the parental unit to make decisions regarding school attendance, as discussed in Chapter II. As this research followed a phenomenological approach specific to this shared and lived experience in HPS, any generalizability to other groups not represented or in other urban settings is limited.

In preparation for the recruitment process, Excel spreadsheets were created and names listed in alphabetical order for all of the subjects that were defined by each category with the variables outlined. These lists were generated by the district’s Office
of School Improvement. Once each list was generated, an online random number generator (http://www.random.org/) was used to select a potential subject from each category for ease of implementation. This was in lieu of using bingo ball call numbers originally identified in the proposal. Therefore, each individual from each category had an equal probability of being recruited from the population, ensuring that the sample would be representative of the population (Keppel, 1991). Four additional alternates were randomly selected in the same manner for each of the identified categories in the event that an identified potential subject was unable to be contacted or unwilling to participate in the study.

All ethnicities represented in the pool of Holland Public Schools who met the enrollment standards are depicted in Table 5. These data were originally collected for participation in 2012. The same data were used to select participants in 2014.

Due to sample size and the protection of the confidentiality of participants of American Indian, Asian, and African-American families, only Hispanic and Caucasian families were moved forward in the first recruitment process. However, two additional potential subjects were recruited from the remaining pool of students, representing all other ethnicities regardless of SES, proficiency, or secondary program selection in the second subject recruitment process. Two potential subjects were selected for recruitment to arrive at a total of 18 subjects. Eighteen participants was the target number of individuals to include in this study, keeping within the range identified for ideal participants in a phenomenology (Polkinghorne, 1989). This process was put into place to minimize the risk associated with the principles of justice as it relates to research with members of minority groups.
Table 5

*Total Population Sample of Students Enrolled Since Kindergarten in Grade 10 for the 2011–2012 School Year Who Also Participate in the 8th Grade MEAP Assessment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Secondary Program</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
<th>Academic MEAP Proficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>New Tech</td>
<td>Low SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Eleven students had no academic performance scores available on the MME, resulting in a total population sample of 162/173. Secondary program is defined as traditional—the secondary program at the traditional high school and New Tech—a secondary school choice option in the district focused on project-based learning. Socioeconomic status is defined by whether the participant’s child qualifies for free or reduced lunch based upon federal qualifications for school lunch programs. To be academically proficient on the MEAP, students must have received a level 1 or 2 on both the eighth grade MEAP math and a score of 1 or 2 on the eighth grade MEAP English Language Arts (ELA). Ethnicity is defined by enrollment records self-reported by parents using the State Race Ethnicity Codes in the State of Michigan for Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). The same population sample was used to select participants for enrollment in the 2013–2014 school year.

Table 6 defines the total demographics for the Grade 12 class under consideration by ethnicity. Table 7 defines the number of participants from each category that were selected. Unfortunately, the final pool of participants was overrepresentative of mothers who were Caucasian, with students in a traditional secondary program, proficient on the MEAP, and who did not qualify for free/reduced lunch.
Table 6

*Total District Population of Grade 12 by Ethnicity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Sample Population</strong></td>
<td><strong>373</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7

*Purposeful Sample Defined by Recruitment Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Secondary Program</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
<th>Academic MEAP Proficiency</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>New Tech</td>
<td>Low SES</td>
<td>High SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Total sample population, \( N = 18 \): Eight Hispanic participants who attended either the traditional high school or New Tech High School with different levels of socioeconomic status and academic proficiency on the MEAP, and eight White students who attended either the traditional high school or New Tech High School with different levels of socioeconomic status and academic proficiency on the MEAP were originally identified for inclusion. Two additional subjects were identified for selection. The actual numbers recruited are included.

There were two different subject recruitment processes that took place. The first was to identify 16 subjects or study participants. The second was to identify 2 additional participants for a total of 18. A pool of potential subjects from the total population was identified for the selection of two additional subjects to represent the population as a
whole. Two potential subjects were randomly identified from this last group with eight additional alternates.

Each of the identified potential subjects received an invitation letter to participate (Appendix K) from the principal interviewer. Each subject was provided with a 2-week window to respond to the invitation. If there was no response, the interviewer made multiple follow-up telephone calls. If the potential subject was unable to be contacted after three attempts or indicated that she did not want to participate, then the interviewer went to the next identified alternate on the list. This process continued until all subjects were recruited or until a category of alternates or potential subjects was exhausted. Six categories were exhausted.

Once the 18 participants were identified and they completed the consent process, each one was again numbered 1 through 18 to protect confidentiality of the participants to move forward in the data collection process.

There were no perceived benefits or risks associated with subjects for their participation or lack of participation in this study. To ensure that this was understood, the following statement was included as part of their informed consent: “Furthermore, I understand that my participation in this research or lack of participation will in no way impact positively or negatively my child’s class placement, schedule, performance, participation in school activities, or any other school related function.” Once recruited for participation, each subject signed the Parent Consent Form, included in Appendix L, at their initial meeting with the interviewer.
The additional descriptive statistics outlined in Table 8 were used only to describe the participants and were not used in any way to interact with the data collected. This description is included in Chapter IV.

Table 8

**Defined Descriptive Statistics for Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Descriptive Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nominal Data</strong> refers to data that contain non-ordered response categories. The data themselves have no arithmetic value.</td>
<td>• <em>Marital Status</em>: Married, Single, Divorced&lt;br&gt;• <em>Primary Language Spoken at Home</em>: English, Spanish, Other&lt;br&gt;• <em>Immigration Status</em>: U.S. Citizen, 1st/2nd/3rd Generation, Legalized Immigrant&lt;br&gt;• <em>Neighborhood School</em>: Harrington, Lakeview, Maplewood, Washington, Jefferson, Van Raalte, Longfellow, Holland Heights, Lincoln</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ordinal Data</strong> refers to data that contain ordered response categories. There is a logical order to the response categories, but the intervals between the categories are not necessarily equal.</td>
<td>• <em>Education Level of Parent</em>: &lt; 12 years, GED, High School Diploma, Some College, College Degree, Advanced Degree&lt;br&gt;• <em>Employment Status</em>: Full-Time, Part-Time, Unemployed, Stay at Home Parent&lt;br&gt;• <em>Number of Schools Child Enrolled in</em>: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, or 8&lt;br&gt;• <em>Number of Children in District</em>: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, &gt; 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interval Data</strong> refers to data that can be scaled so that intervals between the response categories are known.</td>
<td>• <em>Parental Involvement</em>: 1–2 × week, 1–2 × month, 1–2 × year, 3–5 × week, 3–5 × month, 6–10 × year, never</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 provides a descriptive profile of the participants based upon this recruitment process and completion of the participant survey.
Table 9

Descriptive Profile of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>PL</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>ES</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>FI</th>
<th>Volunteer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Stay at Home Parent</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>&gt;$100,000</td>
<td>1-2 × week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>25,001-49,999</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>Advanced Degree</td>
<td>&gt;100,000</td>
<td>3-5 × year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>50,000-74,999</td>
<td>3-5 × month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>75,000-99,999</td>
<td>1-2 × year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>50,000-74,999</td>
<td>1-2 × year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>75,000-99,999</td>
<td>1-2 × year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>75,000-99,999</td>
<td>1-2 × year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>25,001-49,999</td>
<td>3-5 × year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>75,000-99,999</td>
<td>1-2 × month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>English/Cambodian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Stay-at-Home Parent</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>25,001-49,999</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Part-Time</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>50,000-74,999</td>
<td>Unable To</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>50,000-74,999</td>
<td>Unable To</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>75,000-99,999</td>
<td>3-5 × year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Part-Time</td>
<td>&lt;12 years</td>
<td>25,001-49,999</td>
<td>1-2 × month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>50,000-74,999</td>
<td>3-5 × month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Black Amer.</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Unable To</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. The number of total participants = 18. Not all participants answered every question on the demographic survey provided. P=Participant, Ethnicity, PL=Primary Language Spoken at Home, MS=Marital Status, Children=Number of Children Enrolled in the District, ES=Employment Status, Education=Highest Degree Earned, FI=Family Income, Volunteer=Amount of Time Individual Volunteers in the School, Unable To=Participant indicated that their schedule does not allow them to volunteer.*
Before the process of recruitment took place, access to the setting was needed. The setting was an urban school district in West Michigan. The next section describes the process that was used to gain such access.

**Access**

As the student investigator for this research, I was the Superintendent of Schools for the location of data collection. In this dual role, I took great care to follow all bylaws and policies of the HPS’s Board of Education, explain the purpose of this research and access to subjects, and obtain the permission of the school board to do so. Access was needed in two domains for the completion of this study: purpose and participants. I secured access through written explanation and consent, as outlined in Appendix G. In accordance with District Policy 2416—Student Privacy and Parental Access to Information (School District of the City of Holland, 2004) and District Policy 2605—Program Accountability and Evaluation (School District of the City of Holland, 1997), I secured permission from the executive committee of the HPS’s Board of Education. The executive committee, acting on behalf of the board, served as the gatekeeper and access to the identified purpose and participants of the study. Per board policy, I had legitimate access to existing student records for the purposes of program accountability and evaluation purposes.

**Confidentiality/HSIRB Practices**

All information collected as part of this research was treated with the utmost confidentiality and ethical respect by following the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) practices. Informed consent, to ensure that all participants as part of this research had adequate information to make an informed decision regarding whether to
participate, was obtained by using the consent form included in Appendix L. This consent form included the project title, description of the study, researcher’s contact information, research procedures, and perceived benefits/risks associated with being part of this study. Confidentiality contracts were signed by the interviewer (see Appendix I) and the transcriptionists (see Appendix J) to ensure confidentiality in a study that involved individuals beyond the student investigator.

Research data will be kept for 3 years from the date of this dissertation in a locked file at the principal investigator’s office at Western Michigan University or its archives and then destroyed. All audiotapes were destroyed upon completion of the data analysis. Participant’s names were not included on any documents other than the consent forms and referred to only by participant number 1 through 18. The consent forms are on file with the research data. Existing student records were used to access students’ proficiency on the Grade 8 MEAP. Student data were used only to identify the pool of participants in the study to ensure representation across demographic groups. Permission to conduct this research was granted by the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (Appendix H).

The setting for this qualitative research was unique, following a decade of significant restructuring and reform efforts. To assist the reader in understanding the magnitude of physical change and the potential impact on the participants in the study, a detailed historical context is provided in the section that follows.

**Setting in Historical Context**

LeCompte and Schensul (1999) described the ideal setting for qualitative research to be one that is in the natural setting where the researcher can frame the common
experiences, beliefs, and rationale within a social-political, historical, or cultural context. Creswell (2007) recommends meeting with the participants to collect data in the field at the site subjects experienced the issue or problem under study.

The setting for this phenomenology was an urban school district in Michigan. The district was situated in a suburban lakeshore resort community with multiple school choice options within the physical boundaries of the school district itself and within the intermediate school district in which it is located. The choices within the physical boundary of HPS included an early college secondary school option in the district itself, three public school academies (K–12, 9–12, and K–8), and three non-public school districts (K–12). HPS shares a border with four other public school districts.

All parents who leave or enter the district are asked to complete schools-of-choice applications that release them from their resident district. On this form parents may cite the rationale for their decisions to enter or leave the district. As superintendent, I reviewed these forms internally. Parents provided little in-depth information as to their parental choice. The most frequently cited reasons and comments included the following: preference, childcare, continuation, academic programs, moved, parent employee, and court order. Unfortunately, HPS was a net losing district of enrollment through the schools-of-choice program offered to parents.

Figure 18 illustrates the decline in enrollment beginning with the 1993–1994 school year; just prior to the passage of Public Act 145 (Department of Treasury, State Tax Commission, 1993).
Note. Student projection data are used to determine the fiscal year operational budget and staffing needs. The projection lines of high, most likely, and low are based upon trends in enrollment, birth rates, economic factors, and cohort survival rates of individual classes.

Figure 18. Holland Public Schools enrollments and projections Grades K–12. (Ignatovich, 2008)

Impact of Declining Enrollment

Public Act 145 (Department of Treasury, 1993) significantly changed the way in which schools in the state of Michigan are funded. LEAs receive a foundation dollar amount per full-time equivalent (FTE) student based upon two different enrollment or count periods during the school year. These two counts are blended to form the total state allocation that an LEA receives. The net result of this funding formula is that if district enrollment is declining, financial support from the state is also declining. This decline in revenue, combined with increased costs in energy and employee-related salaries and benefits, result in the need to reduce operational expenditures. Over time,
the loss in students and loss in revenue became cumulative and lead to the closing of grade-level sections and/or entire building programs. This was the case in HPS over a 10-year period, resulting in three restructuring plans of the grade-level infrastructure.

Each year, districts make projections for their student count, which in turn determines a significant portion of the overall revenue for operational expenditures. Figure 18 includes an example of the projections for HPS with three different scenarios proposed. Projections like these are used for the purposes of staffing, budget forecasting, and the development of program. This type of projecting and budget forecasting information was used as part of each of the four phases of district reform. Phase I occurred in the 2003–2004 school year. Phase II occurred in the 2006–2007 school year. Phase III began in the 2009–2010 school year. Phase IV was implemented in the 2010–2011 school year. The total district enrollment for spring 2014 was 3,913, a 30% decline from 5,600 in 1995-1996, just 14 years prior.

While no comprehensive study was completed as to the reasons why families left the district during this period of time, the enrollment history of the district and demographics of the residents of the city show a decline in White middle-class families. Is this an example of “White Flight or College Flight?” This question remains operationally unanswered or defined. However, it is a term widely used in strategic planning and defining the current reality of HPS and the city itself. Research substantiates this phenomenon in urban city centers, as discussed in Chapter II.

In addition to the decline in enrollment in the district, there was a gradual shift in student demographics over time. Figure 12 illustrates this pattern, beginning with data collected in the fall of 2001 through fall 2010. This information was collected from the
Michigan Student Data System used for student count and auditing purposes. The fall of 2005 was the first year that the collective number of minority students (51.1%) was greater than the number of Caucasian students (48.8%).

Figure 19 illustrates a pictorial representation of the need for district reorganization. Whenever the enrollment/revenue was below the district expenditures, the district was spending fund equity to maintain operations. When in deficit spending, eventually a change in the infrastructure was needed to reduce overall operational expenditures through a reorganization plan and possibly through consolidation of programs and building closures. When the enrollment/revenue was above district expenses, the district was able to maintain operations for a period of time depending on the decline in enrollment. For HPS, this process repeated itself every 3 years. In essence, operations became even more ineffective in year 2 of each cycle as student loss was not great enough to consolidate programs, thereby increasing operational ineffectiveness from a financial standpoint. These two trend lines are directly related to the decline in enrollment in the district and each of the four phases of district restructuring.

Figure 19. Comparison of enrollment/revenue with district expenses. (HPS Business Office, personal communication, 2010)
History of District Reorganization Plans

Phase I of restructuring occurred in 2003. Phase I was defined as “focus schools.” This infrastructure change resulted in the closing of two K–5 neighborhood schools. The district was reorganized into an East and West region, each including grade-level focus schools K–1, 2–3, and 4–5. Students across the district were reassigned to their new grade-level school. This resulted in families being reassigned to different schools and, in many cases, having children in multiple schools across the Grade K–5 program. The most notable effect during Phase I was the manner in which the restructuring was implemented. The study and design of this model was made by the superintendent and Board of Education without the involvement of district administration, professional staff, community stakeholders, or parents. The decision to move to this grade-level structure was announced one week prior to the Board of Education of HPS taking action. Public outcry was relentless and the local media sensationalized board action and public discourse. While there were two community forums to provide feedback on the plan, it was obvious that they were not input sessions and the new design was unanimously supported by the Board of Education in the spring of 2003. While the restructure had many instructional benefits, the new transportation system to shuttle students from building to building failed miserably on day one, setting the course for continued challenges with implementation and building community support for the model. Parents found it difficult to volunteer in their children’s schools, scheduling of holiday concerts and performances was difficult, and stable organizations like the Parent Teacher Association found it challenging to support their mission. During Phase I, I was an elementary principal in the district.
Phase II began in the fall of 2005 and carried forward into the spring of 2006. This restructure plan was brought about by two primary driving forces: the need for the district to reduce operational expenditures by $2.2 million and the public outcry for the new superintendent to reorganize the district into a much more family-focused design. A Board of Education-appointed community advisory committee was formed to assist in the process. The advisory committee membership included administration, instructional staff, parents, and community members. Through a series of meetings looking at multiple grade-level configurations and associated cost savings, a recommendation was made to the Board of Education by the advisory committee. The result included moving into a K–3, 4–5, 6–8, K–8, 9–12 model. The “elemiddle” concept or K–8 design was debated as a best practice option for urban districts that would also provide parents a choice within the district boundaries. The elemiddle, by its very nature, addressed many of the focus school concerns. However, this concept was not supported enough at the time to implement as a districtwide reform effort. After a series of public input sessions, the Board of Education of HPS unanimously voted in favor of this new infrastructure in the spring of 2006. The plan was implemented in the fall of 2006. The net result was a closing of two more elementary schools in the district and reassigning families once again to different schools within the district. While there was disappointment, frustration, and even anger in some public and private arenas, this plan was met with greater success than its predecessor. Media sensationalized the events surrounding the reorganization once again. During Phase II, I was the assistant superintendent of teaching and learning.
Phase III began in the spring of 2008. I was hired as the superintendent of the school district upon the retirement of the sitting superintendent. I was charged with bringing forward a strategic plan that would meet two primary outcomes: instructional priorities for the district and an operational plan for all district facilities. There was a need to develop a guaranteed and viable curriculum and instructional practices to support the changing demographics of the district. There was also a growing achievement gap among different subpopulations. High school graduation rates were declining. These needs were balanced with the increasing demands to ensure that programs for the highest achieving students were maintained.

With the assistance of several community stakeholders and feedback from many informed and engaged mothers across the district, I recommended Phase III to the Board of Education in the winter of 2009. This restructuring combined all elementary and middle school programs into a district infrastructure of a K–7 model. Grade 8 students were moved to the high school campus to address changes in secondary curriculum and graduation requirements. A Grade 9–12 learning lab/online credit recovery program was introduced, repurposing one of the closed elementary schools from prior reorganization plans. A series of parent forums, student visitations, and transition events were scheduled to receive feedback, provide input, and prepare for possible implementation. The Board of Education unanimously voted in favor of the plan in February 2009, and plans began for implementation. The school attendance areas for the district were redrawn and families were reassigned once again. The children of potential participants for this study were the first Grade 8 class to be enrolled as part of the Grade 8–12 secondary program. The local media played a much more conservative role of coverage during this phase of
district restructuring, neither supporting nor refuting the recommendation and plan of implementation. During Phase III, I was superintendent of the district.

The fourth and final phase of reorganization and restructuring of academic programs began in 2010–2011. Following a comprehensive study of secondary school reform initiatives, this phase resulted in the implementation of a secondary school reform initiative embracing project-based learning as a fundamental means of instructional delivery through the national New Tech Network. This provided a project-based academic program choice for secondary students in addition to the traditional secondary school program. The New Tech High School opened for eighth and ninth grade students in year 1 with a new Grade 8 class to be added each year, resulting in a Grade 8–12 program over a period of 4 years. The children of potential participants for this study were the first Grade 9 class to have the choice to be enrolled. During this phase, the community passed a $73 million bond in May 2010, to renovate and construct new academic learning spaces across all instructional facilities.

While challenged by a continued decline in student enrollment and a national/state recession, the district also needed a large-scale facility renovation project. This plan had to address aging facilities, safety and security, critical repairs, enhancements for learning, and energy efficiencies. The existing revenue source through building and site funds and sinking funds did not meet the need to renovate all existing facilities. In addition, if specific facilities would not be needed in the district, investment into these facilities was not deemed responsible. As I was an employee in the district since 2001 in different leadership positions, I had collected various forms of data and public feedback informally and formally throughout my tenure. During this phase, I
continued as the superintendent. Each of these four phases and desired outcomes are summarized in Figure 20.

![Diagram of phases](image)

**Figure 20.** History of district reorganization.

In this section, I have described the data collection methods that were used for this qualitative study, the purposeful sampling process to recruit potential subjects, access, and confidentiality, and I have provided the reader with a historical setting and context for the restructuring initiatives that took place. In the next section, a description of the data analysis process and procedures that are critical to bring credibility to the work and reduce the level of potential bias associated with doing backyard research is provided.

**Data Analysis Process and Procedures**

As the primary researcher conducting this research in my district of employment, I used several data analysis and validation processes and procedures, as recommended in
the literature, to build reliability and validity of the findings. Moustakas (1994) suggested several different approaches for phenomenological analysis and representation, often referred to as phenomenological reduction. Before I address the specific steps that I followed in the data analysis and validation techniques, it is important to understand the process of epoche and bracketing. During this process, I separated out my own personal experiences of working in HPS so that I could prepare myself to seek out meaning and understand the experiences of the mothers in this research separate from my own.

**Epoche and Bracketing**

As I played three separate and distinct roles during each of the four phases of district restructuring, it was important, to the extent possible, that the process of epoche or bracketing occur before the research was conducted and again prior to analysis to assist in data analysis, description of experiences, and clustering of themes. According to Moustakas (1994), this is difficult to do for individuals who are doing backyard research. However, researchers who embrace this idea can effectively do so by describing their own personal experiences and bracketing (Husserl, 1931) out their own personal views before proceeding with the experience of others. In this process, the goal was to bracket out the world and presuppositions to identify the data in pure form, uncontaminated by extraneous intrusions (Moustakas, 1994). Once the data were collected, the phenomenon was treated as a text or document separately and not interpreted in terms of the standard meanings given to it by existing literature. The subject matter was analyzed, as much as possible, on its own terms.

First, I needed to describe my own personal experiences with the phenomenon under study. This was a complex task, especially as I was closely connected to the
experience itself. I had to allow the phenomenon or experience under study to be just what it was and to come to know it as it presented itself through the participants. Moustakas (1994) described that the epoche process lends itself toward receptiveness.

I am more readily able to meet something or someone and to listen and hear whatever is being presented, without coloring the other’s communication with my own habits of thinking, feeling, and seeing, removing the usual ways of labeling or judging, or comparing. I am ready to perceive and know a phenomenon from its appearance and presence. (p. 89)

Although an epoche in its purest form is never fully achieved, the energy involved in reflection and self-dialogue significantly reduces the influence of my own attitude and frame of reference. The goal was to significantly reduce my “influence of preconceived thoughts, judgments, and biases” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). To exemplify this process and the continued work in this area, I completed a detailed written epoche included in Appendix M. This epoche was written using the following subheadings: role as gatekeeper in a neighboring district and shaping of cultural beliefs/attitudes; first-hand observations and experiences in HPS and the onset of significant change; a personal commitment to maintaining the integrity of parents, the district, and the leader; continued decline in enrollment, a new strategic vision; a new leader emerges, continued decline, school reform; a listening leader; and concluding remarks

I believe, as does Moustakas (1994), that, with intentionality, dedication, and determination, this process made a difference in what I read, interpreted, and understood through the shared-lived experiences of these mothers. I believe that I could let go of my preconceived thoughts and prejudices without coloring the experiences of these identified
mothers with my own habits of “thinking, feeling, and seeing, removing the usual ways of labeling or judging, or comparing” (p. 89).

After careful reflection through the epoche and bracketing process, separating out my own personal experiences from those of the participants, I continued with the process of phenomenological reduction. The steps of this process included the identification of significant statements or clusters of meaning through a process called horizontalization and using these clusters of meaning to write descriptions of what the participants experienced (textural), how they experienced it (structural) and what it is like for someone to experience this phenomenon (composite). This process is discussed in greater detail in the next section.

**Phenomenological Reduction Process**

Following the interview of each participant, each audio recording was reduced into typed transcripts. The transcripts as a whole were read multiple times to obtain an overall feeling for what the participants had to say. As part of this backyard research, I recalled what it was like for me as an employee of the district during each of the three reorganization plans. I recalled my own experiences, reactions, impact and feelings. In some cases, the memories became personal as multiple participants recalled actions that each superintendent took to engage and inform parents during the process. It was not uncommon for the participants to mention the actions of each superintendent by name.

The first round of the data analysis process included the identification of significant statements or sentences that provided an understanding of what the participants experienced, how they experienced the changes, and the impact on themselves, their child, and family. These statements were identified and highlighted
through a process called horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). Each statement was then coded with a description of what the statement represented, such as an action, feeling, impact, or result. Two separate audits of the coding of transcripts were conducted by a doctoral student at Western Michigan University, and a Ph.D. graduate of Western Michigan University. The purpose of these audits was to assist in validation and the identification of any potential bias that I brought during the reduction process. As indicated by one of the auditors,

Everything looks fantastic. I had no questions about the coding or line of questioning from the interviewer. In fact, I appreciated the “human” tone contained within the line of questioning and the flexibility provided to the interviewees in terms of speaking about matters that most affected themselves and their families. (OAISD–Assistant Superintendent, personal communication, 2014)

After the significant statements were identified and coded, they were entered into an Excel document identifying each statement by participant, page number, and line number. This created an NVivo code book. The second round of the data collection process then took place.

I looked for subtle trends and common expressions across the participants in the code book. As these trends were identified, I created a second code book in Excel, moving these statements forward. Each significant statement was used to formulate meaning and clustered into themes common to all of the participants’ transcripts. This process was replicated for the creation of a third code book. This third code book was made for each of the participant’s statements about her child and what she believed they experienced. These statements also described an action, feeling, impact, or result from
the district reorganization. A third round of data analysis was then completed to identify overall themes that emerged. A final code book was then created using identified significant statements based upon the central research question and five subquestions.

During this reduction process, I looked for universal structures that precipitated feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as impact on families, causality, relationships to self or others, emotions, decisions made, values, and the participants’ direct/indirect involvement in the change process. The essential goal was to define how the experience came to be what it was and the impact.

The process of transcendental phenomenological reduction was used based on the merit of its purpose to uncover the ego for which everything has meaning. Specifically, I wanted to bring credence to the experiences of these individuals who may have been underrepresented in school policy issues in the past. This reduction process leads an individual back to his or her experience and the way things are (Schmitt, 1967).

The world is examined in relation to myself when I try to distinguish those aspects of experiences which are genuinely evident from those which I merely assume or supposed to be the case. The subject is examined in relation to the world when I inquire into beliefs, feelings, and desires which shape the experience. (p. 67)

**Descriptive Statistics**

In the discussion of the data in Chapter IV, descriptive statistics were used in addition to the written descriptions previously mentioned (textural, structural, and composite) to describe the participants in greater detail utilizing the information collected
from the demographic survey. These statistics were not intended to make any comparisons or to draw any specific conclusions regarding the participants themselves.

The written descriptions in the findings will be viewed by any reader of this work only as good as the process of validation that was used to ensure that the researcher truly kept out his own bias, presenting a credible written account. The validation techniques that were used to do this are discussed in the next section.

Validation

Qualitative researchers endeavor to “understand” the deep structure of knowledge or essence that comes from personal interaction with participants. This is often in their natural setting, as researchers probe deeper to get to the true essence of the phenomenon. Qualitative researchers should ask, “Did we get it right?” (Stake, 1995, p. 107) or “Did we publish a ‘wrong’ or inaccurate account?” (Thomas, 1993, p. 39). To answer these questions effectively and accurately, I had to look at myself as a participant in the process. Was my account valid and by whose standards? How did I evaluate the quality of the qualitative research? (Creswell, 2007).

Creswell (2007) offered two kinds of validation for consideration: ethical and substantive. I used ethical validation to look at ensuring “that all research agendas must question their underlying moral assumptions, their political and ethical implications, and the equitable treatment of diverse voices” (p. 205). The process of writing an epoche and the peer review of the identified significant statements and coding assisted in ethical validation. I used substantive validation to ensure my clear understanding of the topic under study, meanings that were derived from the participants, and the documentation of the written account of participants and the study itself. The inclusion of multiple
quotations from participants of the study in the findings brings substantive validation to this work.

In summary, in qualitative research that is interpretive in nature, in which the principal researcher is directly part of the process, a “chain of interpretations” must be documented for others to judge the credibility of the work. Written accounts must “resonate with their intended audiences, and must be compelling, powerful, and convincing” (Creswell, 2007, p. 206). The inclusion of textural, structural, and composite written descriptions meets this purpose, and these descriptions are presented in Chapter IV. The quality of the written experience will allow a reader to then transfer this learning to other situations. For the purposes of this research, the transfer of this learning to school board/district leaders and policymakers was of importance. To further mitigate against issues of researcher bias, influence, or power, several validation strategies were employed to bring confidence and credibility to the study. These included member checking, writing rich/thick descriptions, clarifying researcher bias/narrative self-reflection, inclusion of negative/discrepant information, prolonged time in the field, peer debriefing, and a description of the researcher.

**Member Checking**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider member checking to be “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314) when doing backyard research and qualitative studies. In member checking, the researcher solicits subjects’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations. This approach actually results in taking the data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account of the experience. According to Stake
(1995), participants should play an active role in this process. In this research, subjects were invited to review their typed transcripts. Unfortunately, none of the participants, when offered, elected to participate in member checking in this fashion. Participants shared with the interviewer that they felt like they had shared their story in its entirety and didn’t need the opportunity to provide any more information or clarification. They also believed it was complete based upon the questions asked. Finally, participants were grateful for the opportunity to participate in the research study.

**Writing Rich/Thick Descriptions**

Following the process of phenomenological reduction, overall themes that emerged became the basis for writing a description of what the participants experienced (textural description). Next, I constructed a description of their experiences with regard to how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situation, context, or setting that influenced how they experienced the changes and the impact on them as participants, their child, and their family (structural description). Finally, I developed a composite description presenting the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

I looked for universal structures that precipitated feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as impact on families, causality, relationships to self or others, emotions, decisions made, values, and the participants’ direct/indirect involvement in the change process. The essential goal was to define how the experience came to be what it was and the impact.

The intended outcome of writing the overall essence of the experience was that any reader should be able to read this description and walk away understanding what it must have been like to be a mother of a child who went through so many school
restructuring changes. These changes occurred throughout the child’s education in grades kindergarten through Grade 12. It is also important that the reader understand why, given all of this change, the participants continued to have their children enrolled in the district. “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46).

According to Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) and Creswell (2003, 2007), the writing of rich and thick description allows readers to make decisions about the transferability of the research to other situations. By writing such detailed descriptions, I enable other readers to transfer this information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred based upon any shared characteristics. These descriptions are most applicable to other school settings where significant structural changes to the organization have occurred or to understand processes for consideration when making such changes. Detailed descriptions are also helpful to reduce researcher bias, as is described in the next section.

Clarifying Researcher Bias/Narrative Self-Reflection

To clarify the bias I brought to the study, I wrote a detailed self-reflection and epoche. In this clarification process, it was important for me to comment on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study itself (Creswell, 2003). This was important to note in the research so that any reader clearly understood my position during the study and any biases or assumptions that impact the inquiry. In this case, I had a vested interest in the success of the district at Phase III and Phase IV of reform to increase student achievement of all learners and suspend the decline in enrollment throughout the district.
Negative or Discrepant Information

Creswell (2003) suggested that another validation strategy is to present negative or discrepant information that may run counter to the themes that result in the final data analysis and summary. In the findings section, I included quotations and discussion that ran contrary to what I was intending to find. This came to light as 9 of the 18 participants discussed the potential of leaving the district, and 5 of the 18 felt trapped during the time due to the cost of private tuition and lack of access to transportation. Furthermore, not every student described their experience as positive. Two of the 18 families had such experiences with their children. This kind of information adds to the credibility of the study. Readers know and understand that real-life experiences are composed of different perspectives, and details of any study may not always coalesce into nice and neat summary accounts.

To understand what is happening in the experience (positive, neutral, or negative), the researcher must be able to spend a substantial amount of time in the field understanding the culture and all of the variables at play.

Prolonged Time in the Field

Creswell (2003) suggested that researchers should spend a prolonged time in the field to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. By doing so, the researcher can convey all of the detail surrounding the site, participants, and history. In this specific case, I spent the same 10 years of time in the field as the participants, having both personal and professional experiences and outcomes.
Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing is another validation technique used in this research study. In this stage of validation, I took the final draft of data analysis to professionals in the field of research and asked them to review the findings and ask questions about the qualitative study itself. I also asked the peer reviewer to determine whether there is resonance of the essence of the findings (Creswell, 2003). This debrief included a review of the study itself, purpose, data collected, analysis, and sharing of the findings of the experience and applicability to other contexts for shaping public policy. Finally, the key question of voice was asked. Did this research bring a collective voice to underrepresented groups? Do the findings add to the body of literature relative to parental choice, and will the information be helpful to leaders who are responsible for developing policy and/or are facing district reform due to economic or academic necessity? Two professionals in the field of research that I did peer debriefing with included my advisor and another Ph.D. graduate from Western Michigan University. However, I did debriefing with several individuals beyond these two individuals and my dissertation committee itself for review of this work outside of the professional context.

The following individuals were part of this peer-debrief:

- The ISD superintendent of HPS was selected. She was familiar with the structural and demographic changes that had occurred over time but was not directly related as to introduce her own bias to the findings.
- The Executive Committee members of the Board of Education were selected. Each of these three committee members had children in the district during one or more phases of the district organization. They were able to validate not
only the experiences shared by the participants and the findings but also the impacts that it had on their family structure and neighborhood community.

• The Teaching for Learning Committee members of the Board of Education were selected. While only one of three members had children enrolled in the district, all committee members were specifically interested in the voice of often underrepresented groups and the limits of choice that families had or didn’t have during the school restructuring plans.

• I also shared the overall essence of the experience and my findings with multiple administrators from the district. They validated these accounts through their own personal interactions with families and students during this time period.

**The Researcher**

I was the student investigator serving in the role of the Superintendent of Schools of HPS. I completed my sixth year as superintendent in June 2014. Prior to serving in this role, I served in the capacity of Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning for 5 years. Prior to this position I was an elementary principal at one of the nine neighborhood elementary schools for 3 years.

I was personally and professionally impacted as a result of all four phase changes of reform. The first phase presented me with the personal and difficult challenge of closing a neighborhood elementary school in the midst of academic success, high parental involvement, and a supportive teaching staff with high morale. Professionally, I was given a promotion and moved to a central cabinet-level position. The critical role of this new position included the oversight of Phase I. Unfortunately at this phase, I had
limited prior knowledge, research, background, and participation in the decision-making process that led to the focus school design.

Escalated enrollment decline, flat revenues, and public discontent pushed the prior superintendent of schools to bring forward a plan that would “stop the bleeding.” As the assistant superintendent, I co-facilitated a community advisory committee during Phase II, which resulted in a reform initiative with the primary focus of creating financial efficiencies across the district, while at the same time offering choice and bringing back a sense of community to the district. Involvement of key internal and external stakeholders resulted in a plan that was accepted by the community with greater success. Continued enrollment decline, combined with declining revenue from the state school aid fund over the next 3 years, resulted in the necessity to restructure the district once again.

In this phase, I was charged by the Board of Education in the first 3 months of my superintendency to bring forward a recommendation that not only created operational efficiencies districtwide but would address the academic achievement and programs throughout the district. This led to the development of a new strategic plan for the district. Phase III and Phase IV were districtwide reform/restructuring initiative recommendations by me following 9 years of accumulated study, data review, informal interviews, staff meetings, and parent forums. As a result, I had experience in the district as a district leader during the same time period as parents who were participants in this study. Subjects could, in fact, be parents that I had as a principal 10 years ago in the neighborhood school concept model during the 2001–2002 school year. For this reason, I did not conduct any of the interviews.
Keeping all of these validation strategies at the conscious forefront of review, I present the limitations and delimitations of this research.

Limitations and Delimitations

In the preparation and completion of this qualitative study, I gave consideration to the limitations and delimitations that may impact the internal and external validity of the findings. I assessed these limitations from a variety of perspectives, to be aware of my own thinking, and to identify potential consideration before the research took place.

Limitations

Creswell (2003) encouraged researchers to define limitations to identify the potential weaknesses of any study as part of the proposal stage. Limitations are often related directly to the methodology chosen, in this case, phenomenology, and the method of data collection, in this case, interviews.

- The backyard approach to qualitative research was used despite its obvious limitations related to my position in the district from which participants were recruited. This choice allowed me to take advantage of my access to a unique case, where the target population experienced having children attend school in a district with a high degree of structural change over a period of time. While I was able to mitigate the influence of my position of influence in the district in this study by training a surrogate interviewer, I must acknowledge the limitation of my ability to completely bracket out my personal experiences while analyzing the data.

- The primary data collection method used was interviews. While there are many strengths in using interviews as part of a phenomenology, there are
limitations. First of all, interviews provide indirect information that is filtered through the views of the interviewees. While rich in nature in capturing the essence of the experience, each interviewee interpreted the experience from her own cultural, social, and emotional framework of experiences. Common themes from one interviewee to another do not always develop. In addition, subjects may not be equally articulate and perceptive (Creswell, 2003).

Finally, the subjects were asked to recall experiences and events that happened over a decade of school restructuring. This may have impacted both the level of detail and the emotional impact that participants were able to convey after the passage of time versus what they may have experienced and been able to convey at the time they were living through the experience. Additionally, with the passage of time, both events and feelings associated with those events may evolve.

- The criteria for recruiting initial subjects for this research prioritized the inclusion of the mothers of Caucasian and Hispanic students. The final subject pool did include one Asian mother and one Black-American mother. Unfortunately, the final pool of participants was overrepresentative of mothers who were Caucasian, with students in a traditional secondary program, proficient on the MEAP, and who did not qualify for free/reduced lunch. Therefore, any conclusions relating to the experiences of minority parents are limited to parents of Hispanic students and students living in poverty that qualify for free/reduced lunch regardless of their ethnicity.
Delimitations

Creswell (2003) encouraged researchers to define delimitations to narrow the scope of a study. The scope may focus on specific variables, a central phenomenon that is delimited to specific participants or sites, and that is narrowed to one type of research design. This study had the following delimitations:

- This study was confined to an urban school district in Michigan. While the findings from this study may assist leaders from the district selected as the setting for the study, the applicability to other districts is limited.

- The subjects are delimited to the mothers of students who had children that were consecutively enrolled in the district from kindergarten to Grade 12. Eighteen mothers were identified through a purposeful criterion-sampling method to ensure representation of different ethnicities, socioeconomic status, primary secondary academic program, and academic achievement of students. While this was a delimitation, the purposeful nature of the sample and the common shared experience of these mothers over the same 10-year period presented a rich and unique study in and of itself.

- The focus of the research design is delimited to transcendental phenomenology using a social constructivist worldview. The study’s purpose was to reduce the individual experiences down to a “composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the participants” (Moustakas, 1994) consisting of “what” they experienced, “how” they experienced it, and “why” they continue in the experience. The ethnic voice is delimited to 6 Hispanic, 1 Asian, 1 Black-American and 10 Caucasian participants.
Activities, Timelines, and Budget/Funding

Activities

This dissertation proposal began in the summer of 2009 with the identification of a researchable topic for consideration, development of a logic waterfall, beginning review of the literature, identification of a conceptual framework, defining of a clear problem statement and purpose, crafting of research questions, establishing of a research methodology, completion of HSIRB modules, and proposal of intended outcomes for the research findings that will add to the body of literature related to parental choice. Following 2 years away from this work due to professional commitments, I immersed myself in the literature and methodology for completion.

Timelines

The steps and timeline used for the completion of this study are outlined below:

- Dissertation Committee Approval (October 20, 2011)
- Data Collection (April–August, 2014)
- Transcriptions completed as interviews finished (April–September, 2014)
- Phenomenological Reduction Process (October–November, 2014)
- Final Dissertation Defense (February, 2015)

While there was a 2-year lapse in the data collection, this actually turned out to be a perceived benefit. In the initial proposal, parents who had sophomores who were consecutively enrolled in the district were identified for potential inclusion. The final study included parents who had graduating seniors, thus contributing to the account of an overall experience K–12. One limitation of this timeline is that the participants were 2
more years removed from the physical and emotional changes that took place during the
restructuring of the organization. A review of the significant statements included in
Chapter IV mitigate this limitation. Respondents were specific in their emotions,
responses, and impact on them as parents and on their children.

**Budget**

I did not have a grant to support the funding of this research project. As a result,
all expenses related to the completion of the dissertation were a personal expense. The
costs associated with the completion of this dissertation are included in Table 10 below.

Table 10

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<tr>
<th><strong>Budget of Dissertation-Related Expenses</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Task</strong></td>
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<td>Incentive for participation</td>
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<td><strong>Total Projected Cost:</strong></td>
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**Summary**

This chapter described the fundamental components and processes necessary to
complete a transcendental phenomenology with the purpose of describing the experiences
of mothers who have participated in four phases of school reform and restructuring
initiatives with their children. The study set out to define the reasons mothers selected a
public school district in the first place while living in a multiple choice environment,
identify their reasons for continued enrollment in a school district during a period of four consecutive district restructuring plans, and describe their personal experiences as a result of such decision-making. This study was significant in nature from a social constructiveness approach, as the voices of minority parents and low socioeconomic families were brought to the forefront of discussion for consideration of public policy in an urban school setting.

Eighteen mothers based upon specific criteria were recruited to participate in a transcendental phenomenological approach. Standardized open-ended interviews were used to collect the descriptions of these experiences and were analyzed through a process of phenomenological reduction. An epoche was provided in addition to several validation strategies to raise the level of credibility and confidence of such work for district leaders and policymakers.

Chapter IV presents an analysis of these data and the inclusion of relevant textural, structural, and composite written descriptions of the experience and context in which they took place. Based upon this analysis and interpretation, the reasons parents choose to stay in traditional public schools in a time of economic stress, district reform, and public school criticism are identified.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of mothers, and the impact of change on themselves and their children after being enrolled in and attending Holland Public Schools (HPS) during four phases of school reform initiatives. A social constructivist worldview was used to develop meaning from the interpretation of these shared experiences to bring credence to their experience and give voice to often underrepresented groups of individuals (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Neuman, 2000; Schwandt, 2001). Extracting these experiences can assist in shaping public policy regarding school of choice patterns and inform district leaders of the core values that mothers share and the expectations they have of school districts for their children. Given the current conditions in multiple states across the country, district leaders and local boards of education will be faced with continued economic stress, increased accountability for achievement, and increased transparency in public policy. As districts attempt to achieve higher accountability for student results while making complex decisions to balance budgets, it has become increasingly more common to restructure or reorganize educational delivery systems in ways that affect children and their families. Understanding how families and, in particular, mothers translate their experiences with structural and other changes enacted by the schools serving their
children can assist in defining a new strategic direction of renewal, growth, and revitalization.

**Research Questions**

For the purpose of this research, the following central question and five subquestions were used:

**Central Question:**

How do mothers of school-aged children enrolled in an urban district that has undergone several rounds of significant change experience, understand, and connect that change to their own lives and their decision to keep their children enrolled?

**Subquestions:**

1. How do mothers describe their experiences through each of the district’s four phases of school reorganization? (Exploratory/Descriptive)
2. How do mothers describe their child’s experience in the school district through each of the phases of school reorganization? (Exploratory/Descriptive)
3. What contexts or situations do mothers describe as having typically influenced or affected their experiences in the district over the course of the last 10 years and their decision to keep their children enrolled in the system? (Explanatory)
4. Why did mothers enroll their child in the district (public school) in the first place? (Explanatory/Descriptive)
5. How do mothers describe or explain their decision to maintain enrollment in this district for their children since kindergarten and how do they feel about that decision? (Descriptive)

Participants

Participants included mothers of students who were consecutively enrolled in HPS kindergarten through Grade 12. The desired number of participants was 18. A purposeful sampling procedure including criterion and convenience (Creswell, 2007) was used to select 18 subjects from a population of $N = 162$. Figure 17 illustrates the defined population sought by this research to provide equitable representation.

This selection process was used to strive for a balanced representation of ethnicity (White/Hispanic), socioeconomic status (qualification for free/reduced lunch), student achievement level according to the MEAP (proficient/not proficient), and type of high school attended (traditional vs. project-based learning) as represented in Table 5.

In preparation for the recruitment process, Excel spreadsheets were created and names listed in alphabetical order for all of the subjects that were defined by each category. These lists were generated by the district’s Office of School Improvement. Once each list was generated, an online random number generator was used to select a subject from each category. Four additional alternates were randomly selected in the same manner for each of the identified categories in the event that a subject was unable to be contacted or unwilling to participate in the study. A pool of potential subjects was identified for the selection of two additional subjects to represent the population as a whole. Two subjects were identified, with eight additional alternates.
Each of the 18 identified potential subjects received an invitation letter to participate (Appendix K) from the principal interviewer. Each subject was provided with a 2-week window to respond to the invitation. If there was no response, the interviewer made a follow-up telephone call. If the subject was unable to be contacted after three attempts or indicated that she did not want to participate, then the interviewer went to the next identified alternate on the list. This process continued until all subjects were recruited or until a category of alternates or potential subjects was exhausted. Table 11 identifies the individuals that were selected as the result of this process, for a total of 10 participants.

Table 11

Profile of Participants Selected as a Result of the Recruitment Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Secondary Program</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
<th>Academic MEAP Proficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Low SES</td>
<td>High SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Ten of the participants were recruited by the identified selection process. Secondary program is defined as traditional—the secondary program at the traditional high school and Project-Based Learning (PBL)—a secondary school choice option in the district focused on project-based learning. Socioeconomic status is defined by whether or not the participants’ child qualifies for free or reduced lunch based upon federal qualifications for school lunch programs. To be academically proficient on the MEAP, students must have received a level 1 or 2 on both the eighth grade MEAP math and a score of 1 or 2 on the eighth grade MEAP English Language Arts (ELA). Ethnicity is defined by enrollment records self-reported by parents using the State Race Ethnicity Codes in the State of Michigan for Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). Only one subject graduated from New Tech, the remaining two transferred back to the main high school campus and graduated from the traditional program.
Due to the limited size of potential subjects in some categories, and the lack of interest of some subjects to participate, some categories were not represented as originally defined. This was a result of the elimination or depletion of potential subjects in a specific category. Eight additional participants were selected from the remaining pool of alternates already randomly selected representing the population as a whole. Figure 21 shows the final results of the subject recruitment process. The black stars positioned on the chart indicate the categories that were not represented after the recruitment process.

*Note.* Students must have been enrolled in Grade 12 in the 2013–2014 school year and have been enrolled in the district consecutively since kindergarten. White = 8 subjects, Hispanic = 8 subjects, all other ethnicities = 2 subjects. Total participants = 18. The boxes in the foreground with labels represent White students. The boxes in the background (shadow in blue) represent Hispanic students. The black stars indicate the categories that were not represented after the recruitment process.

*Figure 21.* Defined population following the subject recruitment process.

Table 9 (p. 127) contains a listing and description of the participants by ethnicity, primary language spoken at home, marital status, number of children enrolled in or attending school in the district, employment status, family income, and the frequency the participant volunteers in the school district. This information was collected at the time of
the interviews using the participant survey included in Appendix D. Ten of the 18 participants were Caucasian, six Hispanic, one Asian, and one self-identified as Black-American. Thirteen identified English as the primary language spoken at home. Twelve reported some level of education beyond high school, and 15 reported that they were employed on a part-time or full-time basis.

Table 12 contains additional demographic data that were collected during the interview process, including alumni status (HPS/public/private) and employment status of the district. This information was provided by participants freely as they responded to questions in the interview protocol. Two of the mothers self-identified themselves as alumni of the school district. Three self-identified themselves as employees of the district. This information was not available for all participants in the study. The purpose of presenting these data is to show the diversity of the group of participants. There was not an analysis conducted to look at any differences between the groups represented.

The scheduling of interviews was a time-consuming process and multiple follow-up telephone calls were required. Many of the participants contacted indicated that while they did receive the letter and understood the purpose of the study, they were not interested in participating. The reasons cited for non-participation included the amount of time needed for participation, not interested in participation, they didn’t personally like the researcher, they worked two jobs and were not able to commit, and they were not interested due to a language barrier despite an interpreter being available during the interview process. When the interviewer explained the personal side of this research and how their opinions, experiences, and voice may inform future decisions of the district, some became more interested in participation. This was empowering, as there was not an
opportunity for parents to provide feedback or input during the decision-making process through the first phase of reorganization. Finally, multiple participants were motivated to participate by the monetary gift certificate of $30 provided to the district’s spirit store.

Table 12

*Profile of Participants Obtained Through Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P</th>
<th>Alumni</th>
<th>Public Graduate</th>
<th>Private Graduate</th>
<th>Employee</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Both parents teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The number of total participants P= 18. These data were collected during the interview process and was not specifically asked in the interview questions, but offered as part of a response to questions. Alumni = graduated from Holland Public Schools. Employee = employee of Holland Public Schools.

In the next section, I detail the data analysis processes that were used to build reliability and validity of the findings through the phenomenological reduction process.
Data Analysis Process

In a social constructivism worldview (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Neuman, 2000; Schwandt, 2001), the researcher relies as much as possible on the participant’s view of a defined situation. Meaning is formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individual lives. Participants in this study described their experiences after having lived through an experience of enrolling and staying in a public school district over a 10-year period of district reform and restructuring.

An interview protocol (Appendix F) was used to conduct standardized open-ended interviews (Patton, 2002). The protocol included a description of the purpose of the research, the process, procedures for gaining consent, the questions to be asked, and a place for the interviewer to record notable observations. Participants were also asked to complete a participant survey (Appendix D).

The interviews were conducted on the campus of HPS. Each participant was offered the opportunity to meet off-campus at the local library. All 18 participants elected to meet on campus. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and was audio-recorded. Through an interview process, the interviewer focused on the past and present experiences of the participants to describe the essential experience overall. The participants were given the opportunity to describe what it was like for them as mothers with children enrolled in the district during each of the four phases of school restructuring, interpret what was happening around and to themselves and their children, and describe the decision-making process that was used to keep their children enrolled in the district during this time period. While all participants were enrolled in the same
district, each was able to express the nuances of her own experience as a mother, and through the eyes of her child.

Several data analysis and validation processes and procedures were used, as recommended in the literature, to build reliability and validity of the findings. Moustakas (1994), Creswell (2003), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Patton (2002) suggested several different approaches for phenomenological analysis and representation, or often referred to as phenomenological reduction.

**Epoche/Bracketing**

To clarify the bias I brought to the study, a detailed self-reflection and epoche was composed. In this process, it was important for me to comment on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped my interpretation and approach to the study as an employee of the district during this same 10-year period of time (Creswell, 2003). It was important, to the extent possible, that the process of epoche or bracketing occur before the research was conducted and again prior to the completion of the phenomenological reduction process to assist in data analysis, description of the participants’ experiences, and clustering of themes.

First, I described the role of gatekeeper as an employee in a neighboring district and the shaping of cultural beliefs and attitudes. Next, I described the firsthand observations and experiences in HPS as an employee at the onset of significant change. Then, emphasis was placed upon a personal commitment to maintaining the integrity of parents, the district, and the school leader. A significant timeline overview of the history of the district during this time period was written. This timeline underscored the importance and impact of continued decline in enrollment and the onset of a new
strategic vision for the district. This included the emergence of a new leader and school reform efforts. The importance and value of effective communication and understanding was described as an essential characteristic of a listening leader and the importance of this during times of significant school change. The epoche ends with concluding remarks and what I hoped to be able to do with the findings of this research. The goal was to significantly reduce the “influence of preconceived thoughts, judgments, and biases” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). A detailed written epoche of the researcher is included in Appendix M.

**Member Checking**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) considered member checking to be “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314) when doing backyard research and qualitative studies. Participants were given the opportunity to review their typed transcripts to clarify something that was said or add to an existing description. They also had the opportunity to add something new, if reading the transcript spurred another memory. Unfortunately, no participants participated in member checking.

**Phenomenological Reduction Process**

Following the collection of data through the interview of each participant, each audio recording was reduced into typed transcripts. The transcripts as a whole were read multiple times to obtain an overall feeling for what the participants had to say. As part of this backyard research, I recalled what it was like for me as an employee of the district during each of the three reorganization plans. I recalled my own experiences, reactions, impact, and feelings. In some cases, the memories became personal as multiple
participants recalled actions that each superintendent took to engage and inform parents during the process.

The first round of the data analysis process included the identification of significant words, statements, or sentences that provided an understanding of what the participants experienced; how they experienced the changes; and the impact on themselves, their child, and family. These statements were identified and highlighted through a process called horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). Each statement was then coded with a description of what the statement represented, such as an action, feeling, impact, or result. After the significant statements were identified and coded, they were entered into an Excel document identifying each statement by participant, page number, and line number. This created an NVivo code book. Two separate audits of the coding of transcripts were conducted by a doctoral student at Western Michigan University and a Ph.D. graduate of Western Michigan University. The purpose of these audits was to assist in the validation of the identified themes and to identify any potential bias that I may have brought to the reduction process.

During the next round of data analysis, I looked for subtle trends and common expressions across the participants in the NVivo code book. As these trends were identified, I created a second code book in Excel, moving these statements forward for further analysis. Each significant statement was used to formulate meaning and was clustered into themes common to all of the participants’ transcripts. This process was replicated for the creation of a third code book. The third code book was made for each of the participants’ statements about her child and what she believed they experienced. These statements also described an action, feeling, impact, or result while being enrolled
during each of the phases of district reorganization. A third round of data analysis was then completed to identify overall themes that emerged. These themes became the basis for writing a description of what the participants experienced (textural description) and a description of their experiences with regard to how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situation, context, or setting that influenced how they experienced the changes and the impact on them as participants, their child, and their family (structural description). A composite description was then written presenting the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). A final code book was created using identified significant statements to provide evidence that would answer the central research question and five subquestions.

Throughout this reduction process, I looked for universal structures that precipitated feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as impact on mothers and students, impact on families, causality, relationship to self or others, emotions, decisions made, values, and the participants’ direct/indirect involvement in the change process. The essential goal was to define how the experience came to be what it was and the impact it had on the mothers and their children.

The intended outcome of writing the overall essence of the experience was that any reader should be able to read this description and walk away understanding what it must have been like to be a mother of a child who went through so many school restructuring changes. These changes occurred throughout the child’s education in grades kindergarten through Grade 12. It is also important that the reader understand why, given all of this change, the participants continued to have their children enrolled in
the district. “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that”
(Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46).

**Results of Data Analysis**

The data analysis process established three major themes. These themes were identified as values, change process, and school choice. In each of these themes I found a broad range of 20 subthemes with a notable variance among participants. Table 13 presents these themes and subthemes.

Table 13

*Themes and Subthemes Identified Through Phenomenological Reduction Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Change Process</th>
<th>School Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subthemes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Adult/Student Reactions</td>
<td>Alumni</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Associated Feelings</td>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Communication Gaps</td>
<td>Public Choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>Design Understanding</td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Experimental Design</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Education</td>
<td>Managing Transitions</td>
<td>Residency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td></td>
<td>Trapped</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most participants were driven to stay in the district due to loyalty, education quality, relationships, their ability to manage transitions, their understanding of the design structure, and their ability to comprehend and rationalize the economic factors driving the change. Others looked at other school choice options. This was due to a perceived/real loss in relationships, their inability to manage transitions, their lack of trust in the leadership, their frustration with communication, and their associated feelings related to the change.
During the change process over this 10-year period of time, 9 of the 18 participants looked at another school option for their children at one point in time or another, but all ended up staying. Two looked at a charter school option; one, another public school option; five, a private school option; and one considered home-schooling her child. Five of the nine participants who looked at the potential of leaving felt trapped. They did not see any other option but to keep their child enrolled in the district due to the cost of private education, employment status of the family at the time, and the lack of available transportation. One of the participants indicated that her child wanted to leave the district during the transition into high school. Table 14 provides a summary of this information, in addition to data collected from interview questions #7 and #8.

Interview question #7 asked participants to reflect back on their entire experience and ask themselves if they would make the same decision of keeping their child enrolled in HPS if they had to live this experience over again. Seventeen out of the 18 participants said yes. Interview question #8 asked participants to consider the enrollment of a kindergarten student today if they had a child ready to enter school today. Three of the 18 participants indicated that they would not consider HPS as a school option at this time for their child. All three families cited private education as their first choice option.

Those who felt like they had to stay or were trapped cited reasons such as cost of private education, lack of transportation, lack of preparation for charter school academics, and employment status of a spouse. Thirteen of the 18 mothers felt as though they had a choice to leave the district, but their choice was to stay enrolled in the district. One mother simply stated, “This is where I live, and this is where I have to send my child to school.” While 17 of the mothers would consider enrolling their child again in the
district after their child went through all of the changes and graduated from the system, one indicated that she would take the time to study the curricular offerings available to ensure rigor in mathematics. Table 15 presents this information.

Table 14

*Profile of Participants Obtained Through Interviews: Did You Think of Leaving? Make the Same Decision Again? Enroll a Kindergartner? Knew Other Families Who Left?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P</th>
<th>#3 (Parent/Student)</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>#7</th>
<th>#8</th>
<th>Knew of other families who left?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>No/No*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>No/No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>No/No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Yes*/No</td>
<td>Home School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yes/Yes*</td>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Yes*/No</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>No*/No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Yes*/No</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>No/No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>No/No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>No/No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>No/No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Yes*/No</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>No/No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The number of total participants = 18. These data were collected during the interview process using the Interview Protocol–Appendix F #3–Did you think of leaving the district? (If Yes, the type of school consideration). #7–If you could roll back the clock, would you have made the same decision and do it all over again? Yes/No #8–If you had a kindergarten student ready to start school this fall, would you start him/her in Holland Public Schools? Yes/No

* Indicates a specific quote is included in the narrative review of the findings.
Table 15

Research Subquestion 5: How Do Mothers Describe or Explain Their Decision to Maintain Enrollment in This District for Their Children Since Kindergarten and How Do They Feel About That Decision?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P</th>
<th>Did they feel trapped or have a choice?</th>
<th>Enroll again?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Had a Choice</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Trapped-Cost of Private</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Transportation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Had a Choice</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—with reservation regarding curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Had a Choice</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Trapped-Cost of Private</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Husband Unemployed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Trapped-Cost of Private</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Had a Choice</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Had a Choice</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Had a Choice</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Had a Choice</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Trapped-Cost of Private</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>District good 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Had a Choice</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Had a Choice</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Had a Choice</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Trapped-This is where I live</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Had a Choice</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Had a Choice</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Had a Choice</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Participants who spoke of attending private school and felt they were unable to attend did so looking for smaller class size, organizational stability, or a desire to attend based upon their upbringing.
The quotations that follow provide evidence for these responses and the impact that the decision to stay enrolled in the district had on the mothers and their children while considering other school-of-choice options for their child.

After one mother agreed to be a participant in the study, she talked with her twin children about their experiences while being enrolled in the district. She asked them specifically, if they would have had a choice, would they do it all over again?

If we gonna do this all over again, would you, would you go back to Holland High? And they both said No. (P3, p10, L1-2)

Another mother described her thinking and the school-of-choice options available to her as she considered leaving the district.

As a parent it was inconvenient for me, it’s not what I would choose. In my mind I kind of thought about home schooling. (P6, p1, L19-20)

I did kind of wonder about that (private school), but at that time it was a financial issue, that cost was going up and up. (P6, p2, L 33-34)

One mother who thought about leaving the district considered the impact on her daughter and the loss of friendships, only to learn that her daughter’s experience was not as positive as she originally thought.

She was happy to get out of here (graduate). We talked about moving away but I said you know I hate to think about moving away when you guys are at school and you would have to go make new friends and she said I would leave here in a heartbeat . . . that’s how she was. (P7, p6, L1-6)

The emotional response of mothers was also evident as they described the decision-making process the district used during Phase I of the school restructuring plans.
One mother described her feelings about this experience. Not only was she unable to provide any input to a decision that had appeared to already have been made, but she lost trust in the administration when answers were unable to be provided to her that explained clearly why this decision had been made and the research behind the decision.

The thought had crossed the mind because we were, like I said, it was traumatic and angry, did not trust administration at all, complete lack of trust at this point. (P8, p2, L11-12)

This same mother shared that despite the angst toward the administration and the process itself, she still valued neighborhoods and community.

It’s still our neighborhood, it’s still our community yeah, I would have stayed. I certainly would not have gone charter school, nor parochial school and it’s still our community schools. It’s where our friends are, where the kids are that she knows, it’s your community. It’s where you live and there’s just a loyalty in the community so I think, even though we saw all this go on, and we didn’t know what was going to happen. (P8, p9, L15-20)

While many of the changes initiated by the school district initially were viewed as negative, some of the reform efforts over time were viewed positively as they provided new opportunities for students. One mother recognized that the school district was actually making improvements and headed in the right direction with the changes that were being implemented.

Yeah, if I had a kindergartner, yes. I think so, I think we are leaps and bounds ahead of where we were when XXX started. (P10, p6, L 6-7)
The mothers who felt trapped in the system were able to articulate why they felt trapped and the reasons for this condition.

We can’t afford it. It was financial. If I had a choice I would probably put them in Christian School. (P11, p2, L 25-27)

Finally, even though many mothers cited various reasons for leaving the district that were driven in some way by the actions of the district, one mother went back to her core values of what she was looking for in the education for her child.

Again I think if it all was the same again, I would go to private school again for the reiteration of or the reinforcement of you know beliefs. (P17, p6, L 27-28)

. . . back to religion and biblical beliefs to sure up the foundation that was already established as a toddler. (P17, p7, L 10-11)

In this study, another meaningful finding was identified, as illustrated in Table 14. Thirteen mothers knew of families who left the district and yet, they decided to keep their children enrolled. In some cases, some participants were criticized for their decision to stay enrolled in HPS. The mothers in one of the school neighborhoods no longer associate with each other today due to the tensions that it created between each other and the decisions that they made about the educational choices for their child. A neighborhood was actually divided as some of the families chose to go to the local charter school while other remained in enrolled in HPS. The mothers who left insinuated that the mothers who kept their children enrolled in the district in some way did not care about the quality of education being provided to their child. This created social implications for families in neighborhoods. As one participant shared, relationships among parents became tenuous.
There were many, many parents who went to charter and then families were, there was like a, conflict is a strong word, but there was conflict between families. The families who were staying in public some of the charter school parents who thought they were suckers to put up with this with your kids, to not have a voice in their education that the school just did this to you and what would they do next? Almost like we weren’t concerned parents to leave your kids in a district where they were shuffling them around and kind of experimenting on them. I remember hearing that phrase, experimenting, just what would happen if we did this. It actually broke up our neighborhood in a way that it isn’t easily measured but was real. (P12, p1, L13-20)

The participants who chose to stay despite many of their friends leaving cited reasons such as diversity/demographics of the student body, the program options available to their children both academic and extracurricular, the quality of the teachers and staff, the relationships/friendships that their children had with others, and the trust they had in the district and the teaching staff. These participants also expressed their convictions against school choice and a strong belief in public education. This is our community, this is where we live, this is where our children should go to school.

It is interesting to note the reasons that were shared as to why these other families left the district. I identified three basic themes why these families left: communication, the change process itself, and the emotional responses to the changes. Figure 22 indicates the reasons why some families left, as perceived by the mothers who kept their children enrolled in the district.
Communication

Lack of
Not involved in the process
No input

Change Process

Done unto them as parents
Decision already made
Lack of trust in superintendent/administration and Board of Education

Emotion

Mad/Disgruntled
Only way to show dissatisfaction was through leaving
Suspicion
Doubt
Speculation

Note. These data were collected during the interview process using the Interview Protocol—Appendix F. Participants noted improved and increased communication, involvement in the process, and trust during Phase II and Phase III of reorganization.

Figure 22. Why parents left as perceived by those who stayed during initial phase change—focus schools.

Some of the families who left physically sold their homes and moved to a neighboring district, while others simply applied for schools of choice to neighboring traditional public or charter schools. In some cases, families actually began attending private schools. In one instance, the participant knew of a family who moved back to Texas as a result of the change.

Participant #12 actually sold her home in the district and moved into the K–7 school boundary to be assured a place for her children in that school.

It was hard for me to know my little boys weren’t going to be together, they look out for each other. We actually bought a house across town when East became a K–7 so we wouldn’t have four different parent/teacher conference schedules in a
week . . . so that’s quite a big change based on the schools to buy a house on the other side of town. (P12, p2, L6-10)

Further analysis of the data revealed some causal relationships. The core values of the participants drive their school-of-choice options. The impact of the change process itself in the district challenged their school choice options and caused tension with the values that they held regarding the education options for their children, as indicated by the mother who began considering a return to the religious foundations of education for her child. This then led nine of the participants to consider another school choice option. These relationships are depicted in Figure 23.

![Figure 23. Causal relationships of emerging themes.](image)

Further analysis of the identified subthemes are represented in Figure 24, as participants decided firmly to stay in the district or contemplated leaving the district. In some cases the themes were overlapping, while in others they were distinct from each other.
The findings section reports on each of these themes and provides quotations illustrative of each through the writing of the textural, structural, and composite description.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Change Process</th>
<th>School Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Adult/Student Reactions</td>
<td>Alumni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Associated Feelings</td>
<td>Loyalty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Communication Gaps</td>
<td>Public Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>Design Understanding</td>
<td>Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Experimental Design</td>
<td>Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Education</td>
<td>Managing Transitions</td>
<td>Residency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td></td>
<td>Trapped</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 24.** Relationships among themes, subthemes, and decision to stay in district or consider choice option.
Findings and Formulated Meanings

I would like to begin the findings sections with a direct statement from the Board of Education.

With a budget-trimming necessity, and yet with an effective education model in mind, Holland Public Schools began in the summer of 2003 to transform its eight “neighborhood” elementary schools into grade-level focus schools (two each: K–1, 2–3 and 4–5). Change is difficult, and the magnitude of the perceived loss of community sparked by the school restructuring is something the district is closely monitoring. It is a strategic goal of the district to retain as much of the former “neighborhood” feel as possible.

It is anticipated that over time, the parents and students served by Holland Public Schools will embrace the new paradigm enacted by the Board of Education and Administration. A focus on “Eastside” and “Westside” boundaries has been established, and it is hoped that one of the results will be growing public acceptance of a broader definition that would accent and even greater concept of “community.”

But this is not the first priority of Holland Public Schools. We recognize that the first concern of the district is to continue to provide broad, comprehensive, academic and extra-curricular programming, maintain and enhance the integrity of our academic expectations, and remain fiscally responsible to the citizens of Holland. We also recognize that the City of Holland is best served by Holland Public Schools through the management and
administration of a successful public school district. (Holland Public Schools Board of Education Response, 2004)

This first phase of reorganization exacerbated an already present decline in enrollment that resulted in two additional reorganization plans, each initiated by a different leader and each with a different strategy. The impact on the participants of this study is the focus of this study.

From 18 verbatim transcripts, 342 significant statements were extracted. Three major themes and 20 subthemes were identified from the experiences of the participants and the impact it had on their family, as depicted in Figure 24. The three tables in Appendix O include examples of significant statements from participants with their formulated meanings for what they experienced during this time of district change as it relates to each of the major themes and subthemes. Table O-1 includes significant statements made by the participants and their formulated meanings for what they experienced with the identified theme of values. Table O-2 includes significant statements made by the participants and their formulated meanings for the identified theme of school choice. Table O-3 includes significant statements made by the participants and their formulated meanings for the identified theme of change process.

The quotations from the participants provide a descriptive reflection of what and how the mothers responded to the many changes that occurred in the district during the time of their child’s enrollment, based upon these 20 identified subthemes. From these significant statements, I then derived formulated meanings for each of these subthemes to further define the context of what the mothers were communicating about their experiences and the values that they hold. These formulated meanings serve as a basis
for the core beliefs that leaders of a school district should be mindful of as they consider any school reorganization or structural changes to their school system. Policymakers should also be mindful of these belief systems. Decisions that impact these core beliefs are likely to create many of the negative reactions and symptoms that were present in Holland Public Schools during the historical context of all of the changes that took place in its system.

After the themes and subthemes were identified, I organized them into three categories: textural (what they experienced/the change of the experience), structural (how they experienced it in the context or setting), and the overall impact. Tables 16–18 present each of the three theme clusters of values, change process, and school choice. This process was used as a basis to write the textural, structural, and composite descriptions. Table 19 presents the theme clusters and their associated meanings around the same textural, structural, and impact on the students of this study, as perceived by their mothers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textural</th>
<th>Structural</th>
<th>Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Loss</td>
<td>Schools Closed/District Reorganized</td>
<td>Loss of Neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Criticism from Others</td>
<td>Loss of Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did they make right decision?</td>
<td>Families Moved</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Proximity of Home/School</td>
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<td>Safety for Friendships</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>New Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity Growth</td>
<td>Neighborhoods Brought Together</td>
<td>Cultural Appreciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Culture Questioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Doubt</td>
<td>Decisions Made Without Stakeholders</td>
<td>Suspicion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Communication in Beginning</td>
<td>Doubt</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Strategic Planning Phase 2/3</td>
<td>Anger/Frustration</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Helplessness</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Restored Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride Perseverance</td>
<td>Parents Left District/Questioned</td>
<td>Doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality and Leadership</td>
<td>Restored Commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defended Decision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Building</td>
<td>Teacher Reassurance</td>
<td>Stuck it Out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confidence in Quality of Staff</td>
<td>Belief in Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple Transitions–New Teachers</td>
<td>Missed Diagnosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to Know Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing of Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Education</td>
<td>New Program Options</td>
<td>Academic Rigor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exposure to New Teachers</td>
<td>Grade 8 Credit</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Guinea Pig Syndrome</td>
<td>PBL Option</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Too Much Choice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Overall Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust of System</td>
<td>Stakeholder Involvement</td>
<td>Suspicion/Doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication Strategy</td>
<td>Vision/Direction</td>
</tr>
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<td>Multiple Changes</td>
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</table>
### Table 17

*Theme Clusters With Their Associated Formulated Meanings: Change Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textural</th>
<th>Structural</th>
<th>Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adult Reactions</strong></td>
<td>Bewilderment, Denial Sense-Making</td>
<td>Refusal to Participate Acceptance Investigation of School Choice Options Offered Choice to Student Kept from Child Assisted Child in Process Decision to Stay Quality Education Would Enroll Again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Associated Feelings</strong></td>
<td>Reacted Differently than Student Anger/Frustration/Suspicion Helpless/Denial District Reputation/Pride Acceptance</td>
<td>Doubt in System Restored Faith We Can Do This</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication Gaps</strong></td>
<td>Lack of Communication–Phase 1 District Rationalization/Research Focus Schools 8th grade Transition to Main Campus Strategic Planning</td>
<td>Speculation/Rumors Research Desired Morale Increase Stuck it Out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experimental Design</strong></td>
<td>Focus Schools K–7 8th Grade at Main Campus PBL Focused High School Program Guinea Pig Syndrome Teacher Confidence/Reassurance</td>
<td>Quiet Exit from District Instability in Beginning Good–Not for Me Learn More and Stay Choice Consideration Traditional Program Uncertainty/Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Managing Transitions</strong></td>
<td>Neighborhood Schools Lost Proximity to Schools Family Friendly Logistics/Challenges Loss of Community Family Relationships Student Friendships Transportation Students in Multiple Buildings</td>
<td>Family Relationship Loss Driving to School Rushed Schedules P-T Conferences Volunteerism Extracurricular Activity Meet New Families Schedule Conflicts Identify with Teachers Made it Work</td>
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Table 18

*Theme Clusters With Their Associated Formulated Meanings: School Choice*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textural</th>
<th>Structural</th>
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<tr>
<td>Alumni Consideration</td>
<td>It’s My District–Pride</td>
<td>Enrolled/Stayed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>Employee Consideration Alumni</td>
<td>We Have to Stay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Choice</td>
<td>Public Choice is Intentional</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
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<td>Private Not an Option</td>
<td>Explored Options</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Private Expense</td>
<td>Stayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Charter Not an Option</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Private Limits Diverse Preparation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Teacher Knowing My Learner’s Needs</td>
<td>Quality Education/Needs Met</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher Relationships</td>
<td>Confidence to Stay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher Reassurance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Research</td>
<td>Didn’t Know as K Parent in 2002</td>
<td>Enrolled/Stayed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choice Options Explored in 2006</td>
<td>Some Trapped</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Would Research in 2015</td>
<td>Majority Chose Again</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum, Safety, Teachers, Technology, Immersion Programs</td>
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<td>Residency</td>
<td>Live in Community/Proximity to Schools</td>
<td>Sold/Bought New Home</td>
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<td>Changed Residence</td>
<td>Stay in Neighborhood</td>
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<td>Neighborhood/Community Value</td>
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<td>Trapped</td>
<td>Private Tuition Cost</td>
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<td>Employment Status</td>
<td>Had to Stay</td>
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<td>Transportation</td>
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Table 19

*Theme Clusters With their Associated Formulated Meanings for Students as Reported by Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textural</th>
<th>Structural</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eh, Go with the Flow</td>
<td>Moving School-School</td>
<td>Resiliency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Upset/Angry</td>
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<td>Ready for Next Step</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fearful, Anxious</td>
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<td>Just Get Through it–Survive</td>
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<td>Shyness</td>
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<td>Adaptable</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Never Top Dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lost Friendships</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wanted to Leave</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Wanted to Stay</td>
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<td>Scared of High School Students</td>
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<td>Great Experience</td>
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<td>Change Again?</td>
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<td>I made it!</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Constant Change</td>
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<td>Peer Relationships</td>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>Stability/Security</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Relationships</td>
<td>Making New Friends</td>
<td>Increased Friendships</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Diverse Experiences</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Life Ready</td>
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<td>Rallied Together</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Loss of Friendships</td>
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<td>Parent Skepticism</td>
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<td>Missed Being in School with Siblings</td>
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<td>Teacher Relationships</td>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>Rigor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Know me as a learner</td>
<td>Teacher Support</td>
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<td>Comfort</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Academic Success</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Missed Diagnosis</td>
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<td>Continuity Across Grades</td>
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<td>Larger Buildings</td>
<td>Building/Program Reorganization</td>
<td>Anxiety– Grade 8</td>
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<td>Larger Classes</td>
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<td>PBL Secondary Option</td>
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<td>Building Amenities– Playground</td>
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<td>New High School</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of Inclusiveness–8th</td>
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<td>8th High School Credit</td>
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<td>Class Size Increases</td>
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<td>Guinea Pig Syndrome</td>
<td>Experimental Designs</td>
<td>Increased Movement Back</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Instability</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Differing Work Ethics</td>
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<td>Leadership Role Loss</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Choice</td>
<td>Parent Discussion</td>
<td>Hated it–Loved it</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Friendship Stability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>More Diverse School Setting</td>
<td>Cultural Appreciation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Textural Description

The 18 participants in this study all had a common experience of enrolling their children in HPS as kindergarten students and continuing that enrollment through to graduation as seniors. During a 10-year period, they all experienced the same structural changes that were initiated by the Board of Education. However, what they experienced varied depending on their own personal experiences as a family unit and how they responded as adults.

The first phase of school reorganization, commonly referred to as “focus schools” was the most intensively recalled phase. During this period of time, local neighborhood schools were closed. The new “Eastside” and “Westside” schools were comprised of a K–1, 2–3, and 4–5 grade building. The identity of neighborhoods was based upon these small neighborhood schools, creating smaller communities within a larger city school system. While participants mourned the loss of these schools, what was more impactful was the manner in which the change occurred. An announcement was made that specific schools were going to be closed and the district reorganized into a new grade-level structure. There was no stakeholder involvement in this process outside of the Board of Education, superintendent, and central cabinet team members. As one mother reported, the lack of communication and awareness of this change taking place seemed as though it fell out of the sky.

I think a lot of parents didn’t feel like they had an option, or a say. Like, you made this decision- like the school board made the decision, whoever made the decision, school board/superintendent, and it was like, ‘Don’t we have a say in our kids future?’ That was the feeling I got. Because I will say- I mean- it seemed
to come out of the blue. And I think everybody was taken back by that. (P4, p2, L32-35)

The community was stunned by this announcement and could not believe what was happening. Participants recalled their associated anger, frustration, and sense of helplessness leading to what became a traumatic experience.

I was, as a parent, just getting so angry about these changes; just not trusting administration at all, just not! I’ve got fists clenched still, I’m just like, it was so frustrating. Do you know at all what you are doing to us? (P8, p3, L18-20)

It initially was just much distress, great distress felt like parents were not a part of the decision making process whatsoever. Losing the neighborhood school we had just been a part of . . . we had a vested interest in the school, as volunteers, community supporters, as an identity. When it changed it was just so dramatic, we just felt like it was forced. And I don’t know what else to say, it was one of the most traumatic experiences. (P8, p1, L25-26, 28-30)

The impact on parents varied depending on the number of children they had. In some cases, parents had children in each of the three new focus schools, whereas prior to that all of their children were in the same elementary school.

I probably had kids at three different buildings. And you probably hear that a lot. And that was another thing that I think parents were in an uproar about is like ‘Really? You’re gonna have me have my kids at three different places? versus when they started this.’ And I would say that would be honestly be the only, that was about the only impacts: ‘Okay, I’ve got them all over,’ and until basically they hit high school. (P4, p8, L6-10)
This intense reaction of parents across the community led to some parents quietly leaving the district as they felt there was no other way to communicate their anger and frustration. As some parents began to leave, it created doubt in the minds of the participants as to whether they too should leave the district.

It was kind of the first time we questioned, Are we doing the right thing? Like it wasn't just a no-brainer anymore. It was ‘Wow.’ We're in this climate of choice being a BIG thing. And it was the first time you heard people kind of rumble like, Well I'm taking my kid out of here and We're gonna do this, or we're gonna do that. Well, what are we going to do? The first time I can remember my husband and I really sitting down and saying-Is this gonna be our choice? Is this? Are we going to stick with this for better or worse? (P1, p1, L 30/P1, p2 L2-7)

The second phase of reorganization eliminated the “focus school” concept. A community advisory committee was commissioned to address the current financial status of the district, continued declining enrollment, response to the focus schools, and the need for another plan that was more family-friendly for the school community. This new concept was implemented 3 years after the closure of the neighborhood schools under the leadership of a new superintendent. As part of this phase, a new concept of a K–8 school was introduced into the system for a choice option. The grade-level focus schools were eliminated, creating a K–3, 4–5, 6–8 and K–8 option. The importance of proximity to a school and family convenience was so important to one participant that the family actually moved. While this move was essential for their children’s education, it did impact their relationship with other families.
It was hard for me to know my little boys weren’t going to be together, they look out for each other. We actually bought a house across town when East became K–8 so we wouldn’t have four different parent/teacher conference schedules in a week. It was a crazy week, absolutely crazy, disoriented, which school am I here, which child am I here for. So, that’s quite a big change based on the schools to buy a house on the other side of town. (P12, p2, 6-10)

And then we moved out of the neighborhood, it’s just not the same. We don’t have the same connection, we can’t talk about what happened that day, because we had different experiences. We are still polite to each other, we are still friendly, but that friendship, no, we don’t get that back. It was hard. I don’t mean to be negative, there are a lot of wonderful things about Holland Public but that was quite a shake. (P12, p3, L10-14)

In other cases, participants recall families that sold their homes and moved out of the district into neighboring districts or even out of state back to Texas. This underscores the value that families place on neighborhood schools and their proximity to them.

Continued economic challenge and declining enrollment initiated another phase of reorganization led by yet another superintendent. Once again, a communication strategy to involve participants was initiated. A design concept of a K–7 model building upon the success of the K–8 model already implemented was introduced. The challenge with this reorganization plan was the potential decision to move eighth grade students onto the main high school campus. The superintendent (who had been in the district for the first two phases of reorganization) met with multiple community and parent groups utilizing Kotter’s (1995) 8-Step process for leading change. In this collaborative work, a
A sense of urgency was established through the creation of a guiding coalition of the community groups. A change vision was shared and he worked to establish a vision for buy-in and then empowering broad-based action teams for implementation.

Reorganizing the grade-level infrastructure yet again, in a 6-year period of time, was not a small task. The idea of moving eighth grade students onto the main high school campus was a hurdle that would have to be thought through well with a great deal of perseverance. Two new secondary program models were also studied including an alternative high school program and a new secondary model based upon the intersection of 21st century skills, academic rigor, project-based learning, and technology. Short-term wins were identified as hallmarks of all of these changes to build community buy-in.

Despite this process, there were varying degrees of support and reaction. The quotations that follow provide examples of the feelings from the mothers of this study highlighting different phases of the district reorganization.

One mother specifically mourned the loss of the building that housed Grade 4 and Grade 5 students together.

I was very sad when we did the K–7’s ‘cuz (School X) was a really good environment, that 4th-5th was a great thing. So we were kind of sad about that- a lot of parents talked about what a good fit, what a nice developmentally good spot for the kids; so many fun things were learned, and team things were done, and we missed that. That I would have to say when we went to the K–7’s, the 4th-5th thing really . . . I liked it when it was K–3, 4/5, 6–8. I think that was my favorite. (P14, p1, L 11-15)
Another mother noted the wide span in grade levels that would now be present in a building placing kindergarten students with Grade 7 students.

I think that there is one other thing I wanted to mention in regards to the K–7 schools that the beginning I think a lot of parents, and even myself- although I didn’t have any children in the setting- but they were very apprehensive in regards to having kindergartners and 7th graders in the same school. It was like ‘What is that going to be like, and that’s kind of scary for my little kid.” But I believe that the way it has been organized and carried out, it’s been great. (P13, p6, L28-33)

One mother liked the K–7 design concept and wished that this change had been made from the very beginning without having to have gone through all of the changes that led up to this design model.

I wish they wouldn’t have had all the changes and maybe gone to the K–7 right away. (P5, p9, L23-24)

The decision to move to the 8–12 grade level design caused a comparative amount of distrust and uncertainty as did the focus school design model. In one case a mother communicated very strong feelings.

We hated that, I hated that, we all hated that. And the reason is that emotionally, physically, those kids were so much smaller than if you look at the sophomores, juniors and seniors in the high school. And we were constantly reassured that they were going to be very separate, and there is an eighth grade wing. Well that didn’t happen. I felt, actually I feel like the school system either didn’t understand what they were getting into or they lied to us, I’m not sure, but either way I think it shouldn’t have been ok. Because, the reason that we stayed, at that
time we were looking at whether we should stay at that time, was the promise that they were going to be very separate. (P7, p4, L13-23)

Unfortunately, even research-based models of instruction that were implemented into the district were quickly dismissed as an option, as many parents were exhausted by all of the change.

Nope. Didn’t wanna to do (New Tech-PBL Secondary School Program) because it was new. There wasn’t enough, we did not have enough information about it and we did not want to be the first group to go through. We talked about it. So, we didn’t want to be a part of that first year there because we know how first year programs can go and we didn’t want to risk it. (P3, p9, L11-13, 16-17)

Through each of these phases of reorganization and school reform initiatives driven by economic hardship and declining enrollment, nine of the participants did look at school choice options. This challenged their values that they placed on making a decision to enroll their children in the public school setting in the first place. This is significant when 45% of the participants self-identified themselves as alumni, private school graduates, and employees of the district.

It was kind of the first time we questioned, Are we doing the right thing? Like it wasn't just a no-brainer anymore. It was Wow. We’re in this climate of choice being a BIG thing. And it was the first time you heard people kind of rumble like, Well I’m taking my kid out of here and We’re gonna do this, or we’re gonna do that. Well, what are we going to do? The first time I can remember my husband and I really sitting down and saying-Is this gonna be our choice? Is this? Are we going to stick with this for better or worse? (P1, p1, L 30/P1, p2 L2-7)
The structural changes that parents went through, the intense range of emotions and doubt, physically moving their homes in some cases, having relationships impacted within their neighborhoods, and questioning their decision to stay in the school district all was tempered by the relationship that they had with the teaching staff. Eighteen of the 18 participants mentioned that it was the quality of the teaching staff that kept them confident in the district and provided the necessary reassurance that everything was going to be okay. If not for the teachers and the manner in which they conducted themselves, they would have strongly considered other options.

If I felt at all that XXXX’s interests were not going to be met, I would have pulled her in a heartbeat, in an instant, and I was ready if we needed to. I didn’t really have that plan of action drawn up, but I would not keep her in a position if she was not going to have the best education possible. (P8, p7, L8-10)

The quality of the teaching extended to the quality of the relationship that existed between teacher and parent.

And if weren’t for the teachers and that connection I felt when we first started the whole education process for my sons, I would have left. Yeah. I would have said, ‘I don’t care about the- I’m mad about the changes. I don’t really care about the teachers so we’re just gonna leave and not look back.’ But that is what kept us here. (P2, p6, L31-34)

**Structural Description**

While these participants had many similar experiences, it is important to point out that their personal lived experiences and those of their children were highly individualized and unique. This structural description describes some of the conditions,
situations, and context for how the participants experienced all of the changes through their enrollment at HPS.

The number of children that each participant had enrolled in the district varied from 1 to 4. The more children that a participant had, the more challenging it was for her. Families could have children literally in four different school buildings all at the same time with only 2 to 3 years separating the ages of their children. This caused complications in everything from arriving to school on time with transportation issues, driving to and from school, scheduling of parent-teacher conferences, attendance at after school events, and volunteering in the classroom.

We had our neighborhood school that was two blocks away from our home. I have actually three of my girls there. It was really comfortable and also at the same time I was able to get to know the teachers, and the teachers got to know my children. And when we had the Focus, the three of them were ended up in different schools. . . . It was difficult when it came to having to visit the school; parent teacher conferences; special events that I had to that like I wanted to be part of, and also that relationship with the teachers, with the school itself. Two years in one school, then two years in another school is not ideal to me. (P13, p1, L3-9)

The “focus school” concept was the most inconvenient for families, as children were in multiple buildings. This precipitated the decision-making process for some families to quietly exercise their vote of no confidence in the district by selecting other school-of-choice options or physically moving out of the district.
They actually physically moved, because they were mad about it so they actually moved their home. (P5, p2, L24-25)

In some cases, where parents were true to HPS and the community, they physically moved into another part of town to be in the school neighborhood of their choice to create more convenience for them as a family.

It was hard for me to know my little boys weren’t going to be together, they look out for each other. We actually bought a house across town when East became K–7 so we wouldn’t have four different parent/teacher conference schedules in a week. It was a crazy week, absolutely crazy, disoriented, which school am I here, which child am I here for. So, that’s quite a big change based on the schools to buy a house on the other side of town. (P12, p2, 6-10)

Through each of the school reorganization phases, the parent response was varied. At the onset of focus schools, it was of intense anger and frustration. As changes ensued, it actually became comical to some.

It’s sad to say but it was kinda comical just, I mean, when this came out we were like skeptical that it was going to work, even though it made all the sense in the world academically, I think as a community when this was implemented, we knew for family structure it was going to be very difficult for families to embrace that, because we had kids in multiple buildings and parent involvement is going to suffer when you have kids spread across the district... where is this district headed. (P10, p2, L19-24)

The continued changes brought feelings of doubt, skepticism, and even questioning the vision and direction of the school district. The participants who remained loyal to the
school district and never questioned leaving, grew increasingly concerned about public perception, image and identity.

These were huge changes and it was very frustrating and I think Holland was looked at as kind of a joke because it kept making all these changes. And I didn't like people making fun of Holland Schools. (P5, p5, L30-33; P6, L7)

The media was influencing the decisions of some of the mothers by reporting out continued conflict and dissatisfaction by families who had left the district. Parent to parent relationships became strained. Parents who left began to question the decision-making of others who elected to stay.

There were many, many parents who went to charter and then families were, there was like a, conflict is a strong word, but there was conflict between families. The families who were staying in Holland Public some of the charter school parents who thought they were suckers to put up with this with your kids, to not have a voice in their education that the school just did this to you and what would they do next? Almost like we weren’t concerned parents to leave your kids in a district where they were shuffling them around and kind of experimenting on them. I remember hearing that phrase “experimenting” just “what would happen if we did this?” It actually broke up our neighborhood in a way that it isn’t easily measured but was real. (P12, p1, L12-20)

Yet others tried to remain steadfast and make sense of all of the change.

Well I’m a pretty flexible person. I think I tried understanding their point of view. But I decided to just trust them. Their judgment because they had not come to us beforehand. So I thought you know the conditions of the economy of
the time was probably forcing this to happen. Although there was a lot of bussing going around. And when we talked with other parents, we, it didn’t make sense to us to have all this reorganization done and spending so much in bussing. Bussing the students from one place to another. (P13, p4, L9-14)

As students began their transition into their new schools, new friendships were made with students from different neighborhoods and communities. In some cases, students went from primarily all Caucasian and upper-middle-class families to economically and ethnically diverse communities. While all of the participants placed a high degree of value on diversity and the greater appreciation of culture, parents no longer knew the family who lived across the street. Families now had to invest in knowing the families across the city. This impacted whether participants would allow their children to go and spend time at each other’s homes. Already stressed families now had to place a priority on establishing new parental relationships and invest the time in fostering new relationships.

As a working mom, I really put a lot of time into getting to know the families of my children’s friends so that when they go to someone’s home, I know that they are in a safe environment, I know what kind of home they are in, so when this shakeup happened, I had to start that all over again. Which getting to know all new people wasn’t a hard part, I’m not afraid of that, but the time invested was something that I was frustrated about. That took a lot of time to do that all over again. (P8, p2, L24-29)

This relationship strain among parents across the city was also present within families.
Well, it did cause some friction between, definitely between my son and myself because he was just easy to say, ‘Oh it's so and so’s house, and I’m going’ and then it wasn’t like a quick jump on the bike and get there. I had to drive him to the other side of town and my husband is more like, ‘You know what? But he’s a boy, he’s okay and he can take care of . . . ’ But I was thinking, I don’t know these people. I don’t know if there is a mom and dad in the house? Is there older siblings, is there a gun in the house? (P2, p2, L 30-35)

The impact of relationships was also noted with respect to the teaching staff. This was viewed from a positive perspective and a concern perspective through each of the design phases. In many cases, the teachers who were in a building that was closed transitioned into the new school that the students were being transitioned to. This assisted in continuity, relationship maintenance, confidence, and reassurance that everything was going to be all right. Participants placed a high degree of trust and confidence in the teaching staff.

And I never questioned the teaching staff at any of the buildings. I felt really solid about that piece of it. And I think that’s pretty much what carried us through, was that confidence that we had. That he was still gonna be looked after really well, and educated really well because of the quality of the teachers. (P1, p3, L11-14)

During the “focus school” phase specifically, participants were concerned that having their children in a school for only 2 years at the elementary level would create instability in knowing the needs of their learner. No longer would first grade teachers be able to be in the same building as fourth grade teachers and share what they knew about a specific
learning need of a child. This relationship was viewed as very positive in the smaller neighborhood schools by parents. In addition to this, no longer would parents have the working knowledge of the styles of individual teachers and be better informed about who to request as their child’s teacher for the following school year.

Usually when teachers are in one school they talk about a student and— you know—they kinda give a little insight of Okay, these are my observations for the next year you’re going to have her or him so pay attention to this and that— you know— I think that helps, that helps the teachers and it helps the parents also. (P13, p1, L25-28)

Each of the phases brought unique responses to the new instructional settings. Participants and students were most concerned with the younger children being in buildings with older students. The changes that caused the most concern were those that had the widest span in grade level and ages of the students such as in the K–7 buildings—

I think that there is one other thing I wanted to mention in regards to the K–7 schools that the beginning I think a lot of parents, and even myself— although I didn’t have any children in the setting— but they were very apprehensive in regards to having kindergartners and 7th graders in the same school. It was like ‘What is that going to be like, and that’s kind of scary for my little kid.” But I believe that the way it has been organized and carried out, it’s been great. (P13, p6, L28-33)

and on the 8–12 high school campus.

One day he said “Mom, they have beards and cars and jobs and girlfriends” and I’m looking at my little boy like they are walking in the same hallway and it’s true, the seniors have beards and jobs and cars and girlfriends, like men and here’s
my little boy, navigating this space with them, it was challenging, a very challenging year, that year his grades probably had the most struggle and he’s a very bright boy, but he struggled because it was just such a change. He wasn’t ready for it, I think he was too young, I still think 8th grade is too young for high school. (P12, p2, L33-38)

However, the short-term wins, as Kotter (1995) describes, were seen positively by some of the participants. One mother noted the value of being able to receive high school credit as a Grade 8 student on the main high school campus.

I think that the one thing I definitely liked about 8th being at the high school is she earned high school credit right in the 8th grade, so that was great. Which helped her later in her years ‘cuz she needed those credits. (P9, p3, L23-25)

One mother described the positive experience of her child who attended the New Tech High School program.

And she tells me, ‘Mom I’ve learned so much. By reading, by doing that research, and preparing presentations and things like that, and I believe that is not only she has learned academically, but also as a person working with others. I believe that young people need to know that they are going to find all kinds of personalities and they’re going to have to deal with them- somehow- and they need to, they can learn earlier, the better, because then they are prepared for the adult life earlier. . . . And my daughter says that she has learned so much. She has. She has learned so much. Even with the college classes she’s receiving, she feels very confident that she will do well in college because she’s got so much
research and presentations in front of groups. All that has been a very good
experience for her. (P13, p6, L12-17; p4, L33-36)

The unpredicted finding of this research was to learn about the impact on student leadership. The students of the participants in this study were never the Grade 5 class of a K–5 elementary school nor the Grade 8 class of a middle school. Consequently, they felt like they never were in the position of leadership or being the “top-dog” on campus. They missed out on unique opportunities such as the traditional end of grade-level field trips, dances, and rites of passage. These ritual events serve as a mechanism to symbolize a student’s transition from one status to another. In the school setting they serve as notable milestones as students transition from one social status to another. Symbolically, schools may have special events that have historically taken place and students come to expect these events to continue. When they are disrupted or taken away, a void is left and bad feelings may be a natural consequence. This may explain why as a junior and senior class they took great pride in their takeover of the school as seniors and their end-of-year senior pranks. One mother described this loss of leadership opportunities for her child.

These kids again, had never had a chance to take on a leadership role in their school, I know they are young still, but we’re looking for them to spend a consecutive amount of time at someplace, to step into leadership role. (P8, p3, L20-22)

Another mother viewed this missed opportunity more as a status symbol or rite of passage.

He never got to be the Top Dog until his senior year. (P12, p2, L 30)
As the process of communication improved and new programs were launched as part of the new district strategic plan, parents became more involved in the process. There were multiple opportunities to learn about the new program options. The district seemed to be heading in a new direction based upon the kind of rationale and evidence that parents were requesting. However, because the district had been through so many reform initiatives, some participants remained skeptical of the new initiatives. Their children had already been through so many changes and “firsts” that even though the new program options sounded really good, they did not want them to be part of a new experimental design that had not proven successful in the local community.

I went to the meetings and got educated on what the program was and it didn’t seem to be a good fit for XXXX just because he’s very social and has lots of friends and I think he just, yeah, would like, I know he would have liked the bigger school setting as opposed to a smaller school setting. No, after hearing about it, I didn’t really and I didn’t want him to be another guinea pig, honestly...Which at that point it would have been a whole new curriculum and approach, and I just, I didn’t want him, his high school years were just precious to me, and I didn’t want to sacrifice anything for that. (P10, p4, L5-8/10-12)

The context of school choice options was also a significant factor for nine of the participants. School choice options were most frequently considered during Phase I and Phase II of reorganization. Alumni were persistent in staying in the district. Employees of the district felt as though they really couldn’t exercise a choice option for their children and the impact it would have on other families and perceptions of themselves as public education employees.
And- you know- we both just said you know what, we both are public education teachers and we know that there’s excellent teachers and it’s not the buildings and it’s not the other kids that are teaching my kids, it’s the teachers. And we’re fine with it, and we didn’t feel right- well first of all we weren’t going to pay for private education. But we didn’t feel right being public education teachers and sending our kids to a private school. What does that say? You know, that you can teach there, but you can’t send your kids there? And we feel, we feel strongly about that. (P3, p7, L17-22)

Some families, on the other hand, felt that they were trapped in the system due to the cost of a private school education and the lack of transportation to be able to get their children to school.

But what choice? We don’t really have that much choice. I heard, like, in Florida they give out voucher you can send your kids to any school that you want, right? But here we have no option. So it was kind of you got stuck, no choice. (P11, p8, L1-3)

If cost and transportation were not a factor, at least five of the participants would have likely exercised some form of school of choice option.

I got the information about tuition and at that time they didn't have bus service. And so that was a big factor, you know having to drive him back and forth. But, I think if we could have afforded it, we would have gone. So, that’s the truth. That's the honest truth right there. (P2, p3, L 24-25, 27, 29)

Participants were asked during the interview process if they had a kindergarten student today, and they had the decision to enroll their child in HPS, would they?
Surprisingly, with all of the changes that occurred, and the experiences over the 10-year period of time, 15 of the 18 participants said that they likely would. The three who did not indicate that they would do so, would do a lot more research today about school of choice options in comparison to what they did initially.

I know that I would, if I was the person I am now, making that choice, as opposed to what I was like 17 years ago, I would do way more research and I would think much bigger picture. I wasn't really much so like zoned-in and I didn't really take the time to explore. (P1, p8, L28-30)

**Composite Description**

The composite description that follows summarizes the overall experience of the 18 participants in this research study. It is meant for the reader to walk away better understanding what the experience was like. Despite all of the impacting changes the district’s reorganization plans had on the participants and their families, overall, as they look back, they believe that their child received a quality education and good experiences. The composite description begins with a key quote from one of the mothers that provides the essence of this collective experience.

I’m just very proud of Holland Public Schools. I’m very proud. And I think we’ve all worked together, we’re a good community here, and you know, like any families you have some dark periods in your past, and those Focus School years, maybe some things weren’t so great, but some valuable stuff came out of it that, when you talk about that question people look forward would you have still done it, you know, that’s so much a reason why we can’t do that kind of thing, because, you know, yeah, maybe you went through some really uckie stuff but some of the
good that came out of it was pretty tremendous too. And it was a growing experience, and I think administration grew, I think teachers grew, the community grew; we learned from those experiences, and we’ve learned that we can’t be just a Maplewood family you know, we’re bigger than that. And I think there are some other schools in the area that are going to be learning some of those lessons.

(P8, p14, L3-14)

During the enrollment period of 10 years in HPS, participants included in this research experienced many different levels of emotions and experiences that impacted their decisions to maintain enrollment. These emotions included anger, frustration, suspicion, confusion, questioning, resentment, and lack of trust. These emotions were fueled initially by the fact that the district’s lack of communication in the first reorganization plan and involvement of stakeholders was non-existent. While communication and involvement of stakeholders over time improved, the initial structural changes created lack of trust and skepticism in district leadership and board direction. In some cases it became comical. Mothers expressed feelings of having no voice at all. Many witnessed their friends and neighbors leave the school district out of anger and frustration versus dissatisfaction with the overall educational quality of the district. One participant’s neighbor and friend actually sold their home and bought another in a nearby district. One witnessed families move back to Texas. This enrollment loss further contributed to the economic challenges of the district over time, making it necessary for further structural changes. Several participants discussed their prediction of such need for further action based upon the conversations they were having with other families who elected to stay in the district. Participants expressed a strong desire to be part of the
problem-solving process and, perhaps with their help, could have assisted in staving off some of the additional changes that occurred.

As new leadership emerged, the strategy for stakeholder involvement changed over time. Parents became more accepting of re-organization plans, specifically with the elimination of the focus schools and the onset of the K–7 schools. While rationale was provided for the move of Grade 8 students onto the high school campus, some parents felt as though they had been misled or betrayed in the expectations that were outlined in advance for them.

Other parents who elected to leave the district exacerbated the feelings of the parents who chose to stay. They questioned their parenting and why they would leave their children enrolled in a district that operated in this fashion. Parents who staunchly believed in public education, and even alumni of the district, for the first time found themselves questioning their choice in a highly choice environment. While every participant expressed the understanding of having a choice in where their children attended school, 5 of the 18 participants felt trapped in the district in some way and unable to leave based upon their family finances (ability to pay for private tuition and transportation to/from school) and their employment status (sense of loyalty and responsibility to have their children attend where they themselves work).

All participants expressed a sense of loss around neighborhood schools and the sense of community this provides families. Elementary schools are viewed as an anchor of the neighborhood and the community. A sense of safety in knowing your child’s friends and their parents, walking to and from school together, after school play dates, and participating in school events were all expressed as elements of community. In
addition, community was also defined as the strong relationship between parents, students, and teachers. Participants also expressed a strong pride for community and their school system. Quality education, quality schools, and quality school experiences were elements of pride to be shared as ambassadors of the district for new families who move into the community.

Parents experienced many non-parent-friendly events across the district during this time period that created inconveniences for them with children in multiple school buildings. This included hectic mornings to ensure that children arrived at multiple schools on time, challenges to schedule parent-teacher conferences, challenges in volunteering across multiple school buildings and investment of time, a loss of relationships with other families, a loss of security and trust of safe environments for their children to spend time at with newly formed friendships, and the inability for them to get to know an entire teaching staff to identify the best placement for their children the following school year.

Over time parents began to recognize the challenges that the district was having as communication, rationale, and evidence of research began to become more transparent. Parents were able to make sense of the needed changes and several became part of focus groups forming a strategic planning initiative that fostered new direction for the district. This initiative led to a capital campaign project that proved successful.

While the participants’ initial reactions were significant, the student responses to the changes were much less negative. If their child was doing well, the mothers really had no further concerns.
But through the whole course of all these changes, my son was doing fine. He was adapting and part of it that's his nature anyway. So I wasn’t getting any negative feedback from him, which maybe that would have made me feel differently. But, it was funny the parents were the ones who were the most upset. The kids were like. Eh, whatever. (P1, p2/3, L35/1-4)

Only 2 of the 18 participants reported that their child wished they had not been part of the district and one would have left at any time. This was in large part due to the lack of or inability to develop new friendships with a changing demographic population. Other parents reported that their students enjoyed making new friendships and really appreciated the cultural experiences that came as a result of smaller neighborhoods coming together from different parts of the city. Students valued the opportunity to begin earning high school credits as Grade 8 students, despite the initial fears of being on campus with seniors.

The common thread that kept participants in HPS was the quality of the relationship with their child’s teacher. This relationship was based upon the teacher knowing the learning needs of their child and continuation of providing a high quality education experience despite what grade-level structure or building they were attending any given year. In fact, all 18 participants cited the relationship of the teacher as one of the reasons why they stayed.

Participants valued the diverse experience that attending a public school provided for their children. *Diverse* was defined as being able to attend a school where families from many different cultures and levels of socioeconomic status come together to learn. While some participants experienced this for themselves as alumni of the district, others
specifically chose public education for their children (despite being private school graduates themselves) to ensure that their children would be world-ready.

Diversity was viewed as a core learning skill to prepare their children for the future and the ability to interact with, work with, and maintain strong communities. Some participants, however, expressed worry for the future of public education and the ability of teachers to meet all of the needs present in today’s urban classrooms. As schools of choice impacts the diversity among and between school districts, this becomes more challenging. The mothers of this study recognized that students come to school at increasing levels of variability relative to readiness to learn, academic potential, behavior expectations, intrinsic motivation, and support of parents at home.

Participants were generally open to change and recognized the need to do so during struggling economies, accountability to improve academic performance for all learners, and addressing facility master planning when years of declining enrollment impact school systems.

The reality of what the district was up against as far as these old buildings, and did it make sense economically, and how are we going to house these kids in the best way. . . . I can remember hearing the rumblings, Oh there’s gonna be a big, a big change(s) and then when it all came out it was like it makes sense. I mean we gotta, we gotta make some changes. It just isn’t working economically or structurally. (P1, p4, L7-12)

Mothers who are part of a process, receive timely/effective communication, understand the rationale behind such decisions, and can anticipate the potential impact on their child are generally supportive of such decisions that will bring about change. In the
absence of such communication, they resort to trying to make sense of the decision themselves. This absence led to speculation, rumor, suspicion, skepticism, and distrust in HPS. Participants wanted to know up front why the decisions were being made, rather than trying to be convinced later on the value of any change initiative.

The lack of stability in the district and the continued restructuring of the grade-level infrastructure every 3 years during a 10-year period of time caused the participants to question the vision and direction of the district. While 15 of the 18 participants would select HPS again as their choice school district, three expressed that they would research the school system better and what it offered from a curriculum perspective. Nine participants may have made different decisions at the time of these significant changes if transportation and costs for private education would not have been a variable at the time.

Just as participants had varying degrees of experience, so did their children. As one mother reported,

He enjoyed Holland Public. I don’t think he would want to go to a different school, from the beginning. He just feels like he belongs here. (P11, p9, 5-6)

Whether or not the participants directly involved their child in dialogue about the district changes and school-of-choice options, the students seemed to be aware of what was happening around them, especially as they got older.

I know he didn’t like changing schools at the time. He . . . I know he’s said a few things like, ‘Oh they’re changing it again.’ And it really doesn’t affect him, now. But he would, he would say that to me, ‘Now what are they gonna to do?’ You know. So kids know. Kids totally know. (P2, p5, L 12-14)
Through this change, students seemingly were able to make light of the situation and go with the flow. As one mother candidly reported,

They all joke about all the changes they went through and so they’re aware of it, and anytime anything changed throughout high school they’re like, “oh we’re getting screwed again,” but it’s yeah, he’s aware of kinda the rough road he had, but no, he’s happy, he was happy, is happy. (P10, p5, L10-12)

In summary, despite all of this change, participants overall believe that their child received a quality education.

Chapter V will provide recommendations for policymakers regarding parental choice, the essence of information that district leaders should consider regarding parental choice when making decisions regarding building or program consolidation, and recommendations for further research and inquiry in similar/dissimilar settings.
CHAPTER V

RESEARCH QUESTION FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS RELATING TO EXISTING RESEARCH, LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL BOARDS AND POLICYMAKERS, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSION

Research conducted by Bainbridge and Sundre (1991) found in their annual School Match surveys that just as no two children are the same, no two families have the same definition of what an ideal school system is. The general preferences regarding academic rigor, school system expenditures, school/class size, and community characteristics all take on different meanings of importance by family. They argued that school policy leaders need to conduct local market research regarding the factors that parents consider in their own region to truly understand the culture and climate at work in their communities. This was the primary motivation for this backyard research study (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The increased mobility of many families, combined with the school choice movement, has contributed to an increasingly large number of families who are searching for schools that will meet their needs.

The school choice literature demonstrates that parents make decisions about where to send their children to school based on a strong emphasis on academics, convenience, school characteristics, and safety (Amour & Brett, 1998; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000). These studies also indicate that there are slight differences between White parents and non-White parents when academic priorities are considered. Non-White are slightly less likely to identify academics as the most important factor in
choosing a school. Convenience is a priority for many families because many school-choice options do not provide transportation.

Convenience is described as the distance to and from school. Kleitz et al. (2000) found that a majority of parents across ethnic and socioeconomic groups indicate that school location is very important to them. Those that cited convenience and location as very important to them were also those least likely to have the resources available to provide daily transportation for their students on their own. Additional school characteristics, aside from location, that are important when making a decision include school size, school neighborhood, and the diversity of the school. Minority and lower-income parents were much less likely to report that school values and racial diversity were important to them, while parents with a college education cited diversity and teaching values as important considerations (Schneider, Marschall, Teske, & Roch, 1998; Schneider, Teske & Marshall, 2000).

A summary of this research as it relates to the research questions is presented in this chapter. This summary focuses on the research questions and how they relate to the results of the study. Limitations will be discussed, followed by recommendations for local public school boards of education and policymakers. Finally, recommendations for future study will be provided.

**Review of Research Questions**

**Research Subquestion #1**

*How do mothers describe their experiences through each of the district’s three phases of school reorganization?*
Participants in this study reacted uniquely to each of the four phases of school restructuring. In the first phase, everyone loved their small neighborhood schools. These neighborhoods, often defined by the elementary school, were smaller communities within the city where everyone felt as though they knew each other. Family relationships were strong between and among neighbors. This family relationship carried over into the school setting with teachers.

In the second phase of district reorganization (focus schools), all of the mothers mourned the loss of their small neighborhood schools. They each expressed their anger, disagreement, frustration, sense of helplessness, and lack of trust in the district as the change was made without any involvement of the stakeholders in the community. One mother stated it this way:

I was, as a parent, just getting so angry about these changes; just not trusting administration at all, just not! I’ve got fists clenched still, I’m just like, it was so frustrating. Do you know at all what you are doing to us? (P8, p3, L18-20)

Another subject described her disagreement with the restructure plan from the beginning:

We disagreed with the whole focus schools right from the beginning, but we didn’t make a big deal about it because the teachers were the same. I mean, you do what you do. We were not thrilled with that, and we’re not- you know, we really believe in the K–5, the K–6 school and still do. That’s what we have and you know we still kinda wish it was still that way. But, you know, you can’t- we also didn’t believe it was right to just high-tail it out of Holland because you have to try new things and you have to go through it. And, and it was okay. (P3, p3, L8-13)
Despite these negative feelings, there was recognition of the academic benefit of the grade-level structure and focus on grade level specific curriculum and instruction. As one mother shared,

I wasn’t certain about the structure being right, but again, they had a fabulous couple of years learning and the teaching and everything was great. (P1, p4, L3-4)

Many participants had children in multiple buildings over the K–5 grade span and this created significant challenges for parents. Participants expressed hurried and stressful mornings getting everyone to school on time, transportation issues, challenges with prioritizing and getting to after school extracurricular activities, challenges attending parent-teacher conferences, a decrease in their focused commitment to one school for volunteer purposes, an inability to develop relationships with teachers over time in a building to know who they would want their child’s teacher to be, a challenge in knowing the families of the newly developed friendships of their children across town, a loss of neighborhood community, and the added stress of adult relationships in neighborhoods as some stayed in the district while others left. One mother described the impact on her and her children this way:

The first change was definitely the hardest, because we went from a school we knew and loved, and very comfortable with- and knew all the kids, and knew all the parents, knew all the teachers, and we were going to some huge unknown and it impacted- you know- two of my children at that point. (P5, p1, L5-8)

Only two participants discussed phase three specifically. This phase included the addition of a K–8 school choice option into the district and K–3, 4–5, 6–8 Grade schools. One participant really liked the 4–5 option and the experience her child received there.
One family wanted to ensure that they were in the K–8 so much that they physically changed their residence to be in that school’s attendance boundary.

During the fourth phase of the district reorganization design, four K–7 schools were created and the Grade 8 program was moved to the high school campus, which provided a traditional secondary program. Two additional secondary program options were added to the district as school-of-choice options. These options included an alternative learning lab school and a 21st century project-based learning school. Second to focus schools, the Grade 8 transition received the most negative reactions from mothers. There was a lot of concern expressed about the developmental needs of students in a school setting where 13–18 year-olds would be together. One mother described her viewpoint of moving the Grade 8 students to the main high school campus this way:

We hated that, I hated that, we all hated that. And the reason is that emotionally, physically, those kids were so much smaller than if you look at the sophomores, juniors and seniors in the high school. (P7, p4, L13-14)

These negative feelings were followed by the K–7 model. While parents wanted their children in buildings longer and to avoid the lack of family friendly focus school concept, they were challenged with kindergartners being in the same building as Grade 7 students. One mother described her anxiety about the K–7 model this way.

Uneasy, definitely uneasy. You know how is this gonna work with such older kids with such little ones? And luckily I didn't have. My kids at the time weren't so, so little. Like if I had a kindergartner that first year, WOW. Cuz I can still
remember what those first couple of days were like and everyone was like deer in the headlights, teachers, all of us were just like Wow! (P1, p4, L31-34)

Multiple individuals recalled the loss of the middle school experience for Grades 6–8 and still believe that that model is a good learning option for students.

I liked the Focus school. I liked the grade level things. I don’t really like the K–7’s, as a whole. I get it. I get why. But I’m kind of glad we didn’t have more kids in that because at that time I think my daughter was in 4th grade? I wish they had a middle school experience. I think kids need that. (P14, p3, L10-13)

One mother liked the K–7 design concept so much she wished that the district had implemented this design from the beginning and avoided all of the other design options that failed.

I wish they wouldn’t have had all the changes and maybe gone to the K–7 right away… (P5, p9, L23-24)

One participant did discuss a gender difference specifically related to the move of the Grade 8 program to the high school. At the time, multiple parents not part of the study expressed concerns of Grade 8 girls being on the same campus as senior men.

I think having a boy, it was a little less of a stressful situation. I think if I had a girl and it was the 8th grade at the high school, I would have been more fearful of that, but I think since he was a boy, and well adjusted, and never gave us any issues or trouble. (P10, p3, 25-27)

During the school reorganization planning processes, participants called for more research and evidence that demonstrated that any new programs or grade-level span
groupings would actually work. Even when programs were viewed as positive, it left some of the mothers with the desire to stick with the more familiar and traditional-based instructional models that were well known and established. While they recognized the value of education reform and the need for academic changes, by Phase IV, many of the mothers were hesitant about their children being part of yet another experimental design as “guinea pigs.” Designs that were not proven successful locally were dismissed by many of the participants. This was specifically true for the New Tech High School. As one mother shared,

I went to the meetings and got educated on what the program was and it didn’t seem to be a good fit for XXX just because he’s very social and has lots of friends and I think he just, yeah, would like, I know he would have liked the bigger school setting as opposed to a smaller school setting. No, after hearing about it, I didn’t really and I didn’t want him to be another guinea pig, honestly... Which at that point it would have been a whole new curriculum and approach, and I just, I didn’t want him, his high school years were just precious to me, and I didn’t want to sacrifice anything for that. (P10, p4, L5-8/10-12)

As participants reflected back on the experience of their graduating senior and their siblings who were now moving through the school district, they expressed relief in knowing that they were part of a more stable grade-level design that had now been in place for 5 years.

I’m a little bit more relaxed about it now that’s it’s my third one. I think he’ll be just fine. I think he’s… yeah. I really don’t have any concerns now. (P9, p10, L6-7)
One of the findings that I was not anticipating was related to the impact on the family structure that existed inside of a school itself. For those families who had multiple children, they mourned the loss of their children being able to attend the same school as their siblings. They weren’t able to walk to school together, play on the playground together, eat lunch together, or participate in some of the same extracurricular activities. One participant described it this way:

*It meant that they couldn’t see each other in school and say ‘Hi. And how is your day going?’ and you know things like that. It was more of an isolated thing, it wasn’t family.”* (P13, p4, L18-19)

Research Subquestion #2

*How do mothers describe their child’s experience in the school district through each of the phases of school reorganization?*

Participants in this study had varied opinions of what they believed the experience of their child was and how their child would respond if asked. They varied from “They absolutely hated going to 8th grade at the high school. They hated it” (P3, p8/9 L38-1) and “I would leave here in a heartbeat” (P7, p6, L 1-5), to they were doing fine and adapting to the changes: “I think she would say it taught her resilience, adapting and making new friends…” (P6, p10, L14-15). Multiple mothers commented on the positive impacts of their child meeting new friends and participating in more diverse school settings.

*I think he would agree that the changes were good. I mean, he met a lot of people he wouldn’t have met until middle school. He met and- along all races, all classes*
of people and people he probably wouldn’t have met if he was at a neighborhood school. (P5, p6, L11-13)

Another positive experience noted was the ability to take high school credit as Grade 8 students.

By going to the high school, he got high school credit in 8th grade, and then he was able to do more things. (P5, p6, L22-23)

Over time, the changes almost became comical in nature to some of the mothers and their children, and the students responded with comments like, “Oh, here we go again (sigh)” (P14, p3, L7) or “What could they possibly do to us next?” and “Oh, okay, all right” (P4, p9, L28-30).

One of the most meaningful findings of my study that school leaders should be mindful of is related to the inadvertent interruption of leadership opportunities that naturally exist in the transition from one grade level building to another if changes are made in the overall grade-level structure itself. Participants mentioned the fact that their children lost out on leadership roles and “he never got to be the Top Dog until his senior year” (P12, p2, L30). Participants also mentioned the loss of not having a middle school experience.

I think at that point, he started saying his class (chuckle) has been jerked around quite a bit but, cuz it was just little things that were important to him not being an 8th grader at West, not getting to be the big kid at West, not getting the 8th grade trip, the 8th grade dance, you know, just those types of things that they missed out on. (P10, p3, L30-33)
Most notable was the reflection by one mother on what she thought her child’s response would be on their preparation beyond high school.

Definitely she would say she would do Holland New Tech again. Yes. And she tells me, ‘Mom I’ve learned so much. By reading, by doing that research, and preparing presentations and things like that, and I believe that is not only she has learned academically, but also as a person working with others. I believe that young people need to know that they are going to find all kinds of personalities and they’re going to have to deal with them- somehow- and they need to, they can learn earlier, the better, because then they are prepared for the adult life earlier. (P13, p6, L12-17) And my daughter says that she has learned so much. She has. She has learned so much. Even with the college classes she’s receiving, she feels very confident that she will do well in college because she’s got so much research and presentations in front of groups. All that has been a very good experience for her. (P13, p4, L33-36)

Finally, one participant thought that this research question would be a good one to ask the students themselves.

That would be very interesting and that would be a very good interview to interview some of the seniors, I would be really curious to hear what they say because he has some great stories, some very positive things but he still talks about how hard it was to give up what he thought how his childhood was going to look like and then have it look like something completely different and now be told that now it’s going to be something different again. I think it has been hard, the consistency, not able to count on adults around you to keep your experience
the way you expect it’s going to be. I think he would say it was hard but it would be interesting to ask, if he would say, maybe a little braver, because he had to be to go to high school at 13. I wonder what he would say. That would be a very interesting interview. (P12, p3, L24-31)

**Research Subquestion #3**

*What contexts or situations do mothers describe as having typically influenced or affected their experiences in the district over the course of the last 10 years and their decision to keep their children enrolled in the system?*

Participants in this study were equally split on remaining loyal to the district and considering other education options for their children. Nine of the participants did not question their loyalty to the district and made the decision to stick it out as long as their children’s education was not negatively impacted. The other nine participants considered a school-of-choice option but did not follow through on leaving the district. Employee/alumni loyalty and the cost/access of private education were the variables that impacted their decision to keep their children enrolled.

There were six basic factors that influenced and affected the experience of participants and their decision to keep their children enrolled in the system through all of the district re-organization. They included teacher quality, student friendships/relationships, academic rigor, diversity, employee/alumni loyalty, and a sense of community.

The number one factor cited by participants for their staying and making it through all of the changes, emotions, and difficulty managing the transitions and inconveniences was the teaching staff. Not only did the teachers provide them with
confidence and reassurance that everything was going to be okay, but they were what kept things together. As one mother shared,

But that’s kind of what has been the glue that's held it all together for us. I feel like is that confidence that they’re getting a great education, despite all the craziness that’s going; they’re making it work in the classroom, everyday. And I value that. I really value that. (P1, p13, L5, 7-12).

The relationships between teachers, mothers, and students were strong. One mother shared her feelings this way:

And the important thing really for us, was the teachers. We met so many Holland Public School teachers, they became our friends, they went to our church, even in the one year in XXX, we thought “these people love kids and they love XXX” so these were going to be the people in the classroom, even if that classroom wasn’t where we wanted it to be, that’s more important than like you know, board decisions. So we stayed with it. (P12, p1, L24-28)

Mothers believed that the teachers really knew their children as individual learners and worked very hard to ensure that the academic rigor that they received was not compromised. One mother was very confident in this belief.

And I never questioned the teaching staff at any of the buildings. I felt really solid about that piece of it. And I think that's pretty much what carried us through, was that confidence that we had. That he was still gonna be looked after really well, and educated really well because of the quality of the teachers. (P1, p3, L11-14)
Another significant factor was related to the friendships that participants’ children had in the neighborhoods. The mothers wanted these friendships to remain intact. They knew that by moving to another school, they would likely have to start all over again making new friends. Families worked very hard to stick together and make the best of the changes as a result. One mother described the impact of friendships this way:

We did think of leaving the district. There were just enough of the XXX families that were staying and, we chose to stick it out, just to see…. and we just made sure that some of the friend units were together and that, so that the transition would have been a little easier. (P5, p2, L14-18)

Growing in importance in the school system over time was the increasing value of diversity and the desire for participants and their children to go to school in an ethnically and economically diverse environment. Multiple mothers noted the benefits of attending schools with these demographics and the preparation that it provides for today’s global community. One mother shared her thoughts on diversity this way:

The diversity for Holland Public schools was great. ‘Cuz my older two will tell you, now, that they’ve been through it, and now they’re out, and graduated from college and still in college, is that if they had to do it again, they say at different times, ‘Thank you for sending us to Holland Public schools.’ (P4, p2, L18-21)

The overall quality of the education experience itself was an important factor for mothers to remain enrolled in the district. Multiple participants described rigor as a key factor of academic success and reputation for a school district. They expressed the value and pride of the Advanced Placement program at Holland High School. One mother even viewed this program as a school-of-choice option attraction for the district.
In high school, I really do believe that all of the AP classes that they have to offer is wonderful. There are a lot of buildings in a lot of districts that do not have those AP classes, which is why kids come. I think a lot of kids come for those. And I think the teachers who teach them, have been very good. (P3, p13, L32-35)

Not only did moms want academic rigor for their children, they wanted to make sure that their children’s learning needs were met at all levels of the learning spectrum and at the individual level. The participants unanimously believed that the teachers were meeting their child’s individual learning needs. The learning potential of their child was described by one mother this way:

I just feel like people cared about my kids. Like the teachers have done a really good job of looking at where they had areas, and where they had strengths...and saw potential and have always encouraged them to be able to do it. (P14, p9, L32-33; p10, L6).

During the time that other parents were electing to leave the district or questioning their loyalty, employees of the district who had children, and alumni who had children in the district, found themselves reaffirming their commitment to the district. This group made up one third of the participants. One mother who was an employee in the district had this to say: “But, being a Holland Public School employee made me stay loyal, definitely” (P9, p4, L3-5). Another mother who was a proud alumna shared this about her decision to stay:

Well I have to kind of tough it out’ because I wanted Holland Public School, and despite all the changes that they made, this is where I wanted to be. This is where I wanted my kids to be. I went- I’d gone through Holland Public School my
whole life also. And I know, I know a lot of the teachers and that’s what I wanted
my boys to experience. (P2, p6, L19-22)

The city and surrounding neighborhoods that comprise HPS take great pride in
community. Many of the neighborhoods today are still defined by the once small
neighborhood elementary schools, even though some physically do not exist. Three of
these small neighborhood schools have been torn down. This has defined the need to
create a new identity for neighborhoods under the current K–7 and 8–12 model. The K–7
schools are working to create a branding around larger neighborhoods with new
attendance boundaries. As the reorganization plans were implemented over the course of
9 years, one participant shared, “It was almost like you moved to a new town. You
know, different group of parents” (P6, p4, L17). A sense of community was lost as
parents on the same street began sending their children to different schools. Parents had
to redefine what community meant to them from a larger neighborhood scale. The
mothers who stayed enrolled in the district did so because of their value of community
and the schools in them. “It’s like, part of home. Here in Holland, go to Holland instead
of drive somewhere else. So like you hoping you’re part of the family” (P11, p5, L8-10).

Another community perspective that I appreciated finding as a result of this
research was from a mother who represented the migrant community.

Because I hear of other people that come from, the migrants, you know, they need
to be moving around and the kids they don’t have a place so they go to school ... I
don’t want to move, I don’t want to put my kids at risk. Because they are doing
good in school and you are change yeah, no, no, so we decide to stay in Holland.
(P16, p6, L21-22/30-32)
Research Subquestion #4

Why did mothers enroll their child in the district (public school) in the first place?

Participants in this study cited the following reasons for enrolling their students in the district in the first place in 2003: neighborhood/community school, diversity (private alumni perspective), alumni of the district, lack of resources to attend private schools, public school teachers, and they were employees of the district. School of choice was not mentioned as something of importance in 2003 as it is today. One mother indicated that if she had a kindergarten student today, she would consider the enrollment process and entry into the school setting from a different perspective.

And knowing all of the things that we know. Yeah, I would go into it much more in a serious way and look. Maybe go visit other places, just to make sure. But I think ultimately…I would make that same choice to come to Holland as a kindergartner. But I would do it a lot more thoughtfully, I guess. (P1, p9, L6-9)

I know that I would, if I was the person I am now, making that choice, as opposed to what I was like 17 years ago, I would do way more research and I would think much bigger picture. I wasn't really much so like zoned-in and I didn't really take the time to explore. (P1, p8, L28-30)

Research Subquestion #5

How do mothers describe or explain their decision to maintain enrollment in this district for their children since kindergarten and how do they feel about that decision?

Participants in this study went through significant change throughout a 10-year period of time. It was clearly reflected in their recall of events that they experienced while being enrolled in HPS. From the first phase to the final stage, there was a range of
emotion, an awareness and mindfulness seeking to make meaning of the situation, and very intentional effort on their part to make it work for their number one priority, their child. The decision to stay enrolled in the district did not come without sacrifice of their time, effort, and energy. Twelve of the mothers were full-time employees, and only two mothers were stay at home parents. Juggling through work commitments and the responsibility of raising a family was difficult. The greatest challenges that mothers reflected on were related to having children in multiple buildings and, hence, having to balance multiple schedules related to school start and end times, volunteering, attending school related events, and establishing new relationships with teachers and other families.

Overall, only two mothers reported either that their child hated the experience, specifically the transition of Grade 8 to the high school—“They absolutely hated going to 8th grade at the high school. They hated it” (P3, p8/9 L38-1), or that their child would have left to attend another high school if that option had been available to them—“I would leave here in a heartbeat” (P7, p6, L5). Of the nine parents who looked at a school of choice option, five reported that they were unable to exercise this option due to the cost of private education and the availability of transportation. Despite all of the challenge, not one parent commented on the fact that their child did not receive an overall good education.

The following quotations included in Figure 25 exemplify how different mothers felt about their decision to keep their children enrolled in the district and the impact that it had on each of them as a parent.
And then all of a sudden they had to go through three different schools. It was quite a challenge to have to drive them to all three spots. Three kids, different grades. (P11, p1, L12-13)

We had our neighborhood school that was two blocks away from our home. I have actually three of my girls there. It was really comfortable and also at the same time I was able to get to know the teachers, and the teachers got to know my children. And when we had the Focus, the three of them were ended up in different schools. . . . It was difficult when it came to having to visit the school; parent teacher conferences; special events that I had to that like I wanted to be part of, and also that relationship with the teachers, with the school itself. Two years in one school, then two years in another school is not ideal to me. (P13, p1, L3-9)

As a working mom, I really put a lot of time into getting to know the families of my children’s friends so that when they go to someone’s home, I know that they are in a safe environment, I know what kind of home they are in, so when this shakeup happened, I had to start that all over again. Which getting to know all new people wasn’t a hard part, I’m not afraid of that, but the time invested was something that I was frustrated about. That took a lot of time to do that all over again. (P8, p2, L24-29)

I think sometimes parents get worried about where you’re dropping your kid off; you don’t know the family, you don’t know the neighborhood, you don’t know that. And if it’s in your neighborhood, like it is now, I think people are a little more likely to allow kids to play and have friendships. I knew these kids and I knew these parents, because they all volunteered, and we’d go on field trips together. So it wasn’t that big of a deal to us. (P14, p2, L30-32; p3, L1-2)

Because in spite of- you know- all the changes I understood that there were reasons behind it. I understood that this was trying to make the best of the resources available. And that still there were, the education was good. There were good teachers, the opportunities available to the students are great and I didn’t think of leaving. (P13, p2, L29-32)

I think that we understood that the changes were necessary, I mean, especially in my position, knowing why they needed to be made…I know the changes were necessary. It was hard to see, you know, my child go through all the changes, but he never complained. And, I was very in tune to watching for signs that he was having anything negative as a result of the changes, and I never saw anything, so they were handled, you know, I think, as best as they could be handled. (P10, p7, L30-31/33-36)

It’s changing everywhere. But that’s where I feel kind of like we have to remain, like, positive about our school… I just thought there were so many benefits. So when people would complain, I would try to always be positive about it and say, ‘Well these are the good things that can come from it. Because there’s always good that can come out of it. (P14, p7, L31-32; p1, L1-3)

I wish it would have been a little more stable. I don’t think this was an ideal situation for him to be put in, but I don’t think he suffered anything. He’s gotten a good education and the teachers have always been great regardless of the situation. (P10, p4, L22-24)
We have had a choice. We live, I don’t know 10 minutes from XXX schools, 20 maybe 15 minutes from maybe into XXX schools. So we did, we did think about that, but, the friends my kids made, they wouldn’t have wanted to leave; and I was always happy with their learning. They were always learning. And the teachers that we actually had were able to… I don’t know what’s the word… see the needs of my child. (P5, p8, L26-30)

I feel like he’s prepared. As well as he can be prepared for college because of who he is as a person. (P14, p5, L14-15)

I feel like we’ve gotten a quality education. I feel like there are so many different opportunities for our kids to get involved in, different kind of things. (P14, p9, L18-19)

Figure 25. How mothers felt about keeping their children enrolled in the school district.

Central Research Question

How do mothers of school-aged children enrolled in an urban district that has undergone several rounds of significant change experience, understand, and connect that change to their own lives and the decision to keep their children enrolled?

Participants in this study were very reflective on the overall experience and relating it to themselves and their children. I believe that the data would have looked differently if participants had been interviewed at the beginning and end of each of the four design phases. The value of this research being conducted at the end when their child graduated from high school was that the mothers were able to look over the entire experience and assess whether or not the total experience was positive for their child. Many of the participants recognized that change is inevitable; it is how one responds to that change and grows and learns from the experience that is of value. Through their intentionality of being positive about the changes and instilling a can-do spirit in their children, their students overall remained positive, developed adaptable skill sets, engaged in learning with students from many different cultures and communities, and developed stamina in resiliency.
One mother reflected on all of the changes and considered whether she really felt that children are as resilient as people say they are.

They say kids are resilient and stuff, but I just, I didn’t like all the moves. I didn’t like all of the changes for them. I know you can’t be get, can’t be stuck in ‘This is what I’m comfortable with,’ but they were so little to be here and there. And I didn’t like that. (P2, p7, L31-33)

Another mother worked very hard to see the bright side of change. She was concerned about the overall image of the district and wanted to make sure that these negative perceptions did not impact another family’s decision about deciding to enroll in the district or not.

It’s changing everywhere. But that’s where I feel kind of like we have to remain, like, positive about our school… I just thought there were so many benefits. So when people would complain, I would try to always be positive about it and say, ‘Well these are the good things that can come from it. Because there’s always good that can come out of it… (P14, p7, L31-32; p1, L1-3)

One mother described the overall experience that her children had this way:

They’ve had some amazing teachers, some wonderful, wonderful teachers we feel, incredibly blessed. Their teachers got them to do things that have impacted them very positively. Overall I feel like it was the right thing to do, I don’t have regrets, I don’t wish we would have done something else. I think we did the best we could with what we were handed. I think that overall it’s been good for the boys to be, yeah, to have that experience that they had. It’s not what I would have planned for them but I think overall it was positive thing. The boys are Dutch
(school mascot), they are not Dutch at all, but they are Dutch all the way through high school. (laughs). They all three benefited from the teaching program, I wouldn’t change that, I wouldn’t go back at and go to a school that didn’t have it. (P12, p3-4, L35-36/1-4)

Finally, in the overall reflection of the experience, one mother was able to recognize that at the end of any change initiative, something good can come as a result.

I think sometimes you have to go through changes to see the good come out. (P9, p6, L30-31)

**Implications Relating to Existing Research**

In this section, I will relate four recurring themes from across all the participants back to the literature and discuss its consistency with the findings of this study. These themes include teacher quality, teacher relationships, school choice, and managing change.

**Teacher Quality**

According to the October 2014 *PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools* (Phi Delta Kappa International, 2014), 64% of public schools parents have trust and confidence in their teachers. Only 58% of Republican Americans have trust and confidence in their teachers, while 70% of Democratic Americans do. In this research, 100% of the parents of this study had trust and confidence in their teachers. This is a significant finding, as HPS is located in what is widely known as a very conservative Republican county. Teacher quality was an overarching theme that came through as a reason why participants elected ultimately to keep their children enrolled in
the district. Quality was defined as the relationships among teacher, students, and families from an academic (knowing the needs of my student) and social (what my child’s interests are outside of the classroom setting) perspective.

Teacher quality in this study was never defined or measured by the test scores of the district, building, or individual teacher, nor the use of evaluations to simply rate a teacher as highly effective or ineffective. This is consistent with the results of the PDK/Gallup Poll (Phi Delta Kappa, 2014) as well. Sixty-nine percent of public school parents oppose using student test results in teacher evaluation. Interestingly enough, there is a difference between how Republicans and Democrats view the use of assessments in rating the effectiveness of teachers. While 68% of Democrats oppose this, only 50% of Republicans do so. Overall, 71% believe that teacher evaluations should be used to improve the ability of a teacher to teach, and 75% believe that evaluation should be used to document the ineffectiveness of a teacher that could lead to dismissal.

The PDK/Gallup Poll (Phi Delta Kappa, 2014) went on further to ask the question: “Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about the elementary schools in your community? Elementary schools are not changing quickly enough, changing too quickly, or do not need to change.” Overall, 44% indicated that they are not changing enough, 10% stated too quickly, and 44% indicated that they don’t need to change. As district leaders contemplate change in their community, it is evident by this poll that approximately half of the community may be on board with needed change, and about half will need to be convinced of the need to change and brought along in the process from the very beginning.
The same question of the need for change of middle schools and high schools was asked by the poll. Overall, 45% indicated that they are not changing enough, 13% stated too quickly, and 36% indicated that they don’t need to change. It is interesting to note that 52% of Democrats versus 39% of Republicans indicated that they are not changing enough. Schools today find themselves needing to change and transition for a variety of reasons driven by economics, accountability, and achievement. The concept of change in communities, even from a public school perspective, continues to be a highly politically charged agenda. Policymakers and district leaders will need to be mindful of the political forces at play in their community as they seek to bring about change in their school districts.

Teacher Relationships

Baker, Grant, and Morlock (2008, as cited in Gallagher, 2014) shared that teachers play a vital role in the total development of students throughout their education. Positive teacher–student relationships allow students to feel safe and secure in their learning environments and provide the needed scaffolding for the development of social and academic skills. Hamre and Pianta (2001, as cited in Gallagher, 2014) shared that students who develop positive relationships with their teachers can engage in the classroom and school setting and be successful, both academically and socially. This includes the development of not only relationships with the teachers, but relationships with their peers. Murray and Malmgren (2005, as cited in Gallagher, 2014) contended that students who attend low-income schools can specifically benefit from the development of positive relationships with teachers.
Students in high-poverty urban city schools may benefit from positive teacher-student relationships even more than students in high-income schools. Risk outcomes associated with poverty include high rates of high school dropout, lower rates of college applications, low self-efficacy, and low self-confidence. Low-income students who have strong teacher-student relationships have higher academic achievement and have more positive social-emotional adjustment than their peers who do not have a positive relationship with a teacher. (p. 1)

Muller (2001, as cited in Gallagher, 2014) believes that teachers are an important source of social capital for students. “Social capital in a classroom setting is defined as caring teacher–student relationships where students feel that they are both cared for and expected to succeed” (p. 1).

In HPS, the demographics represent a broad diversity of ethnicity and economic status. The relationship between teacher and student is critical for the overall academic and social success of the students. Participants in this study recognized the importance of the teacher–student relationship and wanted to ensure that this was in place as students transitioned from grade to grade and ultimately building to building, especially in the focus school design. Mothers wanted to make sure that the needed information of how their child learns and what their academic needs are was passed on from one teacher to another as it had been in the smaller K–5 neighborhood schools. As participants received the reassurance from the teachers that everything was going to be okay, and they saw their child’s learning needs met, their anxiety lessened with each passing year.

I just feel like people cared about my kids. Like the teachers have done a really good job of looking at where they had areas, and where they had strengths...and
saw potential and have always encouraged them to be able to do it. So I’m proud of that. My kids were not numbers. They’re not numbers at Holland High. They know my kids. And I think that’s kind of special. (P14, p9, L32-33; p10, L6-8)

**School Choice**

The school choice literature demonstrates that parents make decisions about where to send their school based on a strong emphasis on academics, convenience, school characteristics, and safety (Amour & Brett, 1998; Kleitz et al., 2000). However, it is important to point out that choice is actually “constrained for most people” (Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, 2008, p. 4). These constraints may include variables such as money (to pay for the cost of tuition and other fees), time (distance and travel from the local neighborhood), seats available (caps on school-of-choice options), and admission (selective processes based upon criteria) (Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, 2008). All of these variables were consistent with this research study conducted in HPS. These studies also indicate that there are slight differences between White parents and non-White parents when academic priorities are considered. Non-Whites are slightly less likely to identify academics as the most important factor in choosing a school. Convenience is a priority for many families, because many school choice options do not provide transportation. Convenience is described as the distance to and from school. Convenience was noted by all of the participants in this study, especially as it related to their neighborhood elementary schools. Four of the five mothers who felt as though there really wasn’t a school-of-choice option available to them and, as a result, they were trapped in the system, were minority. It is also important to note that choice is limited for most people based upon
money, time (travel, distance), limited space availability, and the selective admissions process at many schools (Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, 2008). Table 2 describes the characteristics of families by school of choice and the basic reasons for selecting different schools of choice.

A 2010 study conducted by Chingos, Henderson, and West found that the public, and especially parents, grade their local schools on the basis of student achievement and not on the demographic makeup of the school related to the number of students who are African-American or Hispanic. This study also revealed that poor and minority families and less educated citizens are just as informed about school quality as the public as a whole. However, both parents and the general public give lower grades to schools with a high percentage of students from poor or low-socioeconomic families. Another key finding of this 2010 study was that neither school size, class size, nor pupil-teacher ratio were important factors when considering school quality. Schools with larger class sizes received higher overall ratings by parents and the public. This perhaps was due to a belief that effective schools attract more families to a neighborhood, or more families are choosing a specific school based upon quality indicators related to school performance. Only two participants in this study mentioned class size as an important factor when considering the enrollment for their child. One mother shared this perspective:

I do like the idea of smaller class settings. I think that when our class sizes are too large, your child can go missed. So I think that’s a bad thing. And you know when you have 30/32 kids in that classroom- I’m sorry- I don’t think they’re getting the attention that they need. Because school becomes almost like their second home. (P9, p7, L10-12)
Kleitz et al. (2000) found that a majority of parents across ethnic and socioeconomic groups indicate that school location is very important to them. Those that cited convenience and location as very important to them were also those least likely to have the resources available to provide daily transportation for their students on their own. Additional school characteristics, aside from location, that are important to parents when making a decision about where to enroll their children in school include school size, school neighborhood, and the diversity of the student body in the school. Minority and lower-income parents were found to be much less likely to report that school values and racial diversity were important to them, while parents with a college education cited diversity and teaching values as important considerations (Schneider et al., 1998; Schneider et al., 2000). This is consistent with HPS, where 50% (nine) of the participants had a college degree or higher, three had some college, four held a high school diploma, and one did not complete high school (see Table 9). The mothers in this study with a college degree cited diversity as an important factor for their staying in HPS. One mother shared her perspective about diversity this way:

> Of what that person can bring and add from their background, from their culture. Being different, what does that mean? And to me, that is such a huge positive, such a gift. I mean they don't have, such a huge handicap facing the world's challenges like my husband and I did. (P1, p6, L28-31)

Another mother shared the positive experiences and impact of attending a diverse school system of her children:

> The diversity for Holland Public Schools was great. ‘Cuz my older two will tell you, now, that they’ve been through it, and now they’re out, and graduated from
college and still in college, is that if they had to do it again, they say at different times, ‘Thank you for sending us to Holland schools.’ (P4, p2, L18-21)

HPS is a diverse school district. Diversity was viewed by the participants as a positive factor for their children to be better prepared to participate in a larger global community that was reflective of their school system. In fact, 3 of the 18 participants graduated from private schools, along with their spouses, and made a very intentional decision to enroll their children in the public school setting. During the time of the research collection, the 2014 Spring Student Count for HPS (HPS Pupil Accounting Office, personal communication, 2014) showed that the collective minority was the majority population, with 61.01% of the students being reported as non-White. The socioeconomic status of the district was represented by 66% of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch, and over 13% of the students qualifying for language services to acquire English as their second language. These percentages contrast with the overall demographics of the city itself based upon the U.S. Census Bureau report (2010), which shows that 68.9% of the residents are White and 22.7% Hispanic or Latino.

According to the findings of Sohoni and Saporito (2009), schools tend to be more racially segregated than the neighborhoods in which they are actually located. This was the case for HPS. This is often a direct result of White residents abandoning their local neighborhood schools for magnet, charter, or private schools. For the mothers who kept their children enrolled in the district, diversity was viewed as a strength, not as a deficit. However, it should be noted that one minority parent (Hispanic) did state her concern that “I think we’re almost … I don’t like to use those words, but I don’t know what other word to use, but I think we’re almost too diverse now” (P9, p 9, L1-2). This was driven
in large part due to her concerns that students from increasingly diverse families were also bringing with them behavioral concerns that were impacting the overall building climate and culture of the district.

Social networks have increasingly impacted schools-of-choice decisions. They first act as a filter to sort out schools that parents should not consider while informing parents what schools to consider and for what reasons. Word-of-mouth parent-to-parent information is another information-rich source for parents in the selection of schools. Fewer decisions are based anymore on a school visitation and tour schools (Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, 2008). While this was true for participants of this research study in HPS when they enrolled their children in 2003, many of the mothers indicated that they would do more research today when selecting a school for their child, if they had a kindergartner. One participant shared,

And knowing all of the things that we know. Yeah, I would go into it much more in a serious way and look. Maybe go visit other places, just to make sure. But I think ultimately…I would make that same choice to come to Holland as a kindergartner. But I would do it a lot more thoughtfully, I guess. (P1, p9, L6-9)

Overall, the motivation for school choice in the literature includes academic reputation, good teachers, safety, class size, location, friends at the school, better curriculum, religious education, test scores, discipline, school racial/ethnic characteristics, teaching of moral values, convenience, similar peer group, and neighborhoods for housing (Amour & Brett, 1998; Bainbridge & Sundre, 1991; Kleitz et al., 2000; Lee et al., 1996; Schneider et al., 1998; Schneider et al., 2000). In 2008, the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice study found that the actual
behaviors that families actually carry forward when selecting a school were a result of (a) White families transferring to schools with higher proportions of white students, (b) minorities transferring to schools with smaller proportions of low SES students, (c) charter school choosers actually choosing a charter school with lower average test scores than their previous public school after listing test scores as their most motivating factor to choose, and (d) those choosing a school based on the racial composition and similarity of the receiving school to their own family. These findings are “provocative: parents cite academics as primary but decisions are linked to race, suggesting that parents might be using race as a proxy for academic quality” (p. 17).

One could speculate that this may have happened over the duration of the specific school reform initiatives in HPS that began in 2003. With the closure of the neighborhood schools, the trend of the collective minority becoming the majority began to happen at an increasing rate (see Figure 12). One could argue this was a result of White flight out of the district. While there were no participants who suggested this during their interview, a comparison of the demographics of HPS, the city itself, and neighboring school communities might prove this theory.

David and Reay’s (as cited in Reay & Ball, 1998) work on gender has found gender to play a significant role in family dynamics of school choice. Regardless if the child was a boy or a girl, and regardless of social class boundaries, it is primarily mothers doing the groundwork necessary to make informed decisions relative to school choice. Mothers were found to visit the schools, talk more with teachers, talk more with other mothers, talk more with their own children about what they preferred and was important to them, and organize events where their children and their friends came together in
social settings. As mothers become more informed of the school choice process, the options and knowledge of what is available, they in essence become the experts, and fathers end up waiving the responsibility to them.

Dornbusch, Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, and Chen (1990) also compared family structure to school choice and further substantiated that mothers were more involved in the decision-making relative to school choice matters. This was substantiated in this study of HPS as the mothers shared their collective responsibilities to manage everything from transportation to and from school, getting to know their child’s teachers across the district, establishing new relationships with new families for social play dates, and managing the scheduling of multiple after school events and activities.

In summary, parental choice happens in multiple contexts across social, cultural, and political environments. While the expressed motivation for choice that is shared by school-of-choice participants to identify a school for their child for all types (public, private, and charter) is perceived academic quality, in reality, the documented behavior following parents who exercise school choice demonstrates that choices are really based on the peer composition in the schools in terms of race and class. The evidence in school-of-choice patterns is fairly consistent that, overall, parents avoid schools with high percentages of low-income students and students of color. This factor may lead to the credibility of the idea that the practice of school choice may lead to further segregation of the schools in our country by race and class. Policymakers and district leaders will need to be mindful of this unintended consequence and make sure that any actions are thought through to ensure equity and access to quality schools to prevent further segregation of
Aside from the research that is available on the factors that parents cite as the reasons for school choice and the factors that they consider, the mothers of this research study were asked in interview question #9, “If your child was about to enter kindergarten again for the first time, what would be the things that you would consider about which school to attend? Figure 26 provides a description of what participants in this study said. The items are listed in alphabetical order and not by prioritization or any other standards of importance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advanced learning opportunities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All-day-every-day kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careerline Tech Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom set-up</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistency/Stability of the school district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of school district (ethnic and socioeconomic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of older siblings in same family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience of other parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation of school district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social needs addressed with support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish immersion programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure with multiple levels of support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher quality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher relationships/friendliness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision—Does the district know what it is doing/Where it is going?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** These data were collected during the interview process using the Interview Protocol—Appendix F #9: If your child was about to enter kindergarten again for the first time, what would be the things that you would consider about which school to attend?

*Figure 26. Consideration of entering a new kindergarten student in Holland Public Schools—school choice factors.*
Managing Change

Bridges (2003) described that it is not the changes that are difficult, rather it’s the transitions that occur during times of change that can be detrimental to success if not managed well. Change in a school district is situational, such as the reorganization of the professional staff and their teaching responsibilities, or the establishment of new district boundaries for attendance areas of elementary schools. This was the case in HPS. The participants in this study experienced changes of driving to school instead of walking, knowing every teacher for the purpose of developing new professional relationships and class selection for their child, knowing the parents of their child’s friends, investing time in meeting families across the city, and being able to volunteer at one building versus having to spread their time across multiple buildings. Transition, on the other hand, is less physical in nature and actually more psychological. Transition involves going through three unique phases of acceptance of the change that has taken place.

The first phase (Bridges, 2003) involves the process of letting go of the old systems, procedures, and protocol that were in place and the identity that people had under these systems. It is a time of ending. In HPS, it was imperative that the teaching staff and parents let go of their small neighborhood schools. Despite this need of letting go, even today, multiple mothers in this study still long for the return to the smaller neighborhood schools (and even the middle schools) that were present in the district 10 years prior. As the closing of the small K–5 neighborhood schools was viewed as such a huge loss to parents, the academic success that the Board of Education sought to produce never came to a reality. The focus school model was abandoned in search of a more family-friendly design model just 3 years after implementation.
The second phase of transition (Bridges, 2003) is described as the “neutral zone” or an in-between time and place, where the old is gone but the new is not well established. It can be a time of uncertainty, fear, anger, and bewilderment, as it is not quite clear what the purpose or final outcome will be. Phase I of the reorganization of HPS had a lot of variables that were interconnected in the neutral zone as parents were adapting to new school boundaries, new transportation requirements, new principals, new teachers, new routines, new expectations, and even new buildings. The district administration in Phase I had many feelings as well. There were multiple attempts to fix unanticipated problems while trying to bypass the real work necessary to bring the organization to its real purpose of increasing academic achievement. The community applied pressure to the superintendent to escape, perhaps prematurely in Phase II, from the neutral zone and redefine a new system based upon compromise and convenience.

Finally, the third phase of transition is the making of a new beginning (Bridges, 2003). This is the time when individuals develop a new identity, fully experience the new system, and understand its purpose to make it work. Stated another way, “Transition starts with an ending and finishes with a new beginning” (p. 5). Bridges likens change without transitions to the mere rearrangement of chairs in a room. “Just because everything has changed, don’t think that anything is different around here” (p. 3). Participants in this research study of HPS came to the “new beginning” in the end, during the final stage of the K–7, 8–12 model. This model was generally accepted and some even wonder why this model wasn’t implemented in the first place. One participant offered this opinion: “I wish they wouldn’t have had all the changes and maybe gone to the K–7 right away” (P5, p9, L23-24).
Ashford (1988), Begley (1998), Callan (1993), Carnall (1986), Gemmil and Smith (1985), Jick (1985), Nelson, Cooper, and Jackson (1995), Olsen and Tetrick (1988), Sagie and Koslowsky (1994), Schweiger and Ivancevish (1985), and Sverke, Hellgren, and Ohrming (1997) (all as cited in Jimmieson, Terry, & Callan, 2004) have all concluded that because organizational change is not linear in fashion and several new changes can spiral from one change, the most frequent psychological state resulting from organizational change is uncertainty. Uncertainty was an understatement of the feelings of the participants in this study. They not only questioned the mission and vision of the district, they questioned if those in leadership responsibilities knew what they were doing. One of the mothers shared her perceptive in this way:

I would say looking back on everything, there was just this feel of uncertainty.

Kind of an underlying uncertainty. Like, is this district okay? Are we headed in the right direction? (P1, p5, L33-35)

As a result of the continued uncertainty created by all of the change, the exodus of many families from the district, combined with the continued financial instability that followed, the leadership of the school district was forced to make several organizational changes in a short period of time.

The hardest thing that individuals have to deal with in regard to change is not the pace of change in the 21st century, rather the changes in the “acceleration of that pace” (Bridges, 2003, p. 102). This profound acceleration of change is marked by accelerated transitions and more cycles of psychological reactions. Any change, even a deceleration of a pending change, can cause disruption. A lack of change would be a change in and of
itself. Fortunately, Bridges reminds us that the human capacity over time has the ability to adjust to new and higher levels of change.

Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton (2000) and Reilly, Brett, and Stroh (1993) (as cited in Kiefer, 2005) relinquished the fact that ongoing organizational change has become increasingly common for the 21st century. Systems are engaged in multiple and ongoing-change events all of the time. The potential impacts can be both positive and negative. It will be important for school policymakers, local boards of education, and district leaders to take into consideration the impact of organizational change and be mindful of these transition phases that individuals involved will go through so that this change can be led effectively.

**Limitations**

In the completion of this research, I have identified limitations to the study that, if addressed in future research, may add to the professional literature on the topic of public school choice. These limitations are listed below.

1. The scope of the study was limited to only one school district. The study of more districts that have experienced similar infrastructure restructuring and significant program change may produce different results. These results thereby informing public policy, direction, and impacting the practice of the governance structure of public school districts are limited.

2. The challenge of getting minority parents to participate in the study limits the social justice framework. The minority voice is limited to Hispanic families and families in general on free/reduced lunch. While 45% of the participants
of this study were people of color, generalizations across all minority groups should not be made.

3. The timeline for parents to recall their experiences through each of the four transitions expanded over a 10-year period of time. Some participants were unable to specifically recall certain events or associated feelings to them. This may have minimized the experiences that they were able to articulate. However, those events that were remembered triggered strong reaction. The information collected may have been different if data had been collected after each of the four organizational changes.

4. The study was limited to the experience as described by the mother and not that of the student. Participants indicated that even their reactions were different than those of their child and how they experienced change. Future research could include the interview of students directly regarding their experience.

5. Teachers were often referenced as a key reason why participants chose to keep their child enrolled in the school district, yet their voice is not present in this research. It would be interesting to learn about their experiences and how they were able to separate out their reactions from the change and multiple moves while continuing to serve as ambassadors for the school district.

**Implications for School Boards and Policymakers**

According to a study conducted by Spalding (2013) for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, nearly 100,000 Michigan students use schools-of-choice options to attend a school outside of their district and the community in which they live. While
enrollment through this option was previously prevalent in rural areas, parents are now selecting different education options for their children in virtually all communities across the state—rural, suburban, and urban. The economic vitality and health of a school district remains harnessed to per-pupil membership. As a result, local school boards of education must be mindful of the impact of schools of choice in their community. Given the current economic conditions in the state, increased accountability for performance and reform efforts, and the criticism that follows districts that are not closing the achievement gap or meeting adequate yearly progress as defined by NCLB, it is likely that decisions will have to be made that impact the overall program provided in a school district. As a result of this study, I have identified 10 key points to consider when a decision that will impact the overall structure or operations of a school district is under consideration.

1. **Leading change.** As school leaders, ensure that you understand the critical elements of leading change. Kotter (1995) outlines an 8-Step process in his seminal work *Leading Change.* This process assists executives in leading change versus managing change. Leadership in the 21st century must overcome over-managed and under-led cultures.

2. **Determine the impact on family relationships, student friendships, and neighborhoods.** This research highlighted the value parents have, specifically mothers, with respect to community and the relationship to neighborhood schools. Any change that seeks to impact this intersection needs to be well thought out in advance. Involving parents in the process can assist in predicting and minimizing the negative impact on families as they are
empowered and part of the change process. This message comes to light through the example of this statement by one of the mothers:

Don’t rearrange your entire city without doing very very good studies in what would happen, interview people about what would happen. Because I think they were blindsided about how many parents left. They didn’t protest or go to meetings, they just left. Now that you have other options, you have charter and faith based schools, you really have to know. Don’t drop earthquakes on families because you’ll lose families that way, get them involved in the process. I guess that’s it, just have it wide open. Because big decisions like these affect families in ways that you can’t know, unless you ask the questions. Unless you know what’s going to happen to that neighborhood, what’s going to happen to the family next door, where are people going to buy houses, that’s a real state decision based on school. Have the doors wide open and get a lot of input, ask questions, get information, if you have to make big changes, because the ripples are really far reaching in people lives and in family decisions that they make. (P12, p6, L7-16)

3. Policy decisions related to expansion/deletion of programs. This research and accompanying literature review highlighted some of the variables that parents place high value on when selecting schools and school districts. It will be essential that school leaders understand the programs in their district that are key in the retention of families. The elimination of a specific program in a
district will have both short- and long-term financial ramifications if not thought through well.

4. **Policy decisions related to redistricting neighborhood considerations.** In HPS, there were negative implications that were inadvertently created by the district among residents in neighborhoods and between the district and city itself. Policy decisions of this magnitude of building closures, redefinition of attendance boundaries, and changes in infrastructure carry with them many political forces. District leaders will need to be mindful of such neighborhood considerations and work to involve all stakeholders.

5. **Policy decisions related to schools of choice participation and impact on diversity.** City schools in the state of Michigan are becoming increasingly less diverse—less diverse from the standpoint that fewer middle-class Caucasian students are attending these schools, and an increasing number of students of color who qualify for free and reduced lunch are attending these schools. This creates unique challenges and opportunities to provide equitable education and access for all students, while simultaneously addressing achievement and discipline gaps. As school choice continues to be an option for parents and urban districts continue to be publicly criticized for their performance, policymakers and school leaders will need to be diligent in ensuring that no child is truly left behind.

6. **Policy decisions related to hiring, evaluation, and retention of highly effective teachers and administrators.** While the participants in this research cited quality teaching based in large part on the quality of the long-lasting
relationship between teacher and learner, school leaders have the responsibility of ensuring that the most effective teachers are trained, hired, and supported in our most challenged urban school districts. In addition, district leaders should be particularly mindful of the need to train teachers and involve them in the relationship building necessary for leading and supporting district reform or restructuring initiatives. They must be fully equipped with all of the information necessary to assist in leading the change efforts. They need to be included as stakeholders from the very beginning. Trust must be built with the professional staff so that they understand the rationale for any change, understanding the change itself, the transitions that will occur, how they will be impacted, how their students and families will be impacted, and what the desired results are of the change. Trust must be built from the ground up. As was the case in this research study, the teachers were the glue that kept everything together.

7. Managing transitions. Bridges (2003), in his work Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change, asserted that transition is not synonymous with change. In a school district, this change could be a change in organizational structure like HPS, which includes all of the associated systems and processes that went along with the changes that had wide-ranging impact on families, neighborhoods, and the community at large. These types of changes trigger an internal psychological reorientation process in those who are expected to carry out or respond to the change. Bridges shared that transition is the internal process that people must go through in order to come to terms with a
new situation. Unless transition occurs, change will not work. District leaders would benefit from studying this principle before launching a large-scale second-order change in their district.

8. *Too much of any really good thing can be a really bad thing.* As participants in this research cited, even though there were some really good innovative programs launched in the district, they no longer wanted their child to be a “guinea pig” for something untried and perhaps even untrue for the district. Innovation fatigue quickly set in, not only for parents but for the administrators and professional staff required to implement such change. District leaders must prioritize their work and developed focused strategies that will have the greatest impact on improved performance.

9. *Trust is essential for carrying out any reform initiative.* The participants in this study reflected on the erosion or skepticism of trust in the school board and district leadership during the district reorganization plans. Covey (2006) outlined 13 behaviors of trust-inspiring leaders in his book *The SPEED of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything.* He discussed values such as demonstrating respect, creating transparency, righting wrongs, delivering results, and practicing accountability. Trust has a bottom-line impact on results. When trust goes up, speed goes up, while costs come down. The investment of time in nurturing and inspiring immediate trust in an organization with all stakeholders will assist in implementing the reforms needed in public education today.
10. Know the values of your community and what your parents value about education. It is important that district leaders understand the values of their local community and the factors that parents hold in high regard about their school system. If systemic reform is required, shaping decisions with these values in mind may prevent the loss of enrollment that is often associated with change initiatives that include changes in building design and attendance boundaries. Figure 27 presents the values that came from this research after analyzing how mothers described their experiences and those of their children through each of the four phases of school reform at Holland Public Schools.
The value and preservation of neighborhoods is important to a community who resides there.

Parents today recognize the value of an international and global society. Parents value diversity and recognize the need for their children to be culturally competent.

Parents and students want to attend a school system with a clear identity that they can be proud of and instills community pride.

Parents value the relationships that are built between teachers and their students. They want them to know their children academically and personally.

Parents place a high degree of trust in the leadership of a school district. When decisions are made that do not include parents as part of the process, they question that trust and it may be lost quickly.

Parents want to be informed and part of any decision-making process that may impact the education that their child is receiving in a school system.

Graduates of a school district take great pride as alumni and want their own children to attend their alma matter.

The cost of tuition and lack of transportation services limits some parents from being able to exercise school choice options that they might otherwise select. It is important that constraints in a school district are known and understood.

Parents assess the quality of a district based in part on the quality of the teaching staff.

Students are more resilient to the change process than the adults who try to manage the change process.

The decision to buy a home is driven in large part by the proximity to schools. Neighborhoods are often defined by the elementary school buildings in a district. Parents place a high degree of value on neighborhood school settings.

Multiple changes over a short period of time can evoke innovation fatigue. Parents can be hesitant of school reform initiatives, especially those that are new and do not have a history of program success in the community, despite their success on a state or national level.

Parents appreciate program continuity and stability. Schools today have many ways that parents are expected to be engaged and support the learning of their children. In the era of both parents working and many after school family commitments, parents are appreciative of school designs that are family friendly, timely, convenient, and well planned.
The changes in school design can inadvertently interrupt the normal developmental stages students go through and prevent leadership development.

The transitions of students from one school setting to another have greater emotional success and comfort when these transitions happen with their friends/peer groups.

Today’s generation of students recognize the value of diversity and culturally responsive school settings.

Figure 27. Values associated with the experiences of mothers in Holland Public Schools.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research study looked at the experiences that mothers had in HPS over a 10-year period of infrastructure change and school reform initiatives. They were able to describe what they experienced, how they experienced it, and the impact it had on their families. The following recommendations are made for future research consideration:

1. A phenomenology or case study that follows the students who go through similar changes as HPS, or a 3- to 5-year follow-up study after the students graduate, would contribute further to this work. Key research questions that could be answered include the following: What skills did the students learn beyond the core academic program in order to navigate new relationships in family, careers, and community? Were they world/life ready upon graduation? What types of adaptability and resiliency skills did they develop? What value do they place on diversity? Was this value already inherent or did this come as a result of attending a diverse high school? When you become a parent, how will you determine what school your children go to? As an alumnus/alumna, would you send your children to HPS?
As one parent shared in her interview in response to this question,

That would be very interesting and that would be a very good interview to interview some of the seniors, I would be really curious to hear what they say because he has some great stories, some very positive things but he still talks about how hard it was to give up what he thought how his childhood was going to look like and then have it look like something completely different and now be told that now it’s going to be something different again. I think it has been hard, the consistency, not able to count on adults around you to keep your experience the way you expect it’s going to be. I think he would say it was hard but it would be interesting to ask, if he would say, maybe a little braver, because he had to be to go to high school at 13. I wonder what he would say. That would be a very interesting interview. (P12, p3, L24-31)

2. A study that examines the experience of superintendents and what they use as guiding principles when they initiate change, facilitate change, and come into the middle of change would inform further leadership development. What are the key skills and attributes of a highly effective leader essential for orchestrating and leading change in this contextual setting?

3. A study that looks at the changes in school board leadership and the associated changes in superintendent leadership during school restructuring initiatives would be of interest. What is the relationship between the longevity of a school board and a superintendent in the ability to implement,
lead, and sustain the changes critical for public schools, especially urban city school systems, to be successful in the 21st century?

4. A study that looks at the principles critical for effective school board governance and superintendent relations during times of significant school reorganization would be helpful for boards considering changes in their district. What are the essential elements critical to developing a peak performance team? What are the critical components of a district strategic plan that casts the mission and vision of the school district to achieve success? What is the decision-making process to make such large-scale decisions? How is success benchmarked?

5. A meta-analysis study addressing the correlation, if any, among school structure, implementation of programs, and impact on student achievement would assist in identifying the best practices of different grade-span configurations to achieve maximum results.

6. A case study that looks at the urban education experiences in traditional public schools and how these schools are addressing access and equity would assist in addressing the achievement gaps in schools. These gaps are contributing to current public school criticism. How are districts implementing culturally relevant district leadership and culturally responsive instruction in the classroom? How are districts creating an inclusive school community where racial equity is exemplified through the creation and proactive reinforcement of policies, practices, attitudes, and actions that produce equitable power, access, treatment, opportunities, and outcomes for all?
7. A study that looks at the long-lasting relationship between teacher and student and the impact on success later in life would assist in defining what a quality teacher is in the eyes of students and parents. What is it about the relationship between teacher and students that contributes to student success?

8. A study that seeks to understand the importance of student leadership during grade-level and program transitions would contribute to the research literature. What leadership opportunities are available to students? Do students naturally participate in these opportunities? What happens when students do not participate in leadership opportunities?

9. It may be helpful to discern the differences between public and private school high school graduates and where they send their children to school and why. Each group of mothers in this study provided overlapping views on public education, specifically as it related to diversity. A mother who attended private school herself had this to say:

    XXX and I both felt we were very sheltered when we went to the Christian school, and then we graduated, and then it was like, ‘Wow! Okay.’ You know? And, we’re talking well over thirty years ago too Okay- for us- but we didn’t want our kids to have the same experience. And that’s why we chose the public school. (P4, p2, L24-27)

A mother who attended public school had this perspective to share:

    I do not believe that- you know- when my mom said to me, ‘Don’t you think you oughta go to XXX Christian because they’re better for the kids?’ You know, I disagree with that whole-heartedly. I
think my kids need to be around kids of every socio-economic status; every color, every race, every religion because not only does it confirm who they are and help them to decide on the person they want to be, but they can reach out to other kids. (P3, p12, L31-35)

**Implications for the Superintendency**

What does this mean for aspiring or sitting superintendents working in an urban school district during times of economic stress, criticism and district reform? It means that they have to be able to navigate through many different levels of situational leadership. Bolman and Deal (2013) provided practical applications for leaders with their leadership framework from a structural, human resource, political, and symbolic reference. Understanding organizations from each of these frameworks will assist leaders in identifying the necessary steps to lead an organization successfully through difficult times.

In the structural framework, leaders focus on the structural elements that exist within an organization. This strategy works well when there are clearly defined goals, when cause-and-effect relationships are well understood, and when there is little uncertainty about what needs to be done in the organization. Leaders who approach change from a human resource framework focus on the people in the system. This approach emphasizes support, empowerment, and staff development. If morale is a consideration of the impact of change, leaders would be well suited to use this framework. When the change initiative has the potential to disrupt a larger system or community, the political framework may be helpful. Leaders who use this approach may
have to build power bases and coalitions that can assist in working with special interest
groups and negotiate strategies or compromises when there is a scarcity of resources.
Finally, individuals who lead change may need to consider the symbolism of the
organization before any change takes place. Leaders who operate from this framework
focus on establishing inspiration around a strong vision. Members of the organization
and community must believe in the vision. Recognizing traditions, celebrating success,
and honoring the past are essential (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Any aspiring leader would
be well suited to review this work.

Kotter International (2014) provides an 8-step process for leading change that I
have found to be effective in leading systemic reform. These eight steps include:

1. Create a sense of urgency and use a significant opportunity to engage people
to be part of the process of change.
2. Build a strong guiding coalition by assembling a group of individuals who
have the necessary skills to lead and support the desired change effort.
3. Form a strategic vision and initiatives to define the desired outcome and
specific strategies to achieve the outcome.
4. Enlist the support of others who are ready and willing to carry forward and do
the work necessary to achieve the desired outcome and drive the change with
others.
5. Remove the barriers or obstacles that threaten the change initiative from being
successful.
6. Generate and celebrate short-term wins that demonstrate that progress is being
made.
7. Sustain the effort by changing the systems internally that do not align with the vision including structures, policies, processes, and people.

8. Institutionalize the change by connecting the new behaviors with organizational success.

Bridges (2003) shared helpful insights on how to manage change when a system must make needed changes through the principle of leading through transitions. Finally, an aspiring or sitting superintendent would be wise to reflect on Covey’s (2006) work related to establishing trust. These are all reference materials that would suit an urban school superintendent and board of education well as a starting point for managing complex changes.

According to Glass (2002), “The twenty-first century finds one-third of America’s public school children attending one of ten large urban (large-city) school districts. By 2020 approximately one-half of public school enrollment will be clustered in twenty districts.” This will require exemplary leadership in these districts, often hard to find. Glass further stated that “the typical tenure of a superintendent in the largest large-city districts is two to three years.” This brief tenure makes it unlikely that a superintendent will develop and implement reform programs that can result in closing the achievement gap, rebuild dated infrastructure through bond support, secure private sector and non-profit assistance, and build a working relationship with the city’s political structure. Longevity will be important.

The superintendent leadership position is unique in that it also requires the chief executive to be the district’s instructional leader, possessing expert knowledge about teaching, curriculum, testing, special education, and school reform. In addition, due to
the nature of education financing and accountability to the use of state and federal program dollars, the superintendent must be a wise politician, ensuring that the district receives its share of the public tax dollar. The superintendent must also be a master communicator working with a political board, forming working relationships with public and private groups, and especially serving as the connecting link between the schools and the community.

During the change in HPS, there were three different superintendents over the time span that these mothers had their children enrolled in the school district, kindergarten through graduation. Each of these superintendents brought with them their own leadership style, philosophy around stakeholder involvement, and communication and implementation strategies. The participants in the study and community responded differently based upon each of these leadership style differences. It will be important that any sitting superintendent clearly define his or her leadership style before taking on the magnitude of change, such as that which took place in Holland Public Schools. It is clear that the mothers of the school system will take note of how the leader initiates change and leads change.

He was going to do it a different way. And it was very evident to me, with this whole thing. Like he had parent meetings ahead of time. He consulted with people. He had his pulse on what the mood was like. I didn’t feel like we were in the dark with anything. Or what are they not telling us? You know all along this way it was kind of like Are they taking our viewpoint into consideration? Like we’re not being heard. That was the thing, like we're relying on rumors and all that I think he completely changed that. And it was very upfront. We may not
have liked what he had to say but we, I think we, everybody appreciated and respected the fact it was all on the table. (P1, p4, L20-27)

Finally, the role of the superintendent has further implications as he or she works with a governance body charged with setting the strategic direction of the school district—the board of education. According to Glass (2002), urban city school board members have historically run on single-issue platforms: “a typical example, to fire bad teachers and administrators whose incompetence is the reason for low test scores.” Running on platforms such as this, some board members feel a strong need to report to constituents about the progress they are making in “fixing” the district. These types of attitudes, beliefs, and actions often lead to governance issues between board members and the superintendent. It is essential that these two governing entities work collaboratively from a well-defined governance model that keeps student learning as its core mission.

Conclusion

Change in public education is inevitable. The negative results and impact on communities, school districts, families, and students can be preventable. If this work is not taken seriously, the devastating impact it can have is not escapable. The mothers of this study shared their personal experiences and provided a framework of implications that can seek to inform the work of our legislators, boards of education, and superintendents as they establish policy and implement practice in our schools today. These extracted experiences will assist in shaping public policy regarding school-of-choice patterns and inform district leaders of the core values that mothers share and the expectations they have of school districts for their children from a local community
perspective. Understanding these experiences can also assist in defining a new strategic
direction of renewal, growth, and revitalization. Given current conditions across our
country, district leaders will be faced with continued economic stress, increased
accountability for achievement, and increased transparency in public policy.

As districts attempt to achieve higher accountability for student results while
making complex decisions to balance budgets, it will continue to be increasingly more
common to restructure or reorganize educational delivery systems in ways that affect
children and their families. If these types of massive changes are going to continue, the
survival of districts will, in many respects, be dependent on understanding the values,
impact of change on families and the neighborhoods in which they live, and the school
choice options that are available to parents.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of 18
mothers, and their children, who were participants in multiple school reform initiatives in
an urban school district. Using the lens of a social constructivist worldview, the focus of
the study was on developing meaning to understand their views of public school choice
within the historical and cultural contexts that operated within their district.

This study desired to understand the reasons why mothers chose public education
for their children in the first place; the reasons for staying enrolled in a district K–12
during times of economic stress, public school criticism, and multiple restructuring
initiatives; and how they described their overall personal experiences. In essence, why
did they keep their children enrolled while others left the district; did they feel trapped in
the system without any choice; and if they had to do it all over again, would they enroll
their children today in a traditional public school district?
Nine of the 18 participants did look at leaving the district at one time or another. Surprisingly, with all of the changes that occurred, and the experiences over a 10-year period of time, 15 of the 18 participants said that they would enroll their child in the district again if they had a kindergarten student today.

This research study highlighted many themes that emerged that were critical to the values of mothers in Holland Public Schools. These themes included community, diversity, leadership, pride, relationships, quality education, and trust. The overarching theme that was most prevalent that kept these mothers in the district while others left was relationships. The relationships were defined as teacher–parent, teacher–student, and student–student.

During significant school reform initiatives, the teachers will be the ones who establish the rationale and foundational experiences for parents to stay enrolled in the district. Trust in the school board and administration will vary based upon the process used to initiate, communicate, and implement any changes. However, at the end of the day, it will be the teachers who present the closing arguments, not the superintendent or school board president. They too, must be part of the process as much as possible to stay informed and supportive. If they are not part of the process and they are unable to articulate the rationale, research, and intended outcomes, it is very likely that parents will see through the lack of systemic organizational change and leave. The only saving grace will be a well-known reputation of highly effective instruction, state/nationally recognized programs, and relevant and rigorous curriculum presented in an environment with high inter/intrapersonal relationships.
The effectiveness of quality instruction by quality teachers is of high value to parents. Quality is not defined by an effectiveness rating such as highly effective or minimally effective. Parents place a significant value on quality teaching yes, but in addition to knowing the academic and learning style preferences of their child, they want someone who will build lasting relationships with their child.

Parents who chose traditional public education place a high value on their children’s learning in economically and ethnically diverse settings, regardless if they are private or public school alumni. They recognize the importance of students being equipped with life skills that will make them world/life-ready as they live, work, and play across diverse communities. However, any school system will be challenged in ensuring that academic and extracurricular programs meet the unique learning needs of every child at the appropriate level of challenge, rigor, relevance, and interest. Diversity with rigor will equal retention of families in a district. Diversity without rigor will lead to White flight and a quiet, steady exodus out of the district.

In HPS, communities and neighborhoods were defined by their small neighborhood schools. In neighborhoods where the school itself has long since been taken down, the neighborhood is still referred to as “the Lakeview” neighborhood. Parents make decisions about where they are going to live based upon the schools that are present in their neighborhoods and the community at large. They possess a strong desire for their children to develop friendships with other children across the street or next door. Parents do not want the added responsibility of trying to get to know parents on the other side of a town or city. As school leaders look at enrollment patterns either for the purpose of expansion, new building, or consolidation, the preservation of community and
friendships is vitally important. If this isn’t taken into strong consideration, whole neighborhoods will be impacted and potentially further exacerbate enrollment decline, as was the case in the neighborhoods in HPS. Designs that value community relationships will foster the retention of families and strong neighborhoods. Designs that split or fracture neighborhoods will ultimately lead to student loss and neighborhood decline.

When the inevitability of change is going to occur, parents who are included in a transparent process of open communication, decision-making, and empowerment will be more likely to keep their children enrolled in the district during the change process. As I found, parents want to understand the root problems that are causing the necessity for change. They want to seek out possible solutions in a collaborative fashion, addressing rationale and research that supports any change that will have an impact on their community, family, and child. They want to understand the research and rationale for any experimental designs or changes. They do not want their children part of any “guinea pig” experiments. Mothers specifically do not like to be presented with convincing arguments after a decision has been made to dispel suspicion or rumor, or to placate them. Rumors spread quickly through social media and other networks that closely connect working mothers today. Communication gaps will elicit strong adult/student reactions that may lead to parents quietly leaving the district. During this change process, it is important that the leadership of the district manages the change itself and leads the community through the transitions that will be necessary to achieve the desired results.

The school choice literature demonstrates that parents make decisions about where to send their school based on a strong emphasis on academic rigor, school/class
size, neighborhoods, convenience, safety, diversity, district expenditures, environment, and escape (Amour & Brett, 1998; Bainbridge & Sundre, 1991; Kleitz et al., 2000; Lee et al., 1996; Schneider et al., 1998; Schneider et al., 2000). However, it is important to point out that choice is actually “constrained for most people” (Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, 2008, p. 4). These constraints may include variables such as money (to pay for the cost of tuition and other fees), time, (distance and travel from the local neighborhood), seats available (caps on school of choice options), and admission (selective processes based upon criteria. While nine mothers of this study (50%) looked at the feasibility of leaving the district, five felt as though there really wasn’t a school of choice option available to them, and, as a result, felt trapped in the system. Eighty percent of those who felt trapped were minority. As a result, school choice programs may contribute to the rise in racial and ethnic segregation in our schools unless policies are defined to reduce this impact.

In 2008, The Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice study found that the actual behaviors that families actually carry forward when selecting a school were a result of (a) White families transferring to schools with higher proportions of White students, (b) minorities transferring to schools with smaller proportions of low-SES students, (c) charter school choosers actually choosing a charter school with lower average test scores than their previous public school after listing test scores as their most motivating factor to choose, and (d) those choosing a school based on the racial composition and similarity of the receiving school to their own family. These findings are “provocative: parents cite academics as primary but decisions are linked to race, suggesting that parents might be using race as a proxy for academic quality” (p. 17).
Finally, one of the most meaningful and unexpected findings of my study that school leaders should be mindful of was the inadvertent interruption of leadership opportunities for students that naturally exist in the transition from one grade-level building to another if changes are made in the overall grade-level structure itself. These leadership opportunities naturally exist typically at the end of elementary school (Grade 5), middle school (Grade 8), and high school (Grade 12). In this research study, the students missed the leadership opportunity, perceived rites of passage, and multiple other historical/cultural components of the district by not being the “top-dog” as eighth graders at a building. They were transitioned from Grade 7 onto the high school campus missing these opportunities.

Table 20 summarizes what the research stated about school choice and the reasons parents select schools in the first place and compares these reasons with the rationale why mothers stayed enrolled in Holland Public Schools.
Table 20

**Comparison of Research-Based School Choice Rationale for Selecting Schools With Findings of This Study**

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<tr>
<th>Prior Research School Choice Rationale</th>
<th>B. Davis Research Findings</th>
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<td><strong>Loyalty to School District</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Trapped in the School System due to Constraints</strong></td>
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<td>Cost of Tuition, Lack of Transportation</td>
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<td><strong>Diversity</strong></td>
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<td>Cultural Awareness/Competency</td>
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<td>White Families may Avoid Families of Color</td>
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<td>Families of Color may Avoid Poverty</td>
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<td>Families of Color may Select Districts Like Self</td>
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<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
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<td>Preservation of Neighborhoods</td>
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<td>“Guinea Pig” Syndrome/Innovation Fatigue</td>
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<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
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<td>District Expenditures</td>
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<td>Environment</td>
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<td><strong>Students</strong></td>
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<td>Adaptability/Resiliency</td>
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<td>New Friendships Formed</td>
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<td>Increased Opportunities for Diversity</td>
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<td>Inadvertent loss of Leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall Great Education Experience</td>
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Policymakers, boards of education, and superintendents need to carefully consider the need for change, process for change, and impact of change in their communities on the individuals it was designed for. Mothers will continue to choose traditional public schools for the education of their children during times of economic crisis, public school criticism, and district reform if this work is done with mindful action.
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Appendix A

Parental Choice Conceptual Framework
MOTHERS WHO CHOOSE PUBLIC EDUCATION IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC STRESS, CRITICISM, AND DISTRICT REFORM

Parental Choice Conceptual Framework

Public schools in Michigan are facing an economic crisis never felt before since the passage of Public Act 145. Local education agencies (LEA’s) must redefine the infrastructure that will support the operational expenditures required to deliver learning that will prepare students to compete in a global learning community. Reform initiatives are also being fueled by strong criticism regarding the quality of public education and lack of student achievement in comparison to peer groups. Describing the failures of the public system is fueling the debate for the creation of more school choice options for families.

As leaders redefine how districts will operate over the next decade, they will need to develop strategic plans and policies that acknowledge the simple assumptions that:

- The Michigan economy will have a slow recovering economy.
- There will be increased accountability for efficiency and effectiveness resulting in greater student achievement.
- Competition between educational providers will remain a key component of reform with the onset of more school of choice options.
- Parents will respond to the academic debate over school reform as greater consumers and choosers of education.
- While change is inevitable and constant, everyone responds to and experiences change differently.

Problem

We don’t know why mothers chose to keep their children enrolled in urban school districts when large numbers of parents decide to leave these educational settings. The continued downward spiral of decline in enrollment, loss of associated resources, abandonment from districts by other parents exercising school choice, the right sizing of districts to become more efficient, and then often a continuation of this cycle over and over has created instability in urban schools. This instability perpetuates a self-fulfilling prophecy of continued stereotyping, low expectations, and further segregation of students based upon ethnicity and socio-economic status.

The description of this experience will assist in understanding why some mothers survive the urbanization of school districts while others do not. This district under study and the changes that have occurred exemplifies the cycles of change common to urban school settings and their perceived destiny for failure. Extracting these experiences can assist in shaping public policy regarding schools of choice and inform district leaders of the core values of mothers and the expectations they have for their children.
Central Question:

How do mothers, of school age children enrolled in an urban district that has undergone several rounds of significant change, experience, understand, and connect that change to their own lives, and their decision to keep their children enrolled?

Subquestions relevant to the study

Subquestions:
1. How do mothers describe their experiences through each of the district’s four phases of school reorganization? (Exploratory/Descriptive)
2. How do mothers describe their child’s experience in the school district through each of the phases of school reorganization? (Exploratory/Descriptive)
3. What contexts or situations do mothers describe as having typically influenced or affected their experiences in the district over the course of the last ten years and their decision to keep their children enrolled in the system? (Explanatory)
4. Why did mothers enroll their child in the district (public school) in the first place? (Explanatory/Descriptive)
5. How do mothers describe or explain their decision to maintain enrollment in this district for their children since Kindergarten and how do they feel about that decision? (Descriptive)
Appendix B

The Interrelationship Among Economics, Criticism, Restructuring, Choice, and Change
As the nation closed in on the anniversary date of No Child Left Behind and the need to have 100% of students proficient on state measures, many educators, legislators, and members from the business community expressed frustration and concern that little progress has been made with past efforts to reform public education in the United States.

Economic conditions are such that district leaders are forced to restructure their infrastructure and consolidate programs to meet deficits in school budgets.

As parents assess the options for their children to participate in a global learning community, there are many factors that go into their decision-making about what kind of school to attend and where.

As public school districts align with economic and academic reform, descriptions of why parents chose public education and stay during this transition will be of utmost importance.

The impact of change on individuals and managing these transitions will be critical for successful implementation and long-term stability given that more change is likely to occur moving forward.
Characteristics Associated with Why Parents Exercise School Choice Options

Factors Driving the Consideration for School Choice (Kleitz et. al, 2000; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000; Schneider, Teske & Marshall, 2000; Schneider, Marschall, Teske, & Roch, 1998; Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1996; Amour & Brett, 1998; and Bainbridge & Sundre, 1991)
Feelings Associated with Change in Schools

Appendix C

Logic Waterfall
Logic Waterfall – MOTHERS WHO CHOOSE TRADITIONAL PUBLIC EDUCATION IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC STRESS, CRITICISM, AND DISTRICT REFORM

Problem

➤ We don’t know why mothers chose to keep their children enrolled in urban school districts when large numbers of parents decide to leave these educational settings. The continued downward spiral of decline in enrolment, loss of associated resources, abandonment from districts by other parents exercising school choice, the right sizing of districts to become more efficient, and then often a continuation of this cycle over and over has created instability in urban schools. This instability perpetuates a self-fulfilling prophecy of continued stereotyping, low expectations, and further segregation of students based upon ethnicity and socio-economic status.

Purpose

➤ The description of this experience will assist in understanding why some mothers survive the urbanization of school districts while others do not. This district under study and the changes that have occurred exemplifies the cycles of change common to urban school settings and their perceived destiny for failure. Extracting these experiences can assist in shaping public policy regarding schools of choice and inform district leaders of the core values of mothers and the expectations they have for their children.

We do not know why mothers chose to stay in their current districts without exercising school of choice options when other parents in a district elect to exercise schools of choice. *(The hole)*

➤ We do not know why parents are staying vs. those who are leaving and why they enrolled in the first place.

➤ We do not know the familial, academic, cultural or economic factors that impact this decision.

➤ We do not know why parents who have the ability to exercise choice do not do so during school reorganization.

➤ We do not know if parents who do not have the resources to exercise choice would if they had the resources to do so.

➤ We do not know the impact of this change and how mothers experience and understand the impact of this change on their own lives and the decision to keep their children enrolled in urban public schools.
Public Schools in Michigan must balance expenditures and revenue sources to meet the funding cliff created during the 2008-2009 economic depression. *(School Funding/Operational Expenditures/National Impact)*

Public Schools must redefine the infrastructure to support operational and instructional expenditures. *(Infrastructure Efficiencies)*

New infrastructure, must support the collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity required to prepare students for 21st Century learning and interaction within a global community. *(Quality Learning)*

Time, resources, and current conditions must be used as data sets to define the infrastructure needed, backed by best practices. *(Best Practices in the new infrastructure)*

School districts across the state are closing schools due to declines in student enrollment and resources. *(State impact)*

The local media exacerbates the decline in school districts and parents exercising school choice with an emphasis on the emotional pushback from the school community internally & externally *(impact on neighborhoods, cities, business, economic growth and development)*

As schools create a new infrastructure that redefines the overall operational efficiencies in program, choices/decisions must be considered in a highly choice and competitive marketplace. *(school choice)*

Mothers exercise school of choice options moving from public to public, public to charter, public to private. Schools must be aware of the conditions created surrounding these decisions for both receiving and sending districts. *(Conditions)*

Some mothers are exercising their decision to stay in the traditional public school setting even when districts must realign programs for operational effectiveness. Why? *(Experience of Mother)*
Appendix D

Participant Survey
Mothers Who Choose Public Education in Times of Economic Stress, Criticism, and District Reform
Participant Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Date:</th>
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</table>

Please place an X before each response that best describes you as a participant in this study.

**Ethnicity**

- [ ] Caucasian
- [ ] Hispanic  
  - [ ] 1<sup>st</sup>  
  - [ ] 2<sup>nd</sup> or  
  - [ ] 3<sup>rd</sup> generation
- [ ] Immigrant  
  - [ ] U.S. Born

**Primary Language Spoken at Home**

- [ ] English  
- [ ] Spanish  
- [ ] Other (________)

**Marital Status**

- [ ] Married  
- [ ] Single (never married)  
- [ ] Divorced

**Number of Children Enrolled in the System Past & Present**

- [ ] 1  
- [ ] 2  
- [ ] 3  
- [ ] 4  
- [ ] 5  
- [ ] >5

**Employment Status**

- [ ] Full-Time  
- [ ] Part-Time  
- [ ] Unemployed  
- [ ] Stay at Home Parent

**Highest Degree Completed**

- [ ] <12 years  
- [ ] G.E.D.  
- [ ] High School Diploma
- [ ] Some College  
- [ ] College Degree
- [ ] Advanced Degree

**Family Income**

- [ ] <25,000  
- [ ] $25,001-$49,999  
- [ ] $50,000-$74,999
- [ ] $75,000-$99,999  
- [ ] >$100,000
Number of Schools that your Current 8th grader has Attended Since Kindergarten in the District

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Your Current 10th grader’s Neighborhood School Prior to any District Reorganization

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harrington</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lakeview</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maplewood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
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<td>Van Raalte</td>
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<td>Longfellow</td>
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<td>Jefferson</td>
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<td>Lincoln</td>
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<td>Holland Heights</td>
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Your Current 10th grader’s Primary High School Program

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holland High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holland New Tech</td>
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</table>

How often do you volunteer in the school district at any level? Please select the choice which best describes your involvement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<td>1-2 x week</td>
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<tr>
<td>1-2 x month</td>
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<td>1-2 x year</td>
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<td>3-5 x week</td>
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<tr>
<td>3-5 x month</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6-10 x year</td>
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<tr>
<td>My schedule does not allow me to volunteer at this time</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

To be completed by Researcher

Proficiency of 10th grade Student in 8th grade (Yes or No)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MEAP ELA</td>
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<tr>
<td>MEAP Math</td>
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*All information is Confidential and will be used as described in the informed consent form. Demographic data will be used to describe the population of the study and any unique findings between participants.
Appendix E

Interview Guide
Instruments and/or data collection protocols

Interview Guide: Mothers Who Choose Public Education in Times of Economic Stress, Criticism, and District Reform

What are the participant’s experiences with each of the four phases of school reform?

✓ Have no choice about it, have no resources to be able to go to another school
✓ Difficulty with transportation, child care
✓ Lack of ability to develop relationships with other parents, friends, teachers, principal
✓ Things progressively got better over time
✓ Recognize the need for the decisions but it has been difficult
✓ Disconnected from the education process
✓ Has impacted work schedules of parents
✓ Rely more on other parents/families for carpooling etc.
✓ Had older siblings to manage the transition with younger siblings
✓ Caused greater child care concerns
✓ Couldn’t manage children in different buildings
✓ Volunteerism decreased
✓ Support overall decreased
✓ Other

What are the participant’s feelings associated with each of the four phases of school reform?

✓ Exhausting
✓ Defeating
✓ No opinion
✓ Positive experience
✓ Emotionally Draining
✓ Happy
✓ Frustrated
✓ Angry
✓ Attitude toward the district
✓ Other

What are the core principles that the participant shares related to choosing public education for their child?

✓ Attended public school as a mother
✓ Diversity
✓ Programs/Services offered
✓ Vision of the district
✓ Facilities
✓ Student Performance
✓ Proximity to Home
✓ Neighborhood Connections
✓ Cost-Free vs. Tuition
✓ Other
What are the core feelings and beliefs about their decision to choose public education?
✓ Satisfied
✓ Dissatisfied
✓ Regretful
✓ Hopeful
✓ Challenged to defend with other mothers
✓ Would do the same thing over again
✓ Would do it differently next time
✓ Other

What external events have impacted the participant’s decision to choose public education?
✓ Husband
✓ Family
✓ Religion
✓ Cultural Norms
✓ Parents
✓ Economics/Family Status
✓ Support Available
✓ Specific learning needs of children
✓ Social Network/Friends
✓ Media
✓ Educational choices in the community
✓ Preparedness for college/career
✓ Other

What aspects of the district reorganization phases have had the greatest impact on the participant’s as mothers?
✓ Communication
✓ Transportation
✓ Involvement in the Process
✓ Children in different buildings
✓ Instability…too much change overall
✓ Program Offerings
✓ Exposure to other students/families outside of the immediate neighborhood
✓ Diversity
✓ Other

Which of the four phases had the greatest impact on them as a mother and why?
✓ Focus Schools
✓ 4-5, 6-8, K-8
✓ 8 @ HHS
✓ New Tech High School Option
What feelings or behaviors best describe the participant’s reaction to change?

- Anger
- Denial
- Grief
- Acceptance
- Other
Appendix F

Interview Protocol
**Instruments and/or data collection protocols**

Interview Protocol Project: Mothers Who Choose Public Education in Times of Economic Stress, Criticism, and District Reform

**Time of Interview:**
- **Start:**
- **End:**

**Place:**

**Date:**

**Interviewer:**

**Purpose of the Research:**

First of all, thank you for agreeing to participate in this research today. I am assisting Mr. Davis in the collection of this information as part of a study to better understand the experiences that mothers like you have had in the District. This information is very important to the District as what you share may be used to help make decisions regarding the programs that are offered within the District and its policies. I really appreciate your participation and sharing your experiences.

The individuals who are participating are much like you. To participate, each mother must have had their child enrolled in the District since Kindergarten and was part of all of the school changes. Each of you has in common a shared experience. However, these experiences may be personally different. We believe that these changes may have impacted families in different ways and this study is seeking to better understand what the impacts were to you and your children. We want to better understand why you have chosen public education for your child. We want to better understand what your experiences and that of your child were during all of the school changes over the past several years. Finally, we want to understand your thoughts about if you were making these decisions again today, would they be the same?

The information being collected today is in two different parts. First, I will ask you to complete a short survey. Then, I have questions to ask. These same questions are being asked of everyone who is participating. I may, depending on your responses, ask additional questions for further clarification. There isn’t a right or wrong answer. I only ask that you be as honest as you can and to try and remember as best as you can.

As part of today, you can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You or your child will experience NO consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study. Please understand that I can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent should I determine that it is in the best interest of both parties to do so.
This research has been approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) through Western Michigan University and is being overseen as well by a faculty member of the university who is advising Mr. Davis. If you have any questions or concerns about this research prior to us beginning or during our time together, you may contact the principal investigator Patricia L. Reeves at 269-387-3527 or patricia.reeves@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions or problems arise during the course of the study.

Before we begin, I would like to review a consent form which further clarifies what is being done today and that you agree to be a participant.

○ Consent Form Completed

Next, I have a brief survey that I would like you to complete. This survey asks some basic information about you and your family. These questions are being asked to describe the individuals who participated in the survey.

○ Demographic Survey Completed

In order for me to best capture everything that has been said and for later review and study, I will be taping the interview today. I may also write done clarifying notes as well. Once the interview has been completed, your responses to each of the questions will be typed into a written document. Your name will not be associated with the written document so your responses will not be associated with you. Once your interview has been typed into a document you will have the opportunity to review the document with me for accuracy and to add any additional information that you like. After this process has been completed, the audiotapes will be destroyed. Mr. Davis will then use this written information to complete his study of the information. Mr. Davis will not know who participated in the study, will not listen to the audio tapes, and will not be able to identify what typed responses go to any of the individuals who participate.

Is it okay for me to tape record the interview today?

Okay, before we begin with some specific questions that I have to ask, I would like you to take a moment to reflect on the past for me. I would like you to think back to when your child was ready for kindergarten. Think about your feelings, your fears, excitement, questions that you had. Think also about your expectations for kindergarten and the district.
Our district has been through three different school reorganizations in the past ten years. Your child was enrolled in school during all of these changes, now, think back to your experiences of that and your child through each of the District’s reorganization plans. They included moving from your neighborhood school to focus schools; the K-3, 4-5, 6-8, and K-8 choice option; moving 8th grade students to the high school; and then the option of having a choice for high school at the main high school campus or the New Tech High School campus. I want you to think about your experiences, how each of these changes impacted you and your child, and what was happening around you. I am interested in learning about the experiences you and your child/children have as the district went through these series of changes.
Questions:

1. Think back to the first time the district made a grade-level or structural change that impacted you and your family. Please describe that change.
   - What did that change mean to you?
   - What did that change mean to your children?
   - Are they any specific incidents, people or events that stand out during this time?
   - What was the result or impact of change on your family?
   - Did you think of leaving? If so, why did you stay?

Notable Observations:
Notable observations of the participant during the interview to be completed by the interviewer (ex. cried, anxious, confused, wondering if they made the right decision- worried, impatient, proud, angry, etc.) Please verbally acknowledge these emotions and have the participant share specifically what is making them feel this way. “I get the feeling that you are XXXXXXXX right now, what is making you feel this way?

2-4. Now, go forward/backward in time. Please describe that change. (The interviewer will ask the question of going forward or backward in time depending on where in the timeline the subject begins to see what memories exist about each of the three school changes.)
   - What did that change mean to you?
   - What did that change mean to your children?
   - Are there any specific incidents, people or events that stand out during this time?
   - What was the result or impact of that change on your family?
   - Did you think of leaving? If so, why did you stay?

Notable Observations: Please verbally acknowledge these emotions and have the participant share specifically what is making them feel this way. “I get the feeling that you are XXXXXXXX right now, what is making you feel this way?
3. Ok, you have mentioned the changes that you remember, I want to remind you of XXXXX.) The interviewer will repeat this as necessary to account for each of the school changes.)

- What did that change mean to you?
- What did that change mean to your children?
- Are there any specific incidents, people or events that stand out during this time?
- What was the result or impact of that change on your family?
- Did you think of leaving? If so, why did you stay?

**Notable Observations:** Please verbally acknowledge these emotions and have the participant share specifically what is making them feel this way. “I get the feeling that you are XXXXXXXX right now, what is making you feel this way?

4. Now, as you think back on all of these changes taken together as a whole experience.

- What do they mean for you?
- What did they mean for your child/ren?
- What would you describe the overall impact to be?

**Notable Observations:** Please verbally acknowledge these emotions and have the participant share specifically what is making them feel this way. “I get the feeling that you are XXXXXXXX right now, what is making you feel this way?
5. How do you feel about the fact that you decided to stay in Holland Public Schools? How do you think your child would describe their feelings about staying in the district?

Notable Observations: Please verbally acknowledge these emotions and have the participant share specifically what is making them feel this way. “I get the feeling that you are Xxxxxx right now, what is making you feel this way?

6. As your child attended all of these different schools, how do you think they would describe their experience? Did they ever express a desire to go to a different school? Why/Why not?

Notable Observations: Please verbally acknowledge these emotions and have the participant share specifically what is making them feel this way. “I get the feeling that you are Xxxxxx right now, what is making you feel this way?
7. If you could roll back the clock, would you have made the same decision and do it all over again? Why/why not?

Notable Observations: Please verbally acknowledge these emotions and have the participant share specifically what is making them feel this way. “I get the feeling that you are X.X.X.X.X.X.X right now, what is making you feel this way?

8. If you had a Kindergarten student ready to start school this fall, would you start him/her in Holland Public Schools? Why/Why not?

Notable Observations: Please verbally acknowledge these emotions and have the participant share specifically what is making them feel this way. “I get the feeling that you are X.X.X.X.X.X.X right now, what is making you feel this way?

9. If your child was about to enter Kindergarten again for the first time, what would be the things that you would consider about which school to attend? Are these different from when your child started school in Kindergarten? Has this experience impacted these things in any way? How?

Notable Observations: Please verbally acknowledge these emotions and have the participant share specifically what is making them feel this way. “I get the feeling that you are X.X.X.X.X.X.X right now, what is making you feel this way?
10. Some people argue that urban schools like ours can't provide quality education. This is the reason why some chose to send their children to other school districts. HPS also has families who are choosing to come into the district from other schools. How do you feel today about the choice you made for your children? Why? Do you believe that you had a choice? Why/Why Not?

Notable Observations: Please verbally acknowledge these emotions and have the participant share specifically what is making them feel this way. “I get the feeling that you are XXXXXXX right now, what is making you feel this way?”

11. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience in Holland Public Schools as it is specific to all of the school changes that occurred?

Notable Observations: Please verbally acknowledge these emotions and have the participant share specifically what is making them feel this way. “I get the feeling that you are XXXXXXX right now, what is making you feel this way?”
Thank you, (be reflective here....that was quite an experience for you, I appreciate the detail that you provided, I am glad that your child is still having a great experience, there are many things that have been shared here that will be very helpful in this research and shaping of future policy and decisions, your voice today is very important etc.)

Your assistance in this research is greatly appreciated. To thank you for your time, Mr. Davis wished to share this gift certificate to the school store at the high school.

The next step will be for your interview to be typed up into a written document. Once that is completed, I will contact you to meet again if you desire. At that time you will have an opportunity to review it for accuracy and to make any changes or additions to it. Mr. Davis has hired an individual to do this so he will be unable to identify who the speaker is. This person has also signed a confidentiality agreement as well and will not know who provided the information. Her job will be to type the responses exactly as they were stated.

Do you have any questions before we end our time today?
Appendix G

Access/Permission to Conduct Research
Access/Permission to Conduct Research for:

"Mothers Who Choose Traditional Public Education in Times of Economic Stress, Criticism, and District Reform"

Western Michigan University
Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership
College of Education

Principal investigator: Patricia L. Reeves, Ed.D.
Student Investigator: Brian Davis, Ed.S.

The City of Holland Schools/Holland Public Schools is invited to participate in a doctoral dissertation research study entitled, "Mothers Who Choose Traditional Public Education in Times of Criticism, Economic Stress, and District Reform". The doctoral student is Brian Davis. Given his role in this research, he is not able to grant permission for participation and access to the participants of this study. The executive committee of the Board of Education is being requested to serve as the gatekeeper for access in compliance with board policy 2416-Student Privacy and Parental Access to Information and policy 2605— Program Accountability and Evaluation in addition to all state and federal laws including FERPA.

As trustees of the community and the Holland Public Schools' Board of Education, we have been asked to participate in research that will address why parents chose public education. More specifically, this study will be addressing why parents choose a public school in the first place, their reasons for staying, and how they describe their personal experiences during times of public school criticism, economic stress and school reform. The participants in this survey will include a random/purposeful criterion sample of twenty 10th grade parents from the 2011-2012 school year that represent demographic characteristics of ethnicity, socio-economic status, secondary school program, and academic proficiency of students. These parents have been with the district since kindergarten and through all four phases of district reorganization over the past ten years.

The research design being used is phenomenology. Phenomenology is a qualitative methodology which specifically looks at how individuals describe an experience. Participants will be interviewed using an interview protocol. All responses will be audio-taped and later transcribed and analyzed by the researcher. All information collected will be kept confidential. All of the research data will be retained for the duration of the dissertation in a locked file in the student investigator's home office. All audio tapes will be destroyed after transcripts have been made and participants have had the opportunity to complete member checking. All research data will be securely maintained per HSIRB guidelines for three years in a locked file at the principal investigators office at Western Michigan University upon completion of the dissertation and then destroyed.

Upon completion of this doctoral work, the dissertation may be published at Western Michigan University. The results will be shared with the Holland Public Schools Board of Education. It is the intention of the researcher that the information gathered from this research will assist in informing school policy regarding parent choice and inform district leaders of the core values held by parents who chose public education for their children.
This project will be registered as a dissertation with the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at Western Michigan University and will meet all requirements for conducting research with human subjects including containing written consent for participation.

If you have questions or concerns about this study, you may contact the principal investigator Patricia L. Reeves at patricia.reeves@wmich.edu and/or the doctoral student Brian Davis at 616-494-2005 or bdavis@hollandpublicschools.org.

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.

For the Holland Public Schools' Board of Education:

Signature: [Signature]
Date: 12-19-11
Steve Grose, Board President

Signature: [Signature]
Date: 12-19-11
Jeffrey Buckman, Teaching for Learning

Signature: [Signature]
Date: 12-19-2011
Jack Gisinger, Treasurer

Student Investigator: [Signature]
Date: 12-19-11
Brian Davis
Appendix H

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board
Letters of Approval
Date: July 19, 2012

To: Patricia Reeves, Principal Investigator
   Brian Davis, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 12-03-21

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Mothers who Choose Traditional Public Education in Times of Economic Stress, Criticism, and District Reform" has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under "Number of subjects you want to complete the study"). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: July 19, 2013
Appendix I

Confidentiality Agreement with Interviewer
Confidentiality Contract - Data Collection - Interviewer "Mothers Who Choose Traditional Public Education in Times of Economic Stress, Criticism, and District Reform"
Western Michigan University
Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership - College of Education

Principal Investigator: Patricia L. Reeves, Ed.D.
Student Investigator: Brian Davis, Ed.S.

I understand that I have been asked to conduct interviews as part of a doctoral research study for the student investigator listed above. This research has been approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) of Western Michigan University and is an approved doctoral research project. I further understand that I have been asked to act on behalf of the student investigator given his relationship to the research being conducted in his district and the relationships that he has given his position to the participants in the study. I have been thoroughly trained in the interview protocol and I will not deviate from the protocol as presented. I understand that confidentiality of all information collected is of the highest priority. To that end:

- I will not record any observations, comments, reactions, or personal information about the participants on any other document other than provided by the student investigator.
- I will not reproduce documents in any fashion prior to turning over all documents to the student investigator.
- I will not comment on the participants or content of their interviews to any other individual keeping the information collected completely confidential.
- I will securely hand deliver all audio cassette tapes to the transcriptionist for electronic recording.
- I will refrain from recording, stating or otherwise indicating on any written, transcribed, or taped information personal information that will identify the participant in the study.

As part of validation of the student investigators research, I may be asked to read a narrative report summarizing the information collected. This is part of a validation process to ensure accuracy, reliability and credibility of the analysis of the data collected.

Interviewer: [Signature] 2-21-2011 Date

Student Investigator: [Signature] 2-21-11 Date
Appendix J

Confidentiality Agreement with Transcriptionists
Confidentiality Contract-Data Collection-Transcriptionist "Mothers Who Choose Traditional Public Education in Times of Economic Stress, Criticism, and District Reform
Western Michigan University Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership College of Education

Principal Investigator: Patricia L. Reeves, Ed.D.
Student Investigator: Brian Davis, Ed.S.

I understand that I have been asked to transcribe interviews as part of a doctoral research study for the student investigator listed above. This research has been approved by the Human Subject Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) of Western Michigan University and is an approved doctoral research project. I further understand that I have been asked to act on behalf of the student investigator given his relationship to the research being conducted in his district and the relationships that he has given his position to the participants in the study. I have been thoroughly trained in the transcription protocol and I will not deviate from the protocol as presented. I understand that confidentially of all information collected is of the highest priority. To that end:

- I will not record any observations, comments, reactions, or personal information about the participants on any other document other than provided by the student investigator.
- I will keep the electronic typed transcripts in a secure folder and not a public domain.
- I will destroy the audio cassettes upon notification from the student investigator that member-checking has been completed and the typed transcripts have been printed and are in final form.
- I will delete files the secure folder upon completion of the student investigator’s final analysis and completion of the dissertation.
- I will not reproduce documents in any fashion prior to turning over all typed documents to the student investigator.
- I will not comment on the participants or content of their interviews to any other individual keeping the information collected completely confidential.
- I will not attempt to identify who participants are by listening to the recordings or any other means.
- I will transcribe the information collected verbatim to express the complete intent of the participant without adding any additional information, context, meaning or judgment.

Transcriptionist: ___________________________ Date: 07/10/14
Signature: ___________________________

Student Investigator: ___________________________ Date: 07/10/14
Signature: ___________________________

Confidentiality Contract-Data Collection-Transcriptionist “Mothers Who Choose Traditional Public Education in Times of Economic Stress, Criticism, and District Reform Western Michigan University Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership College of Education

Principal Investigator: Patricia L. Reeves, Ed.D.
Student Investigator: Brian Davis, Ed.S.

I understand that I have been asked to transcribe interviews as part of a doctoral research study for the student investigator listed above. This research has been approved by the Human Subject Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) of Western Michigan University and is an approved doctoral research project. I further understand that I have been asked to act on behalf of the student investigator given his relationship to the research being conducted in his district and the relationships that he has given his position to the participants in the study. I have been thoroughly trained in the transcription protocol and I will not deviate from the protocol as presented. I understand that confidentiality of all information collected is of the highest priority. To that end:

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- I will not reproduce documents in any fashion prior to turning over all typed documents to the student investigator.
- I will not comment on the participants or content of the interviews to any other individual keeping the information collected completely confidential.
- I will not attempt to identify who participants are by listening to the recordings or any other means.
- I will transcribe the information collected verbatim to express the complete intent of the participant without adding any additional information, context, meaning or judgment.

Transcriptionist: [Signature]  7/9/14  Date

Student Investigator: [Signature]  7/2/14  Date
Confidentiality Contract - Data Collection - Transcriptionist "Mothers Who Choose Traditional Public Education in Times of Economic Stress, Criticism, and District Reform"
Western Michigan University Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership College of Education

Principal Investigator: Patricia L. Reeves, Ed.D.
Student Investigator: Brian Davis, Ed.S.

I understand that I have been asked to transcribe interviews as part of a doctoral research study for the student investigator listed above. This research has been approved by the Human Subject Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) of Western Michigan University and is an approved doctoral research project. I further understand that I have been asked to act on behalf of the student investigator given his relationship to the research being conducted in his district and the relationships that he has given his position to the participants in the study. I have been thoroughly trained in the transcription protocol and I will not deviate from the protocol as presented. I understand that confidentially of all information collected is of the highest priority. To that end:

- I will not record any observations, comments, reactions, or personal information about the participants on any other document other than provided by the student investigator.
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- I will destroy the audio cassettes upon notification from the student investigator that member-checking has been completed and the typed transcripts have been printed and are in final form.
- I will delete files the secure folder upon completion of the student investigator’s final analysis and completion of the dissertation.
- I will not reproduce documents in any fashion prior to turning over all typed documents to the student investigator.
- I will not comment on the participants or content of their interviews to any other individual keeping the information collected completely confidential.
- I will not attempt to identify who the participants are by listening to the recordings or any other means.
- I will transcribe the information collected verbatim to express the complete intent of the participant without adding any additional information, context, meaning, or judgment.

Transcriptionist: [Signature]
Date: 7/10/14

Student Investigator: [Signature]
Date: 7/10/14
Appendix K

Invitation to Participate
Invitation to Participate

Date,
Dear XXXXXX,

The purpose of this letter is to extend an invitation to you to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Brian Davis. Mr. Davis is a student who is working on his advanced studies at Western Michigan University. You are receiving this letter because you have been randomly identified as a mother to participate. This process included identifying the potential participants who met the criteria, assigning a number to each name, and then using a web-based random number generator to identify the participants from an identified group. To be a potential participant, mothers must have a child enrolled in the 12th grade in the 2013-2014 school year and their child must have been enrolled in Holland Public Schools since Kindergarten. According to our records, you meet this criteria.

As part of his work, Mr. Davis is very interested in learning about the experiences you have had as a mother while your child has been enrolled in Holland Public Schools through all of the school reorganization plans. Your child has been in many different schools since Kindergarten. He is also interested in learning how you would describe the experiences of your child. He wants to better understand why mothers like yourself have chosen public education for their children, why they have chosen to stay in the district through all of the changes, and if you had to do it all over again, would you? Mr. Davis is also aware that there have been many changes in education at the local, state, and national level and he wants to make sure that voices like yours are represented.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and all information will be treated with respect. All information is also confidential so that no one will be able to identify in the final report who made what specific statements. You may withdraw from participation at any time. Your participation or decision not to participate will in no way impact your child’s continued education at Holland Public Schools as it relates to his/her grades, class assignment, schedules, participation in extra-curricular programs, discipline or any other factor. Mr. Davis will not know who the participants in the study were. Your specific information that would identify you as a participant will only be known by me. If you have any concerns regarding residency of the school district or the United States, you may discuss these with me prior to your participation in a confidential setting as a school administrator. Holland Public Schools does not require proof of citizenship for children to be able to attend any of its schools.

If you chose to participate, you will be asked to participate in completing a brief demographic survey and an interview that will be conducted by me. I will contact you to set up a time for the completion of both. The completion of the survey should take approximately 3-5 minutes and the interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes depending on your answers to the questions. This process will take place at the Herrick District Library in a private setting at a time that works best with both of our schedules. If you need assistance with transportation to the library, arrangements can be made. The
interviews will be tape-recorded. Your audio tape recording will then be typed into a
written document. You will have the chance to review this document for accuracy. After
this process is complete, the audio tape will be destroyed. Any data that has been
collected will be kept by the principal investigator of this research, Dr. Patricia Reeves at
Western Michigan University, in a secure file and then destroyed after three years per
university and research guidelines.

I will be contacting you in the next few days to see if you are interested in learning more
about participating in this research and to answer any questions that you might have. Mr.
Davis has requested my assistance so that you can be honest as possible about your
participation and answers and to establish as best he can no concerns about his role in the
district and your consideration for participation.

Thank you,
Appendix L

Participant Consent Form
Western Michigan University
Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership
College of Education

Principal Investigator: Patricia L. Reeves, Ed.D.
Student Investigator: Brian Davis, Ed.S.
Title of Study: Mothers Who Choose Traditional Public Education in Times of Economic Stress, Criticism, and District Reform

You have been invited to participate in a research study entitled, "Mothers Who Choose Traditional Public Education in Times of Economic Stress, Criticism, and District Reform." This project will serve as Brian Davis’ dissertation for the requirements of obtaining a Doctor of Philosophy from Western Michigan University. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

**What are we trying to find out in this study?**
This study is intended to understand the choices that families make through the mother’s perspective with regard to their child’s education. More specifically, this study will be addressing why mothers choose a traditional public school in the first place, their reasons for staying, and how they describe their personal experiences and that of their children during times of school reform. The study also seeks to ask the basic question, if I had to do it all over again, would I make the same decisions?

**Who can participate in this study?**
To be a participant in this study you must be a mother whose child has been consecutively enrolled in the Holland Public School District since Kindergarten and is currently in the eleventh grade for field study purposes or in the twelfth grade for research. You have been invited to participate as a randomly sampled individual from a representative group of mothers sharing these same criteria.

**Where will this study take place?**
The study will take place at the Herrick District Library located at 300 S. River Ave. Holland, MI. A private conference room will be reserved for the time of your interview. This will allow for the privacy of your participation and confidentiality of your responses. This will allow for privacy of your participation and confidentiality of your responses.

**What is the time commitment for participating in this study?**
Your total time commitment for participation in this study will be approximately two hours from beginning to end. This will include one required visit and one voluntary follow up visit.
1. The first visit will be for the review and completion of this consent form (3-5 minutes), the completion of a brief demographic survey (3-5 minutes) and the participation in an interview (45-60 minutes).
2. The second visit will provide a time for you to check the accuracy of your interview that has been typed into a transcript (45-60 minutes). You will be able to correct any information and to add any additional information that you feel is important or to provide additional clarification to any of your responses. This second visit is voluntary.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
If you decide to participate in this research, you will be invited to participate in two different visits all held at the Herrick District Library. This will begin in July, 2013 and continue through July, 2014. There are three parts to this process:
1. You will be asked to complete a short survey to collect demographic information about you as a parent. This data will be used to describe the participants in the study only.
2. You will be asked to participate in an interview with an interviewer who represents the student investigator and who has been specifically trained on the use of the interview protocol. The student investigator is not conducting the interviews so that you are free to share any and all information regarding your personal experiences in the district. The student investigator will not have information that will identify you as a participant. During this time, the interviewer will begin by asking you to take a few moments to focus on the past ten years of your child’s attendance in the district, the changes that have taken place in school design, moments of particular awareness and impact, and your feelings related to these changes. Then, more specific questions will be asked regarding your decisions to enroll your child in the district in the first place, why you have decided to keep your child in the district, and how you feel about this decision. Finally, if you had to do it all over again, would you? You also understand that this interview will be tape-recorded and you give your consent to do so. You understand that this tape will not include any information that would identify you as a participant other than your voice. The cassette tape will be hand-delivered by the interviewer to a person identified to produce a typed text version of this interview. After that has been completed and you have had the chance to review the typed text, you understand that the tape will be destroyed.
3. You will be invited to come back and review the data that was collected from you in a typed format to ensure that it is accurate. You will have the opportunity to provide additional information or clarification as needed. You understand that you will meet here at the library again with the interviewer to complete this process. Your participation in this process is voluntary and not required to participate in this research. An interpreter will be available for Spanish speaking families.
What information is being measured during this study?
The demographic survey will be given to collect basic information about you as a participant. This will assist the student investigator in describing the subjects of the study. This information will not include your name or any specific information about your child that would allow someone outside of this research to know who participated.

The interview will be used to collect responses from you based upon twelve pre-identified questions. These questions will ask you to share your experiences and perspectives during your child’s enrollment in Holland Public Schools. The student investigator wants to understand your perspective during this time period and to understand the impact of all of the school changes and choices that you had since your child has been enrolled since kindergarten. The descriptions shared by you will be compared with the responses from other participants to generate common themes of this shared experience. These common themes will be used to write an overall description of the experience for everyone who participated. During the interview, the interviewer may ask you to share in more detail or additional questions based upon any reactions or emotional responses to the questions.

Upon completion of this research, the dissertation may be published at Western Michigan University in accordance with Dissertation/Publication guidelines as a public document. The final results and Dissertation will be shared with the Holland Public Schools Board of Education. The final results may also be shared with locally elected officials. It is the intention of the researcher that the information gathered from this research will assist in informing school policy regarding parent choice and inform district leaders of the core values held by parents who chose traditional public education for their children.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
It is the intention of the researcher that the information gathered from this research may assist in informing school policy regarding parent choice and inform district leaders of the core values held by parents who chose traditional public education for their children. Your participation may assist in providing this needed information. You understand that your participation in this research or lack of participation will in no way have an impact positively or negatively on your child’s class placement, schedule, performance, discipline, participation in school activities or any other school related function.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There may be costs associated with participation related to travel. You will be asked to meet the interviewer up to two times on two different occasions at the Herrick District
Library at mutually agreed upon times. There are no other associated costs for participating in this study.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
Subjects who fully participate in the study including the completion of the consent form, demographic survey, interview, and follow up to check for the accuracy of the interview transcription will receive a $30 gift certificate to the Holland High School Red and White Shop. Subjects who complete everything except for the review of the interview transcription will receive a $20 gift certificate to the Holland High School Red and White Shop.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
There are four different individuals who will have access to the information collected during this study: Dr. Patricia Reeves acting as the Principal Investigator, Brian Davis acting as the student investigator, Kathleen Vafadari acting as the interviewer, Kathleen Hudson acting as the transcriptionist and Veronica Esteves who will serve as an interpreter. All information collected from you is confidential. This means that your name and your child’s name will not appear on any papers on which this information is recorded. The cassette tape recorded by Mrs. Vafadari will be hand delivered to Mrs. Hudson and stored in a locked file at the Washington Administration Building in Pupil Accounting Office. It will be destroyed after you have had the opportunity to review the typed version of your interview. The survey and typed interview will be retained for the duration of the project in a locked file in the student investigator’s home until the research is complete. Once complete, all research data will be retained in a locked file in the principal investigator’s office at Western Michigan University or archives and maintained per HSIRB guidelines for three years. Mrs. Vafadari will not keep any data and will sign a specific contract of confidentiality to not repeat, record information for any personal use, or otherwise share information collected from your interview. Mrs. Hudson, who will be preparing the typed text of your interview, has also signed a confidentiality contract and will not repeat, record information for any personal use, or otherwise share information collected from your interview.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?
You may refuse to answer any questions or refuse to participate in this study. You may quit at any time during the study without prejudice, penalty, or loss of any service that would be provided to you as a parent of a child enrolled in Holland Public Schools. Your child will receive no academic or personal consequences if you decide to withdraw from the study. Mrs. Vafadari can also decide to stop your participation in this study without your consent if he deems it required for the mutual benefit of both parties involved.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the principal investigator Patricia L. Reeves at 269-387-3527 or patricia.reeves@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the
Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions or problems arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

___________________________________________
Please Print Your Name

___________________________________________
Participant’s Signature Date
Appendix M

Epocha of Principal Researcher
Role as Gatekeeper in a Neighboring District and Shaping of Cultural Beliefs/Attitudes

My tenure in HPS began in 2000 as an elementary principal. Prior to my administrative roles in the District, I was a former middle school counselor in a neighboring district that often received students from the HPS. This began largely with the onset of public school choice following the passage of Public Act 145 in 1994. The Ottawa Area Intermediate School District (OAISD) declared open enrollment and school attendance across any and all borders of schools within the OAISD. As a school counselor, I was often the gatekeeper who would be the first point of contact for families visiting and considering other school options for their middle school student.

During my four years in this neighboring district, information was often shared with me regarding student behavior, ethics, values, academic rigor, academic achievement, community values, and childrearing practices of families within the HPS and its schools. My perception of HPS was influenced by these parental perceptions and often reinforced by what was read in print in the local paper of the city. The residential neighborhood in which I lived for my primary residence was located near large numbers of rental properties. Often, these rental properties were the settings for much of the gang reported activity that was occurring within the city. While I do not believe that I formulated my own negative stereotypes regarding any specific minority group based upon this behavior, the community culture in the neighboring district emphasized and reinforced separateness and closed mindedness to persons of different cultures based upon the stereotypes being formulated in the local community. This culture of thinking
was also reinforced and not understood within the strong presence of the reformed
Christian community, and local Dutch residents.

HPS’s reputation as an urban school district was present in the 1980s—1990’s in part due to an increase in Latino, Asian, and African-American residents in the city. This demographic shift began in part due to migrant work available in the many factories, landscaping facilities, and a strong agricultural base specifically blueberries and pickles. With the coming together of many different cultures there was a rise of cultural strife in the city. Media sensationalized any activity that was real or perceived as gang activity. As a result, if teens or adults were involved in this activity in the community, this behavior must also then be present in the school system. The middle schools and high school of HPS developed a stereotype of a place which fostered the coming together of troubled youth who lived in the city and were assigned attendance to these schools. Even though I grew up in a small town, largely Caucasian and Christian, I very much appreciated the diverse experiences that I had while attending undergraduate and graduate school. When the opportunity came to work in a more diverse setting I rose to the occasion.

**Firsthand Observations and Experiences in HPS and the Onset of Significant Change**

During the first three years of my tenure in HPS, I was a principal of a neighborhood elementary school. This school was largely Caucasian and middle-class to upper middle-class. In the community, the school was widely known as the “country club” school. The school had a reputation for strong academics, high student performance, excellent teaching, and strong parental involvement. There was a high percentage of school of choice students from other districts in the OAISD as well as
internal choice students from within the district itself. There were high expectations for
the students, staff, and leadership.

During the first year of my principalship, the district made the decision to close
one of the local neighborhood schools which served primarily a student population of
minority and low socio-economic students. As part of this closing, I was responsible for
developing a transition plan for students and families as they would be divided and
attending existing neighborhood schools within the district. During this transition, it
became visually and verbally evident to me that all of the local neighboring schools were
not open to their school culture changing with the inclusion of students from the core city
into their residential neighborhood schools. As a leader of this transition, I observed fear,
anxiety, bias, stereotypes, and judgments that were being cast onto children from the ages
of five-eleven years old. It was evident to me that there was a strong connection and hold
on childrearing practices and protecting children from “worldly” experiences that might
have been present in the inner city neighborhood school.

During the third year of my principalship, a decision was made by the district to
close two more elementary schools reorganizing the K-5 schools into grade level focus
schools (Phase I). My building was one of the schools slated to be closed under this new
school reconfiguration of elementary grade level programs. Again, through a series of
leadership changes, I was placed in charge of managing this transition as I assumed the
role of Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning. During this process, the
district lost many students as parents left the district to attend neighboring schools in
other districts in the OAISD. While no comprehensive study was done as to the reasons
why parents left the district, the enrollment history of the district and residents of the city
illustrate a decline in Caucasian middle-class families. Was this an example of what is often referred to as “White Flight”? This question remains operationally unanswered or defined, however, it is a term widely used in strategic planning and defining the current reality of the HPS and city itself. The media once again sensationalized this district reorganization and loss of students from the system. Many residents commented negatively on the system for the manner in which the decision to close the schools was done. It was not a transparent process and it did not involve the community. Many families, while silent in words, may have exercised their voice through their feet. During the first year of the “Focus Schools”, the district experienced a student decline in enrollment of over 600 students. Enrollment records show a decline in Caucasian families and an increase in minority and low-socio-economic families. It appeared as the families who had the resources to leave and rationale to do so, did. The recently opened charter school within the district’s boundaries capitalized on this process and their vision of a college preparatory school.

A Personal Commitment to Maintaining the Integrity of Parents, the District, and the Leader

As a new leader in the district, I was troubled by the lack of transparency and involvement of stakeholders in the process of school reform. I was also deeply troubled by the negative perception that the media was imposing upon the district, its students, and its programs. There was a growing lack of trust between building administration and district administration. There was a real lack of trust between teacher and district leadership. In addition there was a lack of trust with the Board of Education. Morale within the district was reported to be at an all time low. I was committed to making a difference in my new role. I was committed to prove that at-risk students could be
successful. Furthermore, I was committed to proving that this quickly turning suburban to urban school district would be successful and not another statistic of urban schools throughout the nation and state. I worked closely with the families of the school in which I had been principal and worked to ensure that they not only stayed within the district but continued their involvement in critical roles including PTO, athletic and academic boosters, the district’s educational foundation, and the day-day volunteer opportunities in the classroom. Many of these moms also became a sounding board for me as I involved them in a review process of key ideas and transformations of district curriculum, program, and structure.

**Continued Decline in Enrollment, a New Strategic Vision**

Unfortunately, the decline in enrollment of HPS continued. With the escalating costs in retirement and health care and no increases in the foundation grant afforded to schools through the school aid fund, the district was faced in 2005 with the need to reduce $2.2 Million from the operational budget. This would most likely involve the closure of additional schools. In addition, the acting superintendent was receiving community pressure to “undo” the focus school concept and move schools back to a more neighborhood concept. This time period also included labor strife regarding negotiated benefits for the instructional staff. This created a greater lack of trust and faith in the district leadership and morale continued to spiral down. It was feared that the district was in a state of decline that nobody could stop or do anything about.

As the assistant, I was given many leadership opportunities. I was a key player in developing a new strategic plan for the district focusing on culture, communication, academic/programs, facilities, and finances. This strategic planning led to the
development of a community advisory committee (CAC) to make a recommendation to the Board of Education regarding the reduction in $2.2 Million in operational expenditures. Drawing upon my prior experiences, relationships developed, and systems thinking, I was able to facilitate a process that reorganized the district once again with the inclusion of a K-8 school and the recommendation to close two more schools (Phase II). A focus during this time was based upon the principles held by Collins (2001) in Good to Great as the district focused on a new flywheel and economic engine. A new vision of “To Be the Schools of Choice” was launched. While from a business model this may have made perfect sense, it did not resonate with the educational community. This was not an easy process as there were community leaders driving this process who were not connected with the educational community and often were critical of it. A contract was achieved with the local education association. There was now an opportunity to come together and address the system as a whole and begin to focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment—factors that we would hold high for if done well, parents would chose to attend our city schools.

A New Leader Emerges—Continued Decline, and School Reform

Despite the popularity of the new K-8 school model, and a return to a more neighborhood feel with the community regarding school programs, the district continued to face a decline in enrollment. There were several contributing factors to this including: a declining economic base in the community, high unemployment, mobility for affordable housing, perceived instability of the district, too much change, a continued shift in demographics of the district (in 2007 the collective minority became the
majority), declining facilities, and a perceived lack of real vision for the district beyond an economic model of survival which did not appear to be working.

I became the new superintendent of the school district in the spring of 2008. I was immediately given the task by the Board of Education to develop a new vision for the district that included a comprehensive facility plan that not only addressed the facilities currently in operation but the sites that were currently unoccupied. A new vision of Belong…Achieve…Grow… was launched in the fall of 2008 and a district reorganization plan was approved in January of 2009. This plan called for the reorganization of the district into a K-7 model, moving the Grade 8 students to the high school campus, and the creation of an online credit recovery tech high school (Phase III). Two more schools would be closed as part of the process.

The drop-out rate at HPS and student achievement gaps in learning became the next focus of the instructional program emphasis. Searching for a secondary school reform initiative and studying several best practices for secondary achievement, the New Tech High School model was adopted as a satellite secondary program in the district repurposing one of the closed and former elementary buildings. This launched the implementation and community support for Phase IV which included the successful passing of two bond proposals totaling $73 Million to renovate four existing K-7 schools, three secondary school facilities, and all athletic sites. The focus of this proposal included safety and security, energy efficiencies, flexible 21st century learning environments, and operational effectiveness. While the outcome of these initiatives are not known at this time, the economic engine was no longer the driving force, rather, systemic reform was launched with a focus on instructional priorities, student/staff performance and growth,
and greater accountability to rigor, relevance, and relationships in a 21st century learning community.

**A Listening Leader**

Throughout each of these four phases, I have drawn upon my counseling background, training, and effective listening skills. I have always been receptive to listening to the needs expressed of staff, students, and parents. I have been keen to listen for what the community values. I have been alert to developing programs that will yield the highest performance possible in our schools. I have been a pragmatist in that the city school system may never return to the days of the early 1980’s with different demographics and programs. However, I do believe that the district can achieve high public regard while serving a higher percentage of at-risk learners. I believe that the district can be the choice of education for all ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic status, and religious beliefs. I believe that the district will be a place of study and evaluation as we launch reform initiatives that are consistent with successful practices known throughout the educational literature and that we will be a model for other communities.

**Concluding Remarks**

The HPS is an organization that has experienced significant change over the past decade. With a decline in enrollment of over 30%, the district leadership and Board of Education has had to make a series of difficult decisions that have impacted staff and families. While I have been part of that decision-making process at varying degrees of leadership, I have also been impacted on a personal and professional level. Through it all, I have maintained my commitment to the district and I chose to stay in the district. I chose to stay in the district for the following reasons: a committed board of education to
staff/student performance and growth, a strong building leadership team, a strong instructional staff, a diverse environment where families and children Belong…Achieve…Grow…, proven programs that are yielding results in student achievement, families committed to the strength of diversity, committed faith-based entities that are new collaborative partners in the process, growing partnerships with higher education, expanding partnerships with business and industry, a growing base of public support and positive perception, and a vision that can be implemented that will have a direct correlation to increased student performance if implemented with integrity.

Through this phenomenological study, I hope to learn why our parents chose to stay with the district despite all that has happened in the past decade to them and their children. While I have had my own personal experiences, shaping of thought, and own my own personal vision and goals for the district, I need to set them aside and assess what has been the experience of families who have been impacted by this change as well. Specifically, how have these shared experiences, good and bad, shaped their belief in the organization and the achievement of their children? This learning may result in my rethinking of the position of our choice parents and the values that they hold dear when staying in a school district even during times of significant reform, public school criticism, and economic challenges. It is important that their collective, yet underrepresented, voices of the past help to shape the future. I may find, that a number of parents actually have no ability to choose and if they did, may not chosen this system. Unfortunately, the economic conditions are not improving for the future. Regardless of the outcome, or a combination thereof, as the leader of the district, I will be able to share
this learning with policy leaders regarding the shaping of choice policy and practice adjusting to the new realities facing public education.
Appendix N

Holland Public Schools History of Infrastructure
Holland Public Schools
History of Infrastructure

Pre-2003  K-5  “Neighborhood Schools”
  • Apple Ave PreK
  • Harrington, Lakeview, Jefferson, Maplewood, Heights, Longfellow, Washington, Lincoln, Van Raalte
  • East/West Middle School
  • Holland High School

Fall, 2003  “Focus Schools” (Neighborhood School Closure)
  • Apple Ave  PreK
  • Harrington  K-1  Maplewood
  • Jefferson   2-3   Heights
  • Van Raalte  4-5   Longfellow
  • West       6-8   East
  • HHS        9-12  HHS

Fall, 2006  Focus Schools Eliminated
  • Lakeview ECC
  • Maplewood, Heights, Jefferson, Van Raalte  K-3
    • Longfellow  4-5
    • West       6-8
    • HHS        9-12  East K-8
  (During this time period, each year Heights added a grade 4th-5th, 6th-7th until it became a K-7)

Fall, 2009  Maplewood ECC
  • Heights
  • East
  • Jefferson
  • West
  • Holland New Tech
    Opened as 8/9 then grew to 8-12
    (PBL focus)
    8-12 in 2014
  • Holland High School  8-12
    VR-Tech (alternative)

Marcia Bishop- Superintendent that changed to Focus Schools
Frank Garcia-Superintendent that changed to K-3, 4-5, 6-8, K-8
Brian Davis-Superintendent that changed to K-7, 8-12, New Tech & VR-Tech
Appendix O

Selected Examples of Significant Statements of Experiences of Participants and Their Formulated Meanings of What They Experienced During This Time of District Change Across the Major Themes and Subthemes
Table O-1

*Selected Examples of Significant Statements of Experiences of Participants and Their Formulated Meanings of What They Experienced During This Time of District Change: Values-Community, Diversity, Leadership, Pride, Relationships, Quality Education and Trust*

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<th>Significant Statement</th>
<th>Formulated Meaning</th>
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<td>You know and we didn’t, we weren’t people that they complain or ‘We’re leaving, we’re leaving.’ You know- we don’t believe that’s what you do within a community. You stick it out and do the best you can and you contribute and try to make things better. (P3, p9, L30-32)</td>
<td>Community: The value and preservation of neighborhoods is important to a community and those who reside there.</td>
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<td>And I can honestly say like his generation, at least our family situation, like our children, really see color the way that we did. Their experience through school is so completely different, and somewhere along the line we broke that cycle. And I thank XXX, because of where we live, and where they go to school, huge part of that. (P1, p6, L 20-24)</td>
<td>Diversity: Parents today recognize the importance of an international and global society. Parents value diversity and recognize the need for their children to be culturally competent.</td>
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<td>I just hope that the present school board can see that it’s like, you know what, you have really, you have in all fairness- you need to let the Holland Public school families know what you’re thinking, what’s going on and let them express negative or positive their feelings, what they think. To just do something and not let them have any say, big mistake. And I think that’s what happened here, because nobody had a say. It was a done deal. (P4, p13, L10-15)</td>
<td>Leadership: Parents want to be informed and part of any decision-making process that may impact the education that their child is receiving in a school system.</td>
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<td>These were huge changes and it was very frustrating and I think Holland was looked at as kind of a joke because it kept making all these changes. And I didn't like people making fun of Holland Schools. (P5, p5, L30-33; P6, L7).</td>
<td>Pride: Parents and students want to attend a school system with a clear identity that they can be proud of.</td>
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<td>I just feel like people cared about my kids.</td>
<td>Relationships: Parents value the relationships that are built between teachers and their students. They want them to know them academically and personally.</td>
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<td>Like the teachers have done a really good job Of looking at where they had areas, and where they had strengths…and saw potential and have always encouraged them to be able to do it. So I’m proud of that. My kids were not numbers. They’re not numbers at Holland High. They know my kids. And I think that’s kind of special. (P14, p9, L32-33; p10, L6-8)</td>
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<td>I think that the crux of everything for me has been the teaching staff. If it wasn't in place-as strongly as I feel about it-we wouldn't be here. No matter how much of a public school supporter we are, and how much we love this community, we would have made other choices; we would have been forced to. But that's kind of what has been the glue that's held it all together for us. I feel like is that confidence that they're getting a great education, despite all the craziness that's going; they're making it work in the classroom, everyday. And I value that. I really value that. (P1, p13, L5, 7-12)</td>
<td>Quality Education: Parents place a high value on the quality of the teaching staff and the education that their children receive. If the education is not compromised, then parents will deal with other distractions.</td>
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<td>We’ll trust our superintendent, school board to know, to know that hopefully they know what they’re doing. (P4, p9, L25-26)</td>
<td>Trust: Parents place a high degree of trust in the leadership of a school district.</td>
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Table O-2

Selected Examples of Significant Statements of Experiences of Participants and Their Formulated Meanings of What They Experienced During This Time of District Change: School Choice-Alumni, Loyalty, Public Choice, Quality, Research, Residency and Trapped

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<th>Significant Statement</th>
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<td>I was really taken back when she made that announcement. And I just kind of shut myself off from everything else that was going on. I felt like, ‘Well I have to kind of tough it out,’ because I wanted Holland Public school, and despite all the changes that they made, this is where I wanted to be. This is where I wanted my kids to be. I went- I’d gone through Holland Public school my whole life also. And I know, I know a lot of the teachers and that’s what I wanted my boys to experience. I felt like I just had to keep my mouth quiet, and just go with whatever they threw at me. (P2, p6, L18-23)</td>
<td>Alumni: Graduates of a school district take great pride as alumni and want their own children to attend if they live in the same community.</td>
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<td>I’m just very proud of Holland schools. I’m very proud. And I think we’ve all worked together, we’re a good community here, and you know, like any families you have some dark periods in your past, and those Focus School years, maybe some things weren’t so great, but some valuable stuff came out of it that, when you talk about that question people look forward would you have still done it, you know, that’s so much a reason why we can’t do that kind of thing, because, you know, yeah, maybe you went through some really uckie stuff but some of the good that came out of it was pretty tremendous too. And it was a growing experience, and I think administration grew, I think teachers grew, the community grew; we learned from those experiences, and we’ve learned that we can’t be just a XXX family you know, we’re bigger than that. And I think there are some other schools in the area that are going to be learning some of those lessons. (P8, p14, L3-14)</td>
<td>Loyalty: Even through very difficult times parents recognize that good things and new learning can come from challenges as a result. Change is hard. Change for the right reason can be a growing experience. Change can bring people together and foster a stronger sense of community, loyalty and ownership.</td>
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<td>It was kind of the first time we questioned, were doing the right thing? Like it wasn't</td>
<td>Public Choice: School Choice was introduced in 1996. Parents in 2002 were relatively new to the concept and began to question their choice options as other parents left the district and questioned why they would compromise their child’s education in this fashion.</td>
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<td>just a no-brainer anymore. It was Wow. We're in this climate of choice being a BIG thing.</td>
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<td>Well I'm taking my kid out of here and We're gonna do this, or we're gonna do that.</td>
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<td>The first time I can remember my husband and I really sitting down and saying-Is this</td>
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<td>gonna be our choice? Is this? Are we going to stick with this for better or worse?</td>
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<td>And if weren’t for the teachers and that connection I felt when we first started the</td>
<td>Quality: Parents assess the quality of a district based in part on the quality of the teaching staff.</td>
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<td>whole education process for my sons, I would have left. Yeah. I would have said, 'I don’t</td>
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<td>care about the- I’m mad about the changes. I don’t really care about the teachers so</td>
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<td>we’re just gonna leave and not look back.’ But that is what kept us here.</td>
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<td>I know that I would, if I was the person I am now, making that choice, as opposed to</td>
<td>Research: Parents today are taking more time to research the best school options for their children. This is driven by program options, quality of programs and diversity of school experiences. This is different from when their children began school in 2002.</td>
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<td>what I was like 17 years ago, I would do way more research and I would think much bigger</td>
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<td>picture. I wasn't really much so like zoned-in and I didn't really take the time to</td>
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<td>explore.</td>
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<td>It was hard for me to know my little boys weren’t going to be together, they look out</td>
<td>Residency: The decision on where to buy a home is driven in large part by the proximity to schools. Neighborhoods are often defined by the elementary school buildings in a district. Parents value neighborhood school settings.</td>
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<td>for each other. We actually bought a house across town when East became K-7 so we</td>
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<td>wouldn’t have four different parent/teacher conference schedules in a week. It was a</td>
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<td>crazy week, absolutely crazy, disoriented, which school am I here, which child am I</td>
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<td>here for? So, that’s quite a big change based on the schools to buy a house on the other</td>
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<td>side of town.</td>
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<td>I got the information about tuition and at that time they didn’t have bus service. And</td>
<td>Trapped: The cost of tuition and lack of transportation services limits some parents from being able to exercise school choice options that they might otherwise make.</td>
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<td>so that was a big factor, you know having to drive him back and forth. But, I think if</td>
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<td>we could have afforded it, we would have gone. So, that’s the truth. That’s the honest</td>
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<td>truth right there.</td>
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<td>I think too personalities you know within the home and and- you know- how parents handle, I mean I work with these kids’ parents all the time at school too. There’s some parents that fly off the handle at everything; there’s some parents who are nervous wrecks; there are some parents who don’t like change. You know, it’s all a part of life and new experiences are what make you who you are and we’ve always tried to instill that in our kids and so, you know, we just didn’t really get all upset about it. You know we just tried to make the best of it and think of all the positive things. And so you know, we’ve/I guess maybe that’s why we both have a life. I don’t sit home and ponder everything and sit and think of all the ways that life is hard for us. We just keep going, and our kids are pretty well adjusted and I think, I think that they deal with things okay because of that. (P3, p6, L25-33)</td>
<td>Adult/Student Reactions: The way that parents respond to change in their lives often translates to how their children will respond to the same change.</td>
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<td>It initially was just much distress, great distress, felt like parents were not a part of the decision making process whatsoever. Losing the neighborhood school we had just been a part of...we had a vested interest in the school, as volunteers, community supporters, as an identity. When it changed it was just so dramatic, we just felt like it was forced. And I don’t know what else to say, it was one of the most traumatic experiences. (P8, p1, L25-26, 28-30)</td>
<td>Associated Feelings: Change can evoke a wide range of emotions in people, These emotions may escalate when individuals do not understand the change itself or the rationale behind the change.</td>
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<td>I think a lot of parents didn’t feel like they had an option, or a say. Like, you made this decision- like the school board made the decision, whoever made the decision, school board/superintendent, and it was like, ‘Don’t we have a say in our kids future?’ That was the feeling I got. Because I will say- I mean- it seemed to come out of the blue. And I think everybody was taken back by that. (P4, p2, L32-35)</td>
<td>Communication: Parents want to be informed of the decisions that are being made with regard to their child’s education. They appreciate knowing about things in advance and the reasoning and research behind the decisions.</td>
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<td>‘Holy cow! You’re sending 8th graders to the high school?’ I’m like (gasp). I just was like, ‘Okay,’ until I kind of knew more about what was going on, then oh my gosh, 8th graders seniors? They cannot be together... (P4, p5, L 18-20)</td>
<td>Design Understanding: Parents can be supportive of change initiatives if they understand the research or rationale and behind the decisions.</td>
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I went to the meetings and got educated on what the program was and it didn’t seem to be a good fit for XXX just because he’s very social and has lots of friends and I think he just, yeah, would like, I know he would have liked the bigger school setting as opposed to a smaller school setting. No, after hearing about it, I didn’t really and I didn’t want him to be another guinea pig, honestly...Which at that point it would have been a whole new curriculum and approach, and I just, I didn’t want him, his high school years were just precious to me, and I didn’t want to sacrifice anything for that. (P10, p4, L5-8/10-12)

We had our neighborhood school that was two blocks away from our home. I have actually three of my girls there. It was really comfortable and also at the same time I was able to get to know the teachers, and the teachers got to know my children. And when we had the Focus, the three of them were ended up in different schools...It was difficult when it came to having to visit the school; parent teacher conferences; special events that I had to that like I wanted to be part of, and also that relationship the teachers, with the school itself. Two years in one school, then two years in another school is not ideal to me. (P13, p1, L3-9)

Experimental Design: Multiple changes over a short period of time can evoke innovation fatigue. Parents can be hesitant of school reform initiatives, especially those that are new and do not have a history of program success in the community, despite their success on a state or national level.

Managing Transitions: Parents appreciate program continuity and stability. Schools today have many ways that parents are expected to be engaged and support the learning of their children. In the era of both parents working and many after school family commitments, parents are appreciative of designs that are friendly-timely, convenient and well-planned.