

**Student Empowerment and School Culture:  
Perceptions of Adolescents and Their Parents/Guardians**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the College of Education

Of Aurora University

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By

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to those who have provided me with their constant love and support. To my wife, Janet, and our beautiful children, Ären, Kyrsten, and Erik, you are my inspiration and my dream for the future. This is done for you and all of the students who will be impacted exponentially as a result of these findings.

To my parents, Dirk & Judit Skogsberg and Nancy & Gary Emmick, thank you for challenging me and all of my siblings to reach for higher and better. Good was never good enough, and I now understand why. Thank you for not placating me and settling on what would be just enough to get by. You are reflections of your parents, and I can only hope to follow in your path by setting an example for my own children.

To my mother-in-law, Judith Wroblewski, with whom I get along so well, that we can always just tell it like it is. The truth hurts, but sometimes it has to.

In loving memory of Hilma G. Armstrong, Dorothy M. Brosius, Corinne E Skogsberg, and Eugene G. Wroblewski – You are true examples of lifelong learners, and an inspiration to all with whom you came into contact. I am sorry you are not here to see this day come, but I thank you for your stories of life and life's journeys.

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## **Abstract**

### Student Empowerment and School Culture: Perceptions of Adolescents and Their Parents/Guardians

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This study sought out the perceptions of middle level students and their parents as they related to empowerment through ownership in the learning community and its subsequent impact on school culture.

This qualitative study was conducted by interviewing former middle level students from a large rural suburban Midwest middle level school and their respective parents/guardians. As of the date of their interviews, the students interviewed were in the ninth or tenth grade. Data was collected by digitally recording responses and then transcribing interviews. Students were interviewed first. After each of the respective students was interviewed, their parent/guardian was invited to participate in an interview. Of the 12 students interviewed, only 10 of their respective parents/guardians participated in a subsequent interview.

During the interviews, the synthesis of perceptions caused the emergence of ideas, particularly students' connection to school as identified through the idea of

ownership in the learning community that tied directly to student empowerment. The emergence of this and the other findings were not identified until full coding of student and parent responses had taken place. The findings, however, could lead middle level school teachers and building administrators to enhance the learning experience for adolescent learners with whom they work.

The first three findings are as follow: 1. Students are empowered by establishing ownership and leadership in their learning community. 2. People make the difference. 3. Student empowerment can change school culture. Each of these aforementioned findings emerged and came as no surprise. However, a fourth finding emerged through the conducting of this study and not because of it. Specifically, it would not have been possible without the emergence of the first three findings.

Culture impacts student behavior and achievement.

Educators who consider ownership, empowerment, and culture will be better prepared to address the developmental needs of adolescents and establish a learning community that enhances the learning experience of all middle level school stakeholders.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Adolescence is an age of constant change and turmoil. As a result, consideration of the change process was made, specifically as it relates to students being active change agents within the construct of a school setting. Fullan (1999), through his extensive research on change, notes, “since no one person can possibly understand the complexities of change in dynamically complex systems, it follows that we cannot leave the responsibility to others... ..and more fundamental, the conditions for the new paradigm of change cannot be established by formal leaders working by themselves” (p. 39). Whether it is the change of a system or network, or the developmental changes many adolescents experience, support is required to ensure the transpiring change is effective and maintained, and leadership is found in all stakeholders, including adolescent students.

Since its inception, and regardless of its varying models, the middle school has struggled to meet the myriad complexities of adolescence faced by the students it serves. Volumes of research support students taking an active role in their school at the high school level, but the “stepchild” concept of middle schools does not take into account the varying differences between elementary, middle level, and high school students. “The variance here applies to their intellectual, physical, emotional, and social growth. There are probably no other three years from kindergarten through senior high school where the range of differences is as significant and pronounced” (Ahrens, 1957, p. 465). Ahrens goes on to posit that in helping students prepare for the transition to high school and the real world in general, we should be helping them

to become complex thinkers, problem solvers, and to make the connection to a context focused on the greater community.

In fall 2007, I joined a learning community and was charged with leading a building which had a tumultuous history. Within a three year span, the school and the district it is in had nearly tripled in size and were identified by the Illinois State Board of Education as having “explosive growth” (ISBE, 2008). The school’s population had grown to nearly double the original capacity of the school. The building and district administration found that for the roughly 1,150 students in the building during the 2006-2007 school year, there had been over 650 out-of-school suspensions. In addition, the building had not consistently met adequate yearly progress on the state assessment. In consultation with the district office, the administrative team (AdT) focused on reducing the frequency of out-of-school suspensions, making positive lasting changes on the culture of the school, and improving academic performance.

Additional changes to the school were taken into consideration during this change process. The building, once a middle school by philosophy, resorted back to a quasi junior high/middle school model to accommodate the student population. The previous configuration of housing grades 6, 7, and 8, was altered to address the overcrowding by moving the sixth grade population into an intermediate school with fifth grade students, Until such time as a primary grade center could be opened. The junior high school also housed roughly 150 preschool aged children. Not only was the building faced with significant changes among the originally targeted audience of middle level students, but consideration for a completely different variable had to be made in the form of a preschool program.

Subsequent review of discipline and academic performance data indicated that there had been a substantial decrease in out-of-school suspensions. Behavioral data indicated 94 suspensions and nine expulsions in the 2007-2008 school year, 75 suspensions and three expulsions in the 2008-2009 school year, and 51 suspensions with zero expulsions in the 2009-2010 school year. During each of these three years, the school's population averaged 925 students served.

As there was no apparent research with regard to the impact on a school as it related to adolescent students being active agents in their school, and student perceptions of how student empowerment through ownership impacts the school's culture, I sought insight as to how to continue positively changing middle level education, and more importantly, how to better serve adolescents.

### ***Problem Statement***

Middle school students face countless psychological and physiological changes as they progress through adolescence. These constant changes pose myriad challenges that often affect the academic and behavioral essence that we know as school culture. Impact on school culture continues to challenge the resulting focus that students have on their well-being and their subsequent learning. It is for these reasons that I studied students' perceptions of how student empowerment through ownership in the learning community impacted the school's culture.

### ***Purpose Statement***

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of middle level students and their parents/guardians of how student empowerment, through student ownership in the learning community, impacted the school's culture.

### ***Related Literature***

A study of related literature guided me to understand the perceptions of middle level students and their respective parents/guardians of how student empowerment through ownership in the school setting impacted the school culture. The literature provided me with an understanding of the historical factors that guided our society's shift to the middle school setting, current concepts of school, the concepts of empowerment in adolescent stakeholders, and behavioral development stages in adolescents. I was then able to use this research to improve school culture as it related to ensuring buy-in from all stakeholders, specifically students.

### ***Research Question***

The following question was addressed through this research: What are student and parent/guardian perceptions related to the student's impact on school culture through student empowerment, and the subsequent impact of ownership on the change in school's culture?

### ***Definition of Terms***

For the purpose of this research study, the following terms were defined to assist the reader. Other terms not specifically delineated below but requiring definitions were provided for as they arose.

*Adolescence*: The transitional period between childhood (the onset of puberty) and adulthood (conclusion of puberty), often identified roughly by the age range of early adolescence (age 10) through the age of majority (age 18); the stage in one's life wherein one is growing into adulthood (Steinberg, 2005).

*Adolescent*: An individual living through the adolescence stage of life, *see also adolescence*.

*Autonomy*: Independence; a multifaceted construct of independence for adolescence comprised of emotional, behavioral, and values-based independence (Steinberg, 2005).

*Culture*: A shared, learned symbolic system of values, beliefs, and attitudes that shape and influence beliefs and behaviors (Boswell, 2008). "It is accompanied by the creation and use of a common language regarding teaching, learning, and schooling" (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, p. 119, 2005).

*Empowerment:* The sense of having ownership and authority to provide insight and make decisions.

*Explosive growth:* (also referred to as “fast-growth”) Rapid growth, as defined by the Illinois State Board of Education, are those school districts which, during the two most recent school years, faced an enrollment increase greater than 1.5 percent for districts with more than 10,000 students, or greater than 7.5 percent or more for districts with an enrollment under 10,000 (ISBE, 2008).

*Junior High School:* A school setting specifically relegated to provide instruction and support individual development of adolescent students; usually comprised of students in grades 7, 8, and/or 9 with a core academic program that is “departmentalized.”

*Middle Level:* Any middle school or junior high comprised in any facet of grades 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9.

*Middle School:* A school setting specifically relegated to provide instruction and support individual development of adolescent students; usually comprised of students in grades 5, 6, 7, and/or 8 with course programs that are structured in academic teams, provide for exploratory experiences, and ensure advisory capacity of staff to students as the students mature and develop.

*Mission:* The component of an entity, be it a business, a profession, or an individual that addresses the question “What is the business of our business?” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

*Norms:* The code of conduct detailing behavioral expectations agreed to by members of a group as the legitimate guiding force for how business is to be conducted. Generally, acceptance of a code of conduct is made through consensus.

*Touchstone:* A living component of the school culture meant to inspire and develop critical thinking and ethical judgment (Summit School District, 2009).

*Vision:* The component of an entity, be it a business, a profession, or an individual that addresses the questions “Where are we now?” “Where are we going?” and “How are we going to get there?” It is the overarching theme that drives an organization to continuous improvement (Owens, 2004).

### ***Assumptions***

Assumptions made by me included the belief that respondents in the interviews were honest and forthright. To establish themes for qualitative research, I also made the assumption that the data collected was used to create collective themes for consideration and analysis within the dissertation.

### ***Researcher Background Statement***

As of the date of this study, I had 13 years experience working with adolescents in middle level schools, 13 years experience working with community college students, and was most recently the principal of a combined junior high school and pre-school which consisted of grades 7, 8, developmental kindergarten, and an at-risk pre-school. As the building leader, I was charged with the challenge of making sweeping academic and behavioral changes in a building that experienced previous explosive growth. I was subsequently drawn to seek insight from the students most recently served within that context.

It was critical to maintain a clear lens of focus and an open mind with the subjects and their parents/guardians. I was constantly vigilant in excluding biases and from steering participants to specific responses.

### ***Limitations/Delimitations***

The limitations to this study included a direct focus on matriculated adolescents from a middle level school in the rural suburbs of a large Midwestern city. Additionally, findings of this research were not generalized to all middle level schools in the Midwest.

This study was delimited to 12 graduates from a specific, rural, Midwestern middle-level school. Parents/guardians of the 12 graduates selected were also invited to participate in one-on-one interviews with me.

### *Significance of the Study*

I chose to study adolescents because students in this particular demographic are “caught” between childhood and adulthood. They were expected to rise to the expectations of young adults, but were often left with little freedom or locus of control to make decisions that would have impacted them. It is as if adolescent students were expected to be mature, but were not given the trust to employ that maturity. The societal significance of marginalizing adolescents led me to seek understanding in the perceptions of adolescent students and their parents/guardians on how empowering adolescent students impacts the culture of a school.

## **Chapter 2: Relevant Literature**

### ***Introduction***

The purpose of this literature review was to explore and synthesize the research related to the historical construct of junior high schools, middle schools, the philosophical approaches to teaching students of adolescent age, and the socio-behavioral development in adolescents. The literature appeared to indicate that student empowerment, impacting school culture, and the interwoven connections between these components and those of adolescent development lead to student autonomy. The literature review presented over a century of research and supported the call for students to take a more active role in their learning and learning environment.

### ***The History and Evolution of Middle Level Education***

Since the late 1800's, the field of education has focused on changing its initial construct of a 1-12 or K-12 school to a multifaceted structure containing at least two levels of study that we have come to know as elementary and secondary schools. Throughout the early 1900's, the debate raged as to how to best address the early adolescent, those children in the "awkward age," adolescents, those students in the "middle years" (Ahrens, 1957; Alexander & Williams, 1965; Lounsbury, 1960; Manning, 2000; and Noar, 1957). In 1892, the "Committee of Ten," recommended that middle aged children should be split into two segments of six years of education. However, because information was "inconclusive," the grade school model (kindergarten through grade 8 or grade 1 through grade 8), in collaboration with a

secondary school consisting of grades 9 through 12, continued (Noar, 1957). Noar also noted that another group in 1899, known as the Committee on College Entrance Requirements, emphasized that secondary education should consist of six years, beginning in the seventh grade. Again, the result was a “6-6 plan.”

To meet the ongoing demands of secondary and post-secondary education, departmentalization of grades 7 and 8 was recommended by the committee. Fifteen years after the inception of the Committee of Ten, additional grade configurations began to surface. Two specific configurations were the “6-4-2” (six grades at the elementary level, four years at the secondary, and a separate setting for upper secondary) and “6-3-3” plans (six grades at elementary, three at the middle level, and three at the secondary level) (Noar, 1957). In 1909, nearly 20 years after the recommendation to formulate such a setting by Charles W. Elliot (Lounsbury, 1960), the first three-year junior high school was established in Columbus, Ohio. The school was driven by academic demands, not the physiological and psychological needs of the students. During the next forty years, there would be a massive expansion of what were known as junior high schools (Lounsbury, 1960; Manning, 2000; and Noar, 1957).

By the early 1950s, dissatisfaction with the previous 8-4 (grade school/high school) model had grown. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) noted in a 1954 report that the strict model of elementary and secondary education did not and would not meet the needs of adolescents (George & Alexander, 2003). Nearing the end of the 1950’s, the predominant model for educational settings in the United States was that of a five to seven-year elementary

school, consisting of kindergarten or first grade through fifth or sixth grade. This was followed by a junior high school containing combinations of grades 7, 8, and 9. The experience then terminated with a senior high school setting that housed a possible combination of grades 9, 10, 11, and 12 (Lounsbury, 1960).

As demands of the “greater society” in the United States changed, so did the demands in the educational setting. Forty years of academic expectations did not seem to meet the physiological or psychological needs of students in the middle level (Alexander & Williams, 1965). Research conducted by Alexander and Williams highlighted additional findings by Margaret Mead and noted that grades included in junior high were based on age, and not physiological development. Ongoing reflection by the researchers of the time led to the proposal for a school that was more appropriate for children who were young adolescent learners (Manning, 2000). In 1950, the Bay City, Michigan schools established the first middle school constructed to focus on core curriculum, advisory systems, and exploratory courses (Manning, 2000). Two questions remained however. First, how did we best meet the needs of adolescents at the middle level? Next, was this middle level a bridge between elementary and high school a mimicked model of the high school, or a completely separate developmental stage requiring a setting and culture unique to the needs of learners?

Alexander and Williams (1965) argued that in consideration of the developmental needs of this unique age group, a “real middle school” served the needs of children aged 10-14. The environment was free from rigidity in a departmentalized setting, provided for opportunities for exploration and

independence, and empowered students by giving them a voice in decisions and a listening ear. “Its organizational arrangements should foster growth from childhood dependence towards a high degree of self-sufficiency” (Alexander & Williams, 1965, p. 219). Fullan also noted that schools driven by a moral vision, in this case meeting the developmental needs of adolescents, performed better because members strove to operate by its ideals (Fullan, 2001).

### *Adolescents and Their Social Development*

George and Alexander’s extensive research into adolescents and their impending development led to the establishment of moral developmental levels and stages. In their text, The Exemplary Middle School (2003), George, seen as one of the foremost experts on middle schools, and Alexander, known as the “Father of Middle School,” noted that at the middle level. We could see any one of three developmental levels and/or six developmental stages as identified by Kohlberg:

#### *Level One: Preconventional*

*Stage One-Punishment and Obedience: literal obedience to avoid punishment*

*Stage Two-Individual Instrumental Purpose and Exchange: serving one’s own or other’s needs for personal benefit*

#### *Level Two-Conventional*

*Stage Three-Mutual Interpersonal Expectations, Relationships, and Conformity: the desire to please others and conform to perceived norms of right and wrong.*

*Stage Four-Social System and Conscience Maintenance: doing one's duty to preserve the social order*

*Level Three: Post-Conventional and Principled*

*Stage Five-Prior Rights and Social Contract: commitment to relative social order; rules may be changed if needed*

*Stage Six-Universal Ethical Principles: action determined by conscience, based on self-chosen ethical principles (George & Alexander, 2003, pg. 16-17).*

Through their research, George and Alexander ascertained the moral developmental level of middle school students, noting:

- some will demonstrate a predominance of Stage 1;
- near age 10, some begin to enter Stage 2;
- middle school students are typically thought to be in Stage 3; and
- a very small population of middle school students will move into Stage 4 during their middle school years.

Considering Kohlberg, George, and Alexander, Berndt's 1979 research on the role of youth development identified specific correlations between adolescents and their developmental changes in conformity to peers and parents. Specifically, adolescents were more apt to conform to peers and peers' wishes than the wishes of their parents or other adult figures. This corresponded to the Stage 2 service of one's needs or the needs of others for personal benefit versus the more advanced Stages 3 and 4 approach of conforming to norms of right and wrong, or doing one's duty to maintain the social good. The research indicated that adolescents were more likely to

side with peers and peer requests than the requests of the adult figures (parents, guardians, teachers, administrators, etc.). Behaviors researched were categorized into three compartments: neutral, prosocial, and antisocial. Of alarming rate was the growth of adolescents (children in grades 6 through 9) conforming to antisocial behavior. Commensurately, there was nearly an equal level of decline in this negative behavior in later adolescents (grades 10 through 12) (Berndt, 1979). Feldman (1970) identifies the need of adolescents to be “permitted to experiment partially and somewhat leisurely with the obligations and privileges of adulthood... to alleviate such stresses” (Feldman, 1970, p. 2).

A more recent study conducted by Crick and Dodge (1994) examined “global cognitive constructs such as perspective taking, role taking, and referential communication” (pg. 74). Crick and Dodge identified four mental steps that children took prior to participating in social behaviors “(a) encoding of situational cues, (b) representation and interpretation of those cues, (c) mental search for possible responses to the situation, and (d) selection of a response” (1994, pg. 74). Again, research by Bandura and Schunk (1981), through Stanford University, opined that “[b]y making self-satisfaction conditional on a certain level of performance, individuals create self-inducements to persist in their efforts until their performances match internal standards. Both the anticipated satisfactions for matching attainments and the dissatisfactions with insufficient ones provide incentives for self-directed actions” (1981, pg. 586). What is emphasized in Bandura and Schunk’s research is the notion that competence and self-efficacy are developed through self-motivation. This means that students, particularly adolescents, improved their interest in doing

what was right as a result of the perceptions held in the direct link to the results. One may then surmise that as adolescents develop, when given the opportunity to personally connect to their own experiences through individual and group ownership, the results of undertakings were improved.

Research by Berndt, et.al (1979), and subsequently by Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) indicates that students, when given the opportunity to make a choice in a presented hypothetical scenario, adolescents (referred to as “youngsters” by Steinberg and Silverberg) came to differing conclusions which were dependent on the perception of whom the student was trying to please. In the cases where the same scenarios were presented, students often opted to seek peer approval versus adult approval. When considering peer to peer decisions, adolescents were more likely to choose a result more pleasing to close friends (or best friends) than to another peer with whom the student was acquainted. This information led me to indicate the correlation between the theoretical work conducted by Kohlberg (1981) and George and Alexander (2003), and that of the quantitative research conducted by Berndt (1979), with supplemental study by Steinberg and Silverberg (1986).

Catalano, et.al. (2004) indicated a distinct difference between bonding to an entity, such as school, versus attaching oneself to a committed social network. Consideration of this research deconstructed the socialization process into four key processes: “1) perceived opportunities for involvement in activities and interactions with others; 2) actual involvement; 3) skill for involvement and interaction, and 4) perceived rewards from involvement and interaction” (2004, pg. 252). This research, again, supported findings by Berndt (1979) and Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) in

direct correlation to Kohlberg (1981) and George and Alexander (2003). In 1994, Crick and Dodge focused their study on children's social adjustment examining perspective taking, role taking, and referential communication. Dodge's previous research noted that when children were "faced with a social situational cue, [they] engage[d] in four mental steps before enacting competent social behaviors" (Crick & Dodge, 1994, pg. 74). As described in previous studies, when students were afforded the opportunity to make decisions, they did so. As has been discussed, the indication was that decisions made were connected to peer relations versus adult or parental relations. In summary, these theorists and researchers appear to describe an environment built upon a foundation of empowering students by giving them ownership in their learning community.

### ***Middle Level Philosophy and Tenets***

Young adolescents, nearly twenty million in the United States alone, were "forming the attitudes, values, and habits of mind that will largely direct their behavior as adults" (NMSA, 2003, p. 1). In order to best support the developing needs of these young adolescents, a specific environment for adolescent learning had to be developed. "[F]or students to be successful, the school's organization, curriculum, pedagogy, and programs must be based upon the developmental readiness, needs, and interests of young adolescents" (NMSA, 2003, p. 1).

Since its establishment in 1973 the National Middle School Association (NMSA) has helped to fill the gap left by its counterparts in the realm of professional organizations. The preceding research posited that middle level education in concept

has been the outcast, caught between the elementary and senior schools of learning. NMSA identified 14 school practices and cultural characteristics that addressed this gap. Through its most recent edition of the publication *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, the NMSA laid a foundation for middle level learning environment and experience for the students served. The organization subcategorized these characteristics into school practices and cultural characteristics.

Driven by the understanding of the significant changes faced by adolescents, the NMSA recognizes “that the areas of development – intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and moral-are inexorably intertwined” (NMSA, 2003, p. 3) and focuses on the following components of practices and culture:

*Facets of School Culture*

1. Shared vision
  2. High expectations
  3. Courageous and collaborative leadership
  4. Adult advocate for each student
  5. Safe environment
  6. Knowledgeable educators
  7. School-initiated partnerships
  8. Active learning
- (NMSA, 2003, p. 7).

*Programmatic Characteristics*

1. Guidance and support
2. Health, wellness, and safety
3. Multiple learning and teaching approaches
4. Organizational structures
5. Assessment and evaluation
6. Relevant, challenging, integrative, exploratory curriculum

It should be noted that the facets of school culture posited by the NMSA must be present in order for the programmatic characteristics to develop and survive. In each case above, the premises were previously synthesized into a short list as described by the Carnegie Task force in 1989:

- create small communities,
- teach a core academic program,
- ensure success for all students by eliminating tracking,

- empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle-grade students,
- staff middle schools with experts in teaching adolescents,
- foster the health and fitness of students,
- engage families through school initiated activities to take an active role, and
- make school to community connections to support the students.

As mentioned by all parties in the inception process of creating a middle-level learning environment, the functions of integration, exploration, guidance, differentiation, socialization, and articulation were the culture that guide the program to success (Gruhn and Douglass, 1956).

### ***School Culture - Visions, Missions, and Touchstones***

Practitioners and researchers have consistently opined that a shared vision of an organization at its inception is what allows an organization to grow and thrive. Fullan, et.al. (1990) noted, specifically, that this is the foundation of school improvement. Synonymously, the State University of New York at Albany noted that the “district-level vision is clearly articulated in terms of what it looks like in classrooms and how it will affect student achievement” (Wilcox and Angelis, 2007, p. 19), thus guiding school improvement in terms of both culture and academic performance. Elbot and Fulton (2008) specifically identified the differences between a vision, mission, and touchstone. The vision of an organization “states its goals”

where as the mission of an organization “states the purpose of the organization.” A touchstone, however, “expresses the ‘how’ of the organization” (2008, p. 18).

Schein, as cited in Kariuki (2008, p. 25), defined culture as the “deeper level of basic assumptions, values, and beliefs that become shared and taken granted for as the organization continues to be successful.” Logically, then, the vision, mission, and touchstone were interwoven threads that shape and form the tapestry of the school and is known as the school’s culture. School culture is something that is felt. More specifically, school culture is something that could be observed. Think of each component as another lens of focus with which to look through. We saw that observing the goals through a global perspective emphasized the codependency. The goals were driven by the mission, and the goals drove the mission. The touchstone, however, was not long term in its focus like its counterparts-the vision and mission. Elbot and Fulton posited that the touchstone was, “both academic and ethical-that a school community seeks to develop in its members, and it serves as a guide for daily thinking and action” (2008, p. 2). In keeping with the analogy of a tapestry, the touchstone was the common thread that held the culture together and took its community members to task.

Some recent action research supported this premise. One of the premier districts in implementing touchstones, Summit School District in Frisco, Colorado, took the lead to “incorporate a shared set of universal values and aspirations for all members of the school community” to hold the district together and “keep them focused, even during turbulent times” (2009, p. 1). The distillation of each school’s touchstone included the collaboration of all stakeholders, especially the active

participation of students. Appelsies and Fairbanks made specific note of student ownership within the culture of a building, quoting students in their observations, “[t]his is where we work together” “[t]his is where we help each other,” and “[t]his is where we conversate” (1997, p. 70).

The action research by Appelsies and Fairbanks (1997) noted that part of what we called “school culture” and “student ownership” in the building was reflective of a fostered, democratic environment, a premise that was of vital importance for adolescents to experience as they lived through this stage of intellectual maturation. The fostered, democratic environment linked the aforementioned needs of developing adolescents. The question remained then, how did each stakeholder play a role in school culture?

### ***Change of School Culture & Change in Theory***

With any change process, there is an inherent feeling that something is “wrong.” Simpson echoed the connotation “that culture and change are antithetical, that change threatens stability, predictability, and comfort of the culture” (1990, p. 35). Fullan (1993) emphasized that if the change process was addressed as a political process, what stakeholders faced was stagnation, frustration, discontent, disconnectedness, defensiveness, and superficial changes that resulted in a return to the status quo.

### *Ownership, Empowerment, and Stakeholders*

If we recognized that the change process as a whole, let alone the change of a school culture, was an ongoing process—a living entity analogous to the concept of the Constitution of the United States—then we had to accept that culture and the process of change had to be nurtured. Research repeatedly noted buy-in from all stakeholders and lists those in the school community as administrators, teachers, non-certified staff, parents/guardians, and community members. Unfortunately, and of particular concern for the children impacted by this perceived bias, the students were consistently ignored, yet they were impugned for changes while being excluded from the change process itself. This seemed to be in direct contradiction to published research by Fullan (1999) which focused on collaborative cultures that fostered diversity while building trust, provoked anxiety and contained it, engaged in knowledge creation, combined connectedness with open-endedness, and fused the spiritual, political, and intellectual (p. 37). How could we possibly foster collaborative cultures when students were not given ownership in their school, in part or in whole, with any initiative?

Dorman, et.al (1985) raised this point regarding adolescents and their role in schools and developmental needs, which specifically called for “diversity, self-exploration and self-definition, meaningful participation in their schools and communities, positive social interaction with peers and adults, physical activity, competence and achievement, and structure and clear limits” (p. 46). Research conducted by Way, Reddy & Rhodes (2007) emphasized the tenet that students’ beliefs during middle school years formed the base from which they would grow into

adulthood and be positive or negative. This was specifically true as it related to students perceiving a sense of autonomy and having the opportunity for autonomy. The researchers found “the intercept of opportunities for student autonomy was significantly associated with the intercept of depressive symptoms and self-esteem and the intercept and slope of behavior problems” (Way, Reddy & Rhodes, 2007, p. 206). This direct correlation between student autonomy and behavior problems indicated that there was a significant impact on school culture whether or not students perceived that they had autonomy. The key was that the students had the opportunity to be autonomous. Way, et.al. emphasized that “students’ beliefs of the school climate appeared to be important not just during the transition from elementary to middle school, but also during middle school itself” (2007, p. 209).

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

“Qualitative data... are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 1).

This chapter addresses the foundation for researching the phenomenology of student empowerment. Methodologically, this study was founded in qualitative data, designed to give me insight into the perception of students and their respective parents on the impact of student empowerment on a school’s culture. Research in a phenomenological framework draws meaning from the insight of a specific audience and their experiences from specific events that they identify as being applicable to the questions raised (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982).

The concept of researching a topic qualitatively raised the question as to why one should not conduct the study quantitatively. Anselm Strauss posited that interviews, transcripts of meetings, field observations, and other documents such as diaries and letters “provide indispensable data for social research” and “without grounding in data, that theory will be speculative, hence ineffective” (Strauss, 1987, p. 1). Strauss went on to indicate that in order for one to conduct a qualitative study, the researcher must understand the foundational components to the act of qualitatively studying a phenomenon.

#### ***Complexity***

Interpretations during the study evolved, meaning that the initial complex interpretations made caused the research to evolve as the study continued. As a result

of the depth created in a phenomenological study, there was an ever increasing strand of links between themes that came forth. Consequently, the themes that evolved forced me to look at the data collected through multiple lenses of foci, micro and macroscopic, and all variations between.

### ***Experiential Data***

Due to the complexity that individuals presented, each subject's perceptions provided me the opportunity to make comparisons and find variations. The use of experiential data was limited within a construct of parameters through collecting and coding data, combined with memoing.

### ***Induction, Deduction, and Verification***

In order to ground the data in theory, the processes of induction, deduction, and verification were an interwoven tapestry of the interpretive process throughout the study that led me to hypothesize and verify such a hypothesis in the findings as they were presented through the collection and coding of the data (Strauss, 1987).

The qualitative approach in this case was used to assess affective components believed to exist by students and their parents. "In the affective realm the use of observational methods is based on the assumption that it is possible to infer affective characteristics from overt behavior, physiological reactions, or both" (Anderson and Bourke, 2000, p. 52-3). Anderson and Bourke opined that interviewing subjects provided for additional breadth and depth, because subjects' responses can "move

into other areas” or provide “for more detail as appropriate” (Anderson and Bourke, 2000, p. 60).

Finally, due to the myriad variables presented in a study of this phenomenon, a qualitative study was the best fit. “Individual’s consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people” (Seidman, 1998, p. 1). Seidman noted, specifically, “[i]nterviewing provides access to the context of people’s behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior” (Seidman, 1998, p. 4).

The balance of this chapter reviews the components of the methods used to conduct this study including the research question, ethics and study as approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), data collection and analysis, confidentiality, trustworthiness, and initial biases.

### ***Research Question***

Through my own personal and professional experiences, I sought to gain insight into how to impact the culture of the school I led most effectively. Research supported the premise that the building leader, generally described as the “principal” is the individual with the responsibility for ensuring a sound learning environment (Whitaker, 2003). Other literature supported the position that we must empower all of the stakeholders who will be impacted in order to ensure buy-in and successful implementation of any change effort (Fullan, 1993 and 1999). Stronge, et.al. (2008) posited “[s]uch a network of collaboration has the potential to strengthen the school

in multiple ways” (2008, p. 18). Marzano (2005) and Schlecty (2001) specified that this collaboration, when focused on the shared vision, can significantly impact the culture of any enterprise. In this case, the enterprise is a school. Finally, Summit School District, located in Frisco, Colorado, has delved beyond the constructs of a mission and vision to establish school touchstones, honing in on the insight of all stakeholders, including students, to incorporate “a shared set of universal values and aspirations for all members of the school community” (Summit, 2009). All of this research led me, as a practitioner, to seek insight to the following question: What are student and parent/guardian perceptions regarding how student empowerment, through ownership in the learning community, impacts school culture?

### ***Research Design***

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand what students and their respective parents/guardians perceived regarding how student empowerment, through ownership in the learning community, impacted school culture.

In conducting the interviews, and in an effort to ensure reliability in responses and findings, Seidman (1998) drew focus to three components associated with interviewing as qualitative research. He noted specifically that the focus drawn should be on life history, details of experience, and reflection on the meaning of information gained. This thought was supported in Kvale’s (1996) *Seven Stages of an Interview Investigation*. Seidman’s findings provided for the “what and why” referenced by Kvale in his first step of thematizing. Design of the research process

followed with specific consideration for the “moral implications of the study” (Kvale, 1996, pg. 88). Kvale’s processes of interviewing, transcribing, and analyzing interviews come next, accounting for reliability. This was done in part by establishing what Seidman (1998) called the “interview guide” and using it in conjunction with the coding of transcribed information along with any memoing collected. Verifying findings through reliability and validity confirmed that the data collected are a reflection on the intention of the study and its correlation to the research question. In Chapter 4, I reported and defended the findings of the study (Kvale, 1996).

### *Sample*

Participants were selected from a list of graduates from a select middle level school. After being selected and invited to participate in an interview, one parent/guardian of each student was also invited to participate in an interview. The students selected were chosen completely at random without any preference to any demographic. The subjects selected are graduates (former students) specifically chosen from the building previously served by me. The 12 student subjects were selected from school rosters comprised of graduates from the 2007-2008, 2008-2009, and 2009-2010 eighth grade classes. Using a computerized random number selector, I sent invitations to those students whose numbers were chosen based on a pool of roughly 1,200 students (approximately 400 students from each graduating class over the last three years). One parent/guardian from each of the student subjects was invited to participate in an interview. Only 10 out of 12 parents invited to participate

were interviewed. I kept a journal to reflect on each interview, memoing additional insight obtained through reflections. The journal assisted me in the organization of data interpretation and the final production of data analysis.

### ***Human Subjects and the Institutional Review Board***

Tantamount to successfully completing a study grounded in student perceptions is the concept of confidentiality. Twelve graduates from an elementary school district who are now attending high school were selected to participate in interviews. Selection of the subjects was through random numbered selection based on three class lists, each comprised of approximately 400 students, and totaling roughly 1,200 subject candidates. The list of subject candidates was provided by the school district in which the subject candidates formerly attended a middle level school prior to matriculation to high school. Permission and understanding to use this information was granted and approved by the school district superintendent with the understanding that student anonymity would be maintained.

In addition, one parent/guardian of each student was invited to participate in an interview. No conflict of interest or power-based relationship between me and any subject interviewed existed. Informed consent and assent by parents/guardians and students respectively was obtained. This was done prior to interviewing participants separately and in a neutral, comfortable, and discreet location chosen by the participants. Subjects received a copy of the informed consent document and were reminded that they might withdraw from the study at any time. Informed consent

included permission to digitally record interviews and confirmation of consent was given orally on each participant's recorded interview.

Collection of responses was done on a digital audio recorder. I was the only individual who accessed the recordings and the respective transcripts. All print documents related to responses were locked in a location to which only I had access. Digital voice recordings were locked with an electronic security code known only to me. All recordings, along with print and electronic copies of transcripts, will be destroyed after a period of three years. Information collected will be used solely for this study and no other research.

Interview questions, in the form of an interview guide (see Appendix A), were developed. Each interview was designed to be 90 minutes in length.

### ***Ensuring Anonymity and Pseudonyms***

Prior to interviews commencing, pseudonyms for subjects were established to maintain anonymity. It is noted here, and again in Chapter 4, that all names, references to communities, correlations to schools, and any other possible name affiliation have been modified to protect the identity of the subjects. All names in this research study are pseudonyms.

### ***Data Collection***

Supplemented by memoing in a journal, the primary source for data was the digital recordings and subsequent transcription of interviews conducted. I used memoing in a journal, reflecting on interviews in a separate log, and the review of

printed transcripts to organize, interpret, and triangulate responses provided. The journal provided for the recording of nonverbal and other identifying factors that I was not able to capture through the recordings.

Student participants were provided with a \$10.00 gift certificate/gift card as compensation for their time. It was made clear in the interview that the gift was provided as compensation for time only and not for any responses. Participants were asked to provide responses that are “as candid and forthright as possible” (Patton, 2002, p. 412).

As student subjects were interviewed individually, prior to each interview commencing, student subjects were provided the opportunity to have his/her parent/guardian present. When student subjects chose to have their parent/guardian present during their interview, the parent/guardian was instructed to allow his/her child to answer independently without guidance from the parent/guardian. The response from the student was his/her own, and was as independent of parent/guardian influence as possible.

### ***Data Analysis***

This study and the analysis of the collected data was based on what Patton (2002) referred to as an emergent design. The themes that came from the coding of data collected were seen as an emergence of the repeatedly reviewed responses of participants. Final synthesis of findings did not take place without thorough analysis and disaggregation of the data.

When the transcripts and journal entries were coded, I coded for every detail, identifying a large number of codes that would later be regrouped and recoded into more general topics. One hundred twenty-six original free codes were identified, but later reduced and recoded to account for more specific codes, reducing the number of free codes to 81.

In addition to reducing the number of free codes, a more specific focus was given to the top 21 codes ranging from 38 to 125 for the number of times the code was referenced. After considering the tree node for empowerment, this particular tree node was recoded to place “empower” as a child node to the parent node of “leadership.”

### ***Trustworthiness***

Validity of the findings presented came about through the process of triangulation of additional data. This additional data included audio recordings of interviews, transcribed interviews, memoing, journaling, “checking for the consistency of what people say about the same thing over time” (Patton, 2002, p. 559), and member checking by providing the opportunity for those who were interviewed to review the transcripts of their interview.

### ***Conclusion***

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the perspective of middle level students to identify opportunities for empowerment through ownership in the learning community and the impact of empowerment on school culture. Findings

were expected to assist all stakeholders, specifically the students. Gaining clarity through stories and personal insight emphasized the importance of conducting a qualitative study. If it was the culture of the building that laid the foundation for success, and all stakeholders were responsible for the culture of the learning environment, logic would dictate that educational practitioners not only needed to hear what students were saying, but to seek additional insight from students as key stakeholders, and more specifically, owners in their education and educational setting.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### *Introduction*

This study identified student transformation as a result of empowerment through ownership in the learning community. There was a change in spirit and culture of the learning environment. An overarching unanticipated finding most likely resulting from the change in culture was an improvement in academic and behavioral performance.

While the administrative team saw a dramatic change in student behavior as compared to previous years, we found that the students struggled with the transition from a free-for-all environment where the idea of accountability was a brief stay at home impacting attendance and learning, further sending a message that a perceived “vacation” was a reward for inappropriate behavior, to an atmosphere of accountability and support for personal and academic growth.

My entry as principal was fraught with an untenable atmosphere of chaos and academic mediocrity. Quantitatively, the number of referrals, suspensions, retentions, summer school attendees, and a drop in state and local assessment performance all supported the premise that the school had to change. Qualitatively, through anecdotal conversations, various stakeholders had shared with me that the school culture was destructive. As identified later in this chapter, staff feared for their safety and the safety of the students, parents feared for the safety of their children, and students were in a survival mode living one day at a time not knowing what to expect other than a free for all when they entered the building.

To combat this situation, backed by research, I had to prioritize the steps necessary to make a lasting change. Understanding that addressing behavior and academics might help student performance on a short-term basis led me to focus first and foremost on the culture of the building. In doing this, any additional change would be met in an atmosphere set to support and sustain a lasting change initiative to which the stakeholders consented.

As a result, and as the driving force behind this study, I chose to focus on the change in culture. In spite of my initial plan to focus squarely on culture, the data indicated a subsequent change in both behavior and academic achievement of the students. It is noted here, that while this change was not targeted, the subsequent indication of the change in student behavior and achievement was so significant that this, too, was identified as a finding, and subsequently addressed for future implications in this chapter. That a change in culture positively impacts student achievement and behavior emerged as a result of and not because of this study was an unexpected finding

Since the target for investigation in this study was the impact that ownership and empowerment had on school culture, it was first necessary to establish whether students and/or their parents/guardians felt that the students had ownership and were empowered to make a difference in their learning community. Once this was established, as indicated in Finding 1 “Ownership Through Empowerment,” consideration was given as to what catalyzed this ownership and empowerment. From the feedback provided predominantly by the student subjects, a feeling that “People Make the Difference,” as noted in Finding 2, helped to move the school’s

learning community forward in establishing student ownership and empowerment. Subsequently, the next finding that emerged made the connection between ownership, empowerment, and the change in school culture. As identified in Finding 3 “Empowerment Changes Culture,” we saw that both students and teachers were able to become active stakeholders, but more importantly, that students were able to have and use an active voice in improving the culture of the building.

The first three findings address the initial scope and focus of this study; however, a fourth and unexpected finding emerged. In deference to the original design Finding 4 surfaced as the greatest finding of all. The fact that ownership and empowerment impacted school culture was a confirmation of beliefs I formed as a result of conducting research and synthesizing the current literature. The implication of ownership and empowerment having an impact on student behavior and academic achievement was a significant surprise.

The remainder of Chapter 4 is comprised of a series of vignettes to specifically assist the reader in conceptualizing the long-term changes and resulting impact on school culture as perceived by middle level students and their respective parents/guardians as they relate to these findings.

***Finding 1: Student Empowerment Through Ownership AND Leadership***

Ownership in the learning community was brought about through the empowerment of stakeholders. Significant change was possible when all stakeholders had a sense of and fully embraced the idea of taking ownership in the learning community, and actually did it. All students, and all but one of the parents

interviewed, mentioned that the school provided the opportunity to take ownership within the school by empowering the students to take an active role. In most cases, this active role was in some form of a leadership capacity. Of particular interest, some students took a lead role in one activity, and were an active participant but not a leader in another activity.

The sense of ownership in the learning community and leadership were identified by many students. During an interview with Abigail Carey, she alluded to the foundation that was laid for her and her classmates at the junior high school she attended. Based on her perception of student interaction and behavior at the subsequent high school where most of her junior high classmates now attend school, there was a clear indication that empowerment and ownership were a unique opportunity at her junior high. Empowerment and ownership were apparently not present at the other middle level schools that fed into the current high school, and this, to Abigail, was noticeable through observing the behaviors of her classmates from other middle level schools. As a reminder, Dorman's (1985) research emphasized that adolescents needed to be in a school where they could experience "diversity, self-exploration and self-definition, meaningful participation in their schools and communities, positive social interaction with peers and adults" (p. 46).

*I think that students from Jakobs Junior High know that Jakobs is our school, and it's always going to be our school no matter what. And students from Grace Junior High, they're great students – don't get me wrong. But I don't think they see things as we do. They think of that school as a place where you need to go to get an education, and that's about it. [They think that] school*

*isn't a place where you can succeed in skills such as leadership and other opportunities such as that. (Abigail Carey, li 423-429)*

Additional insight from Delbert Lowery emphasized the self-imposed expectations of the student body on having ownership in a school and the connection between the thoughts from Abigail Carey and the research from Dorman (1985).

*It's our school. It's the student body's school. [I]t makes me feel I have a sense of ownership and that it's my school and my job to take care of it and make sure everyone does their part. (Delbert Lowery, li 297 & 300-301)*

The connection was made here to Kohlberg's research as referenced in Chapter 3 of this document. Students, over a two year period, transitioned from a "Level 2, Stage 3" where students had "mutual interpersonal expectations" to "Level 3, Stages 5 and 6" where students entered into a "social contract and embraced the premise of making decisions based on "universal ethical principles" (George & Alexander, 2003, pgs. 16-17). In Stage 3, students embraced a sense of peer-based conformity, and had "the desire to please others and conform to perceived norms of right and wrong" (George & Alexander, 2003, pgs. 16-17). However, when students transitioned, they had a "commitment to social order" and understood that "rules may be changed if needed" (George & Alexander, 2003, pgs. 16-17) for the common good. In addition, "actions determined by conscience" were based on "self-chosen ethical principles" (George & Alexander, 2003, pgs. 16-17). Students moved beyond feeling the need to please others and were committed to holding themselves and their peers responsible for the choices they made. By halting the marginalization of students and providing them with the freedom to grow and explore with support, the

previously perceived social consciousness of adolescent development of children can be accelerated.

Constance Holden's mother echoed the sense of ownership as was shared by Delbert Lowery.

*She (Constance) brought the kids together. She helped in making them feel like – you know, if you're going to complain, do something to change it. If you're not going to do something and participate in the process don't complain. She fostered that within the kids.* (Mother of Constance Holden, li 262-264)

More than one parent saw the significant impact of the aforementioned growth in the students and the significance of growth in adolescence as a major step in transitioning to adulthood.

*I felt that the junior high was definitely a stepping stone educationally, but I also felt that it really started to push the kids to be even more independent and [school became] even more of a stepping stone to adulthood and responsibility, which is very important.* (Mother of Abigail Carey, li 100-102)

Denver Franks summed up the feeling that all of the students alluded to, and which lead to the formulation of the second and third findings in this study.

“It's our school. It's the students' school. It's, you know, it takes one to make a difference and one to mess it up” (Denver Franks, li 162-163).

While there were some students who did not take on a leadership role in student activities, they were still involved. One student identified the feeling of

frustration at initially getting classmates to recognize the opportunity that they had been presented.

*At first, it was kind of, not a lost hope, it's just how are we going to get this many kids to be completely committed to saying that [this] is our school. I think after not giving up, and wanting it so bad because I was convinced that it was the best thing for our school that it definitely worked... [W]hen we're all working together and we're all committed, it made everything a lot better.*  
*(Constance Holden, li 101-107)*

### ***The Charge for Change***

The foregoing vignettes encapsulated the need, as prescribed by the district administration, to make significant change. As a primary focus, I as the building principal, collaborated with the other building administrators, two assistant principals, and the building's leadership team, comprised of team leaders from each academic team and representatives from virtually every content area in the building. Through professional dialogue, it was determined that the students had a great deal of inconsistency in expectations, both academic and behavioral. There was a perception of inconsistency on the part of all stakeholders.

### ***Year 1: Building The Plane In-flight***

The small, rural community in which this study was done faced similar facets of change that many communities throughout the nation also faced, not the least of which was a housing boom and exploding growth. This district in particular had just

over 1,500 students during the 2002-2003 school year. And, within five school years, the district-wide student population had more than doubled, sitting at nearly 3,300 students. The buildings in the district had not been designed to house such large numbers of students. The middle-level school, serving grades six through eight, was designed to house a capacity of 650 students; however, by the spring of 2007, the building boasted over 1,110 students, double its designed capacity (Skogsberg, personal account).

In addition to this rapid growth, the building faced large numbers of retirements during the school years preceding the 2007-2008 school year. The change in leadership also came into play. I would be the third principal to serve as the building's leader in as many years. With the change in leadership at the building level, attrition of teachers, and explosive growth of the student population, the learning community was teetering on the verge of chaos.

To add to the existing significant population challenges, the various municipal bodies that governed the approval of home development had set the district up for continued explosive growth. Unpublished projections based on the "Cohort Survival Method" indicated that the district would again be close to increasing its student population by another 1,500 students by the start of the 2014 school year (Ehlers, Inc., 2010).

### ***A Leadership Team Forms***

A new superintendent took the helm in the summer of 2007, and a search for a new "junior high" principal began. During the course of the search, the

superintendent emphasized, along with other administrators and board members who participated in the search process, that the sheer number of student referrals to the administration, let alone the nearly 650 out-of-school suspensions issued during the 2006-2007 school year was proof enough that one of the main charges would be to bring order to a building that was completely out of control.

Becoming acquainted with the current culture of the building was my first task. The administrative team was comprised of me, an assistant principal-who had served in various roles as a leader among her peers, and a dean/athletic director-who spent his entire first career as a U.S. Army officer. Together, we brought a vast array of leadership skills and experiences. It is because of this variety in leadership experience that we were all the better in how we guided staff and students to improve. We had no idea at the time just how vital our collective differences would benefit the students. With Beth as my assistant and Bob as my dean and athletic director, we sat down to discuss our individual strengths, weaknesses, experiences, and perspectives on where the climate of the building was, where we were going to take it, and how we were going to get there.

Beth had more experience in the building than Bob or I, having spent her entire career up to that point at one school. She had seen change from the “middle school” model to the renegotiated, contract-approved model of the “junior high.” Beth had also seen tremendous differences in the previous two administrations, but emphasized that as a teacher, she never quite felt the support of the administration to either make change, or help change occur. She believed teachers were disheartened,

frustrated, and felt as if they were backed into a corner and living in a constant state of survival mode.

Bob, on the other hand, was much newer to education. He had spent quite a bit of time in suburban school districts, and one in particular, that housed the alternative school for the area. In his experience, Bob had also only ever worked with one principal in this building, who himself had only one year of administrative experience prior to moving into the principalship. Bob put it best, “We each have our own way of leading-some of us just lead better than others” (Skogsberg, personal account). I could not have agreed more with this sentiment, and this concept of leadership became the crux of many administrative team conversations.

Getting our footing as a team would be an arduous task. The night of the appointment to our positions, Beth and I were joined by five new teachers. And due to the parameters set at the district level, a complete change to the master schedule had to be made, on top of consulting with intermediate school teachers to acquire accurate recommendations for course placement for incoming students, meeting with teachers interested in taking on the role of team leader, reestablishing some measure of teacher empowerment and ownership, getting the virtually defunct parent organization back up and running, and consulting with community stakeholders.

We spent countless hours, and in some cases worked 21 hour days to make sure we were ready to welcome the students with completed schedules, balanced class lists, and developed expectations of change. Beth and Bob shared with me that the only thing that had been consistent about the activities at the building was that there was no consistency. This contradicted the research found and emphasized in Chapter

3 of this study. Students, particularly adolescents, needed consistency-in structure, expectations, rewards, and consequences (George & Alexander, 2003). This was a priority topic of conversation with the Building Leadership Team (BLT); however, it was not the first. Based on guidance from Beth and Bob, we established the importance of a learning community, were clear on our norms of collaboration, and defined who we were as a community of educators and learners.

It became all too clear during our initial meetings with the BLT that teachers lived on edge, did not know what to expect, and felt that they had to sacrifice their personal lives for their professional careers. This had to stop. We all believed then, and I know the staff believes now, that “family comes first.” This was one of our many nonnegotiable norms of collaboration. Other norms included:

- being open-minded to suggestions, and any suggestion offered was received with positive presuppositions (no idea was a bad idea);
- we thought globally and with a vision formed by multiple foci; silence on the part of anyone did not indicate compliance or acceptance;
- we did not sit in fear of adverse consequences for being candid in our feedback and suggestions to each other;
- consensus was a result of at least 80% acceptance of a recommended course of action, and any dialogue or discussion that resulted in consensus was met with 100% support (we had to maintain a consistency in support and present a united front with students and parents); and
- we trusted in one another.

This was not a grandiose philosophy or set of beliefs. Rather, these norms of collaboration defined what and how we made the school better for the students and ourselves (Fullan, 1999). This was how we went about our business of educating our students.

### ***Expectations***

In addition to discussing, developing, and agreeing to our norms of collaboration, we also needed to define what change we expected within the school from the students and from the staff. Four categories were presented to the team leaders, and they in turn discussed them with their teams with the thought of bringing ideas back to BLT for dialogue, discussion, and a final decision. *As a side note, I think it is important to address the distinct difference between a dialogue and a discussion. For the purpose of this research, and the terminology used herein, a dialogue is a conversation that is a sharing of insight, information, and opinions, but does not result in a decision. A dialogue is designed to be the precursor to a decision. A discussion, however, is the conversation that results in a decision.* We needed the teachers and staff to address what they wanted the students to believe differently, know differently, and do differently. We had to determine what our immediate, short-term, and long-term needs were in order to meet these needed changes. Working with the entire staff, upon completing this activity, we identified the following key points for student outcomes:

Table 4.2 – Key Focus Points for Student Outcomes

<b>Know Differently</b>	Content wise
	Prepared for life
	Authentic learning and engagement with applications

	Think globally (with multiple foci)
	Use prior knowledge
<b>Believe Differently</b>	All students can be successful
	Overcome negative peer pressure
	Read for importance
	One must be educated physically as well as mentally
	All students learn in different ways
	Self-directed learning
	Self-advocates
	Freedom and trust to discover new and interesting things
<b>Do Differently</b>	Care for others and act on it
	Student involvement
	We should do something as a learning community for the larger community
<b>Next Steps</b>	Critical thinking
	Develop a culture of trust
	Model expected behavior
	No fear of adverse consequences; with the caveat that consequences are naturally occurring for choices that are made
	Get involved
	Self assurance
	This is a community
	We are a team
	It is okay to be “critical friends.” We can be candid with each other, and the students about expectations and disappointments
	Cognitive coaching – we have to be willing to coach and be coached – colleague to colleague, teacher to student, and student to teacher

These key characteristics were vitally important, as the staff and students relied on the characteristics as a guiding force and set of outcomes for the learning community. The need for these characteristics was emphasized by the subjects. Discipline, or at least consistency in expectations regarding discipline, was virtually non-existent as indicated by Amina Santos.

*In sixth grade, no one really cared. I used to ditch class all the time, and no one would be in the hallway to say anything. Seventh grade, they tried to get*

*strict and they started expelling everyone I knew-eighth grade, expelling! It was just strict. You couldn't do anything* (Amina Santos, li 145-148).

We continued our conversations with the BLT, turning our focus to many of the “next steps” listed above. Included in this course of action was researching and establishing ways to reach these new key student characteristics. As an example, student-led conferences were used to develop self-assurance, critical thinking, a sense of trust and support between the students and staff through cognitive coaching. While the student-led conferences (SLCs) would be piloted by one academic team in the fall, the balance of the student body would be prepared to conduct SLCs during our spring conference time. This one step would be an initial introduction for students into taking ownership, in this case, of their learning. Students analyzed their prior performance, set future goals, and reflected on their growth toward those goals prior to conferencing with their parent/guardian. The additional incidents listed in Chapter 4 were not created by staff, but were used by the staff and administration as pathways to guide students to these new key characteristics. The vignette of each incident below has been linked back to Table 4.2, referencing the characteristics applicable. In some cases, similar scenarios were grouped together to address comparable key characteristics.

The BLT also began challenging itself and our colleagues throughout the building by asking other vitally important questions such as:

- “How can what we are reporting to parents be better connected to standards?”

- “Is the way in which we are communicating to parents presently painting an effective picture of student growth, knowledge, and learning overall to the necessary recipients?”
- “To whom does this information go, and what purpose does this information serve?”
- “Is this information being used as we intend it to be used?”

*Formative Assessment to Cause Change in Culture* (Fullan, 1999)

Upon further reflection, we discovered that not only were we not using student data effectively to drive our decisions, we were not relying on the data as part of our conversation with parents when providing support and guidance as it related to student learning. So, for the first time ever, the building would host a multi-day data retreat, looking at “big picture” items in assessment data, and we would begin targeting student support needs through this data review. It should be noted that up to this point, data regarding behavior-other than that data indicating the number of suspensions-had also not been collected or used to guide future decisions. As an administrative team, we then collectively decided to track student behavior related to office-based behavior management (usually those incidents which resulted in an office referral). This recording of information would lead the staff to consider what else could be done to help impact the behavior of the students, and subsequently the culture of the building.

Who of us in this field would not hold true to the tenet that students should be held accountable for the choices they make? Of greater importance, however, was

the subsequent conversation that took place regarding behavioral expectations of the students, support to be provided by the staff, and the modeling of expected behavior by the staff to the students. Through this initial conversation, and many subsequent conversations, it came to light that if the teachers expected the students to take on the responsibility of improving the school culture, they would have to begin by trusting the students to make the improvements. To say this was a leap of faith on the part of the staff is an understatement. The belief in students would have to start at the top with the building administration, supported by the district administration. The building administration then supported the faculty and staff. It could no longer be the norm to marginalize students as stakeholders. We would not see how vitally important this tenet was until the first day of school. The faculty and staff had to believe that the students could and would have as much impact on the school as the staff did. The staff would be trusted to do so by giving the students the ownership they thirsted for and so richly deserved. Of vital importance to all of this however, was ensuring that the staff was actually modeling the expectations for which they held the students accountable.

An outcome from this conversation was the idea that if the teachers needed information on expectations that were clear and consistent, one could then surmise that it was of even greater importance to provide similar information to the students. And, the best time to do this would be during an all school assembly so all students could hear the same message. So, on the first day of school, we hosted the first all school assembly of the year and laid out from day one the expectations we had for the students, and emphasized that we also needed to know and understand the

expectations the students had of us. The expectations from the students required the student body to take the initiative and vocalize the needs they had as individuals and collectively.

### ***First Day of School***

The first day of school arrived, and we believed we were ready to set a new tone. While the faculty was waiting for students to enter the building and head to their first period classes prior to the all school assembly for the year, a fight broke out which nearly transitioned into a mob action. Most administrators that I have worked with would have immediately suspended the students involved for the prescribed number of days pursuant to board policy. Consequences were sure to be issued after a thorough investigation; however, it was of far greater importance for students to hear a clear, definitive, and consistent message from the very beginning. Behavior such as that witnessed on the first day of school, not 15 minutes prior to our first all-school assembly, would not be tolerated.

Time would only tell whether the change would come, but as our teacher training courses embedded in us, we must embrace these “teachable moments” with gusto. As we began our conversation with the seventh and eighth grade students, Beth, Bob, and I emphasized expectations we had collectively as an administrative team, but noted that these expectations echoed those of the staff. Our expectations would also require students to take ownership of the building. I used the analogy of the students’ respective homes, asking one student, then another, and another until the assembly had heard that when talking about home, it was “my house” or “my home”.

We expected students to believe that this was “their school” and they had to take ownership, lead by example, get involved, and make a change. It was from this point on that whenever we held an assembly, the students would hear me bellow out, “Whose school is this?” They would respond fervently, “OUR SCHOOL!” only to be followed up immediately by me with, “How many does it take?” The students unanimously would say, “ONE!” As I reflected and considered what that “Power of One” came to mean, I too grew and understood that it was one student or a collective one, *e pluribus unum*-out of many, one. I prided myself on the fact that anytime we had an outsider enter the building to visit with staff and/or students alike, any student in the building could be asked those two questions, and they would answer accordingly. More importantly, when answering, the students believed that the school was theirs and it really only took one student to make a difference. I hoped that with this as our “touchstone,” the students would grow into a unified body of adolescents willing to do whatever it took to make things better for themselves and other students for years to come.

During this same assembly, we discussed having respect for oneself as well as for others, and that began with one’s appearance. Students heard that they should “dress for the job they wanted.” Saggy pants, baby doll shirts, midriff shirts, short-shorts and mini-skirts, displaying of undergarments were not acceptable. And while this change was slow going, what was first seen was a specific change in our student athletes as they began to dress up for game days. Our student fan club expanded its use of spirit wear and shared in the game days by dressing in school colors.

### ***Self-Reflection***

I knew, based on what I had been told by staff, that the school was out of control. Unfortunately, I had no idea just how bad things were until I witnessed the foregoing scenario. The fight before school on the first day led me to undergo significant self reflection in consideration as to what had been done up to this point by previous building leaders, and what had to be done with a new team of administrators, teachers, and students. It also meant getting parents and community members involved. As a staff, we may have thought up to that point that we knew what we needed to do, but we did not. We would only be able to make the necessary changes and have the students take on ownership if they were able to take the lead with us supporting them. And so, this was where our journey of ownership through empowerment headed.

Foundationally, we struggled through the first year, noting that students were earning the trust of the staff, and more importantly, that the students were beginning to believe that they were encouraged to make a difference and they would be heard.

### ***Earning Trust***

Earning the trust of the students was a struggle. Words and expectations are fruitless without action. Students and staff alike wanted leadership that would guide and support the desired change. To support the change between school, home, and the greater community also meant getting adults outside the building involved to provide their insight. In order to have candid conversations with secular, non-secular, and other community leaders to address questions and concerns related to the school,

I hosted Principal's Coffees throughout the first year. By opening myself up to frank conversations with students, staff, and members of the community, trust was developed, and this was another cornerstone to our collective success.

### ***Battered***

In early November, after the first principals' coffee, a student with a background of manipulating (students, staff, and the truth), threw a book across the room during his mathematics class. The book struck the long-term substitute teacher in the face, causing her to bleed. Not only was this substitute teacher covering for a teacher on maternity leave, but she was pregnant, herself. The thought that a student would strike a teacher appalled me. Through professional dialogue with current and former staff members at the school, indication was made that the student body was completely out of control, staff feared for their wellbeing and the wellbeing of the students, and learning had most assuredly taken a second place to safety issues.

Just prior to winter break, one teacher in particular, who had retired at the end of the 2006-2007 school year, later returned to act as a substitute teacher in the building for day-to-day and long term subbing. The substitute indicated that in the short time since her departure, she had seen a significant improvement in the culture of the building. The culture components of the building specifically referred to indicated a change in professional demeanor and behavior on the part of the staff, and more specifically on the leadership and decorum of the students.

During our investigation, it came to light that the students in the class where the teacher was battered were disgusted, and they expected the most severe

punishment for the offending student. There was a glimmer of light that was growing. Students not only realized the impact of doing wrong, but they wanted to stop poor choices altogether. This required action on the part of the staff and students collectively.

### ***Fire in the Bathroom***

I was sitting in my office speaking with a student about his academic progress when the fire alarm sounded. The administrative team responded as we had in our drills, each of us taking a wing of the building to call the all clear. Beth's voice came over the walkie-talkie indicating she had found the cause of the alarm. It turned out that a student had set fire to the bathroom in the "200 Wing." Beth's quick thinking to get the fire-ravaged trashcan out to the closest emergency exit, less than 20 feet from the scene of the fire, would save the learning community from a much larger issue. Thankfully, no one was physically injured in this incident. Our investigation, however, would again find the administrative team face to face with students who were fed up with the insane antics of their peers. They wanted more than justice, they wanted a change.

As a result of this incident, we began to see students overcoming peer pressure to keep silent. There was a care for others, and the students that came forward to help with our investigation of the fire in the bathroom proved that students were willing to act on the care and concern they had for themselves and everyone else in the building. While we were working on developing a deep culture of trust, it was apparent that without trust of the students in the administration to take action, the students would

not have come forward to share the information they had. We had turned a corner, and made progress toward initial change.

### ***Beer in the Gatorade***

The third incident that the administrative team would see as a major issue involved “beer in the Gatorade™.” Three students had the idea of concealing beer mixed with Gatorade™ for the purpose of consuming it with their lunch, and sharing it with classmates. Thankfully, a student who was told it was only juice and drank some of it realized that the liquid was far from being just Gatorade™. Despite having Bob immediately available in the cafeteria, the student instead reported the incident to Beth in the main office to avoid being seen by the offenders. Nearly a day and a half from the time of the first reporting, the AdT spoke with our assistant superintendent, Bruce. We were again in a situation where children had been put in harm’s way, and it would not be tolerated. The students who brought and distributed the liquid, along with those who knowingly consumed the liquid as an alcoholic beverage would be suspended and recommended for expulsion. Again, during our investigation, it was students who called for severe action to be taken. Upon the board’s decision, this incident would bring our total number of expulsions to eight, including our book thrower, fire starter, and mixologists. Unfortunately, this was not the last incident that would result in the administration making a recommendation to the board for a student expulsion.

When we considered our focus of student outcomes, we used this and many other scenarios that will be referred to later in this chapter as formative assessment

tools. We investigated, analyzed, and more importantly, had the students analyze their behavior. Formative assessment would not be that at all were it not for putting descriptive feedback immediately in the hands of the students. As a result, we saw our students model expected behavior for their peers. They got involved and overcame peer pressure. Students also acted as critical friends. A pattern of behavior had formed in students holding each other accountable for their actions. I hoped that this pattern would continue and expand, and it did.

### ***Dealing at Lunch***

As any middle level educator will tell you, the end of the year is not a time of “winding down.” If anything, I would equate it to wheels falling off the wagon with a train of horses dragging the wagon behind. The time between spring break and the end of the year is often times the most challenging. This would hold true come April of 2008 when the administrative team would receive a report from students that there had been a drug deal witnessed during a lunch period. The result of our investigation showed that three students were involved with a prearranged exchange of money for marijuana. The evidence we had was substantial, including admissions from all three students involved. I prepared the expulsion packet for each of the students involved and the first hearing was held. The hearing officer, hired by the district, heard the case, reviewed the information, and indicated to the board that there was enough evidence to move forward with the first of three expulsions. Between the first hearing and the other two hearings, however, the district office made modifications to the consequences issued and withdrew the expulsion recommendations. While the

administrative team did not agree with the decision, we could say, emphatically, that we complied with protocol and followed the prescribed district policy. This last incident challenged me and raised significant consideration for our next step as a building community in my second year.

Similar to the “Beer in the Gatorade™” vignette, students showed care for others and overcame peer pressure. When we discussed the situation as an administrative team, however, our reflection indicated that students still had a sense of fear of adverse consequences for stepping up and doing the right thing.

### ***Providing Activities that Build on Student Interests – 9<sup>th</sup> Period Clubs***

Throughout the course of the first year, the day was structured in such a way as to allow for student support. Specifically, we put the previously scattered “study hall” time at the end of the day for all students. In doing this, we afforded students the opportunity to visit with teachers for academic support during what was called our “resource study hall.” This common time for the entire building also allowed for students and staff to create what was called our “9<sup>th</sup> Period Clubs.” The opportunity for students to take an interest, seek support from staff in way of sponsorship, and bring student interests to fruition, was another catalyst in student empowerment and ownership.

Student self-advocacy and activity interests started slowly but accelerated into a number of activities that nurtured student leadership to blossom. Two students in particular approached their science teacher and indicated their desire to start an environmental club. Word was put out via the announcements and weekly

newsletters and within two weeks, the “E-Club” was up and running. The group grew so quickly that we needed two sponsors to supervise all of the participants. Actions on the part of the sponsors quickly lead to business partnerships with local businesses, and the sponsors were able to bring in thousands of dollars in funding for students to begin beautification projects on the school campus.

We also had students who shared a strong interest in expanding the student body voice. The opportunity had been there but the logistics of coordinating a school newspaper had been the struggle. The computer lab teacher had students approach her one day after a lesson and by October, we had our first publication. During the next two years, the newspaper expanded from a two-page tabloid to a four, and sometimes six-page, publication in which all students had pride.

Interest in athletics in this community was abundant. The school boasted countless state titles in a variety of sports. As a result, we also had a large pool of students interested in maintaining their fitness during their respective off seasons. Upon petitioning two of our physical education teachers, we were not only able to get a fitness club started for athletes, but it was expanded on alternating days to include fitness development for those students who were not in the best shape and wanted to improve their physical wellness.

The variety of student skills and interests continued to expand, including the interest in music. Early in the school year, we were approached by high school students who needed to complete community service hours. The boys indicated they were interested in providing guitar lessons for students who were interested. We had an entire class set of acoustic guitars and quite a few students in the building had their

own electric guitars. By winter break, the group had grown so large that the boys had to alternate days when our students could attend the small lessons. The administrative team received word that the community service hours had been completed, and by the start of the new school year, we would not have anyone to support the continued interest of students. Luckily, we also had two staff members who played guitar, and so they stepped in to take the lead as co-sponsors. By the end of the school year, we had nearly 120 student members of the guitar club.

Growth in student activities had been tremendous and the opportunity for students to become involved increased every day. In the next two years, the school saw more growth for student activities, most of which was initiated by the students themselves. Students were not only taking an interest in their school. Students had pride.

*He would come home and [say] 'Guess what I joined! Guess what I did! Guess...' You know, it was all about them and their school and not [being] afraid to wear the colors or the school's name on their person, on a shirt. They took pride of where they went to school. And I think that says a lot...that the kids can take pride in their school. (Mother of Isaiah Steele, li 136-140)*

Students, as a result of expanding our ninth period clubs, began to think globally. They were expanding their view on the world, and this led to students become self-directed learners and self-advocates. Students took the initiative to research and expand the possibilities offered for their involvement, and this behavior was reflective of critical thinking skills. Students saw each other as being on the same team, regardless of interest in a particular club, sport, or some other activity.

The administration and staff were not forming a community of learning for the students; instead, the students were building their own learning community.

### ***Summary of Year 1***

Our first year appeared to be the most challenging, but it provided us with the opportunity to reflect on what we had done, adjust our course, and plan for the future. We had already seen a dramatic drop in suspensions; however, the ever present concern for me, as a building leader, was the number of expulsions. I did not want any child to go without an education, and a major priority for the administrative team and BLT was brainstorming how we could best address our priorities as a learning community.

We saw the paving of roads for students to travel, to find themselves, and shape their destiny as students and student leaders. Mrs. Steele's quote regarding guiding the students, while never really discussed among the administration or staff, was accurate.

*[T]hey were guiding the students to be the best they could be...a lot was offered in the school for different things that the kids could be interested in to bring out their natural talents. I guess you could say the school was behind the wheel driving the kids into these different areas and then opening the world up to them, saying, 'You could do this.' [and] 'Why don't you try this?' There were so many roads that these kids could take in the school to open them up to different situations and different ideas. (Mother of Isaiah Steele, li 91-99)*

Moreover, students were guided into scenarios that would challenge them and make them all the better because of the struggles they faced. Perhaps the guidance, provision of challenges, and support through the tribulations of early adolescence was also a reflection of the blending of the leadership styles that Beth, Bob, and I found within our own leadership team.

We were beginning to reach our goals in developing student capacity for involvement and leadership. We embraced the opportunity to induct incoming seventh grade students while they were still in sixth grade. The induction process included having non-traditional student leaders, average kids who had become a leader in an organization, on a team, or was a natural leader among the student body, step in as ambassadors and present to sixth grade students at the intermediate school. Ambassadors shared with the sixth grade students what it was now like to be a student at the junior high school. We also hosted an evening lock-in for the sixth grade students that allowed interaction with student leaders and volunteers from the seventh grade class. These two events were the first opportunities for our incoming seventh graders to hear from their peers that it was their school and they were not only able to make a difference, but were expected to actually make a difference.

One thing was certain. We were willing to do what was necessary to make a difference for our students. It was the charge we were given, and it was the charge to which we would live up. The parents of our community trusted us with their most precious possessions: their children. We were not going to let either the parents or the students down.

## ***Finding 2: People Make the Difference***

Everyone was capable of making a difference. Leadership was a key to making that difference. Fostering belief in others was easy. Fostering a belief in oneself was the greater challenge. The greatest challenge of them all was having a belief in a collective whole. Constance Holden was able to capture these ideas during her interview in the following statements:

*When we were all working together, and we were all committed, it made everything a lot better. (Constance Holden, li 106-107)*

*For the trust that people had in me, I had trust in [them]. And, I know that if they (students) couldn't do something on their own, we'd say, 'Okay, what can we do together to help?'* (Constance Holden, li 410-413).

*As a team, we have the ultimate power, if we work together. (Constance Holden, li 421-422)*

The concept of people making a difference to Constance went well beyond peer interactions and expectations of her classmates. She and the other students interviewed, even those who did not like being in a middle level school, identified adults from throughout the learning community who had an impact on the students individually and collectively. While students may have taken ownership, it was the ever present support made available to students that sent clear messages of caring, understanding, and sympathy as students transitioned through adolescence.

*Walking into the school doors-let's put it this way. I don't feel like until eighth grade-I wasn't met at the doors every single day with people standing out there whether it was rain, shine, cold, freezing, snowing with a smile on*

*their face saying, 'Good morning, we're happy that you're here!'. And it wasn't until eighth grade that they meant it and I was happy to be there* (Constance Holden, li 244-247).

Vignettes, along with review of transcripts, led me to see that students perceived the various opportunities provided as being individually targeted for growth. While the initiatives taken by the administrative team and staff were to encourage the Stage 3 to Stage 6 transition through adolescence, it was apparent that each student made this change in his or her own time. Specifically, students moved from a Stage 3 sense of conformity “the desire to please others and conform to perceived norms of right and wrong” to Stage 6 sense of universal ethical principles where their “action [is] determined by conscience, based on self-chosen ethical principles” (George & Alexander, 2003, pg. 16-17). The provision of opportunities was as much individually targeted as it was group targeted in that the opportunities built to students’ individual and collective strengths while honing in on weak areas that allowed for supported growth. I would compare our actions to that of a personal trainer. Certain muscle groups are targeted for a reason. In some cases, more tone or fit muscle groups are targeted less intensely while less developed or underdeveloped muscle groups are focused on with greater acuity so as to balance the development of the whole body. Constance was one of the students who initially needed specific toning in way of finding a balance between taking initiative and delegating responsibility to others.

*I was given the opportunity to make so many changes. If there is anything that I want to say, it's thank you for giving me the feeling of pride and having*

*ownership, and feeling like I am so capable of taking initiative with any project or situation I choose to conquer. A lot of that is from junior high... (and) I will carry it with me for the rest of my life* (Constance Holden, li 539-544).

This targeted development was also perceived by Abigail Carey. In her case, decision making was the challenge. More specifically, while self-reflection is a skill with which many adults struggle, Abigail excelled at it. However, self-reflecting in her case, often led Abigail to second-guessing and self-doubt.

*[Y]ou had to make decisions. And I'm really bad with decisions, but it helped you get ready for the real world, I guess you could say, because, you helped others which was really important, but you always were doing something. You were always making sure something was getting done, something was happening* (Abigail Carey, li 260-268).

Actions by the faculty and staff did not go unnoticed by parents either, as was indicated by the mother of Isaiah Steele.

*I suppose you could say they were guiding the students to be the best they could be, to lead them to be the best that they could be. You know, a lot was offered in the school for different things that the kids could be interested in to bring out their natural talents. I guess you could say the school was behind the wheel driving the kids into these different areas and then opening up the world to them. And, 'You could do this' and 'Why don't you try this?'. But there was so much offered. There were so many roads that these kids could*

*take in the school to open them up to different situations and different ideas.*

(Mother of Isaiah Steele, li 90-99).

Finally, Abigail Carey, as was always one of her strong traits, summed up what ownership was and is all about for the students.

*[Ownership] helped us respect the school more. I think that we had more school spirit, and that's very important when it comes to pretty much everything. I think it made us more friendly towards one another, knowing that we're in the same boat, kind of, that we're both-all of us-are the owners, not the owners, but we are Jakobs Junior High School We make up Jakobs Junior High School, and without us, it would just be an empty building. It wouldn't be a junior high school. I think it just helped us connect more and become more of a, make us more friendly towards one another, more together*

(Abigail Carey, li 194-201).

### ***Year 2: A History in the Making***

As the principal, I had to be able to answer what could and should be done in order to have such a dramatic impact on student behavior, and more importantly student ownership and its subsequent impact on student behavior. In retrospect, the change process began day one of the first year. I recalled the first faculty meeting I facilitated. A discussion ensued regarding students taking responsibility for their academics. The faculty was unanimous in its expectations of students being held accountable for academic performance and behavioral expectations. With the perceived lack of consistency in holding students accountable for anything from

previous administrations, it appeared that the only consistency was coming from the teachers within each of the classrooms. Many teachers believed in the, “We’re going to do it my way-no highway option” (Birbaum, et.al., 2005) mantra of leading students through adolescence. This was the only way the teachers felt that they could maintain some semblance of consistency. The administrative team had already begun the self-induced charge of establishing and maintaining consistency throughout the building, and at this point, students had been charged with taking ownership of their building during the preceding school year. The maintenance of consistency was immediately embraced by the staff. In order to get the staff to move away from an archipelago mentality of doing their own thing, we had to encourage staff to take risks in trusting the administration to be consistent. The teachers had taken a leap of faith, and it paid off for the administration, the staff, and the students. In modeling the support to staff to take a leap of faith, the staff began to model for students how they too could take a chance and do something different.

### ***The Executive Branch***

Approximately one week before the start of my second year, I received an impromptu visit from the Student Council president and vice president. The students indicated that since their sponsor was out on maternity leave, they wanted to seek my advice and guidance. To ensure we all heard the same message and were consistent in our support of the student leaders, the entire administrative team met with the students. The executives indicated that they had large scale plans for the year, so I suggested that they go through a planning phase, including a cost benefits analysis

and timeline of activities. Dumbfounded, I reached out my hand to receive a plan of action already prepared, cost analysis included. It was not that the students were not “getting it,” rather the leaders were living the touchstone, being proactive and self-advocates. The students were empowered. They knew they were empowered and they were making choices that would impact students during this school year and for years to come. I thought I had truly seen students at their best. I could not have been more wrong.

In addition to these students taking a proactive approach, we received a report at the BLT that students were interested in going with a theme to name the academic teams. Without hesitation, the student body quickly embraced the concept of superheroes, and so we went from red, white, and blue teams to comic book heroes and heroines that would inspire the students to reach for and achieve more. Not only were the students taking pride in their school, but also in their academic teams. Yes, this school was their school, but by making their own connection to a super heroes, the students saw that “with great power comes great responsibility” (Arad, A., et.al, 2002), and they were willing to rise to that challenge. We had not even started the school year, and already I was seeing students expand their roles, addressing more key points from our originally targeted student outcomes. There was more than the surface change in student behavior. In fact, students now saw the school as a team, a learning community, and more importantly, they made the connection from the previous year to preparation for life beyond junior high and high school.

When reviewing the transcripts, virtually all participants, both students and parents/guardians indicated that the perception was that it was the students' school.

This sentiment was indicated in the response provided by Abigail Carey:

*It's our school. It's my school. It's my friends' and my school. It's everybody's school, honestly, because we're the ones who make it better and we're the ones that make the environment so comfortable, make the environment so great. And, we're the ones that make up the school (Abigail Carey, li 176-179).*

### ***Big Brother is Watching***

Abigail's sentiment would be manifested within the first month of school of my second year. I was sitting in a BLT meeting discussing a variety of topics on an early Tuesday morning when there came a knock on the door. One of the team leaders opened the conference room door, and in walked the president and vice-president of Student Council. Intrigued by the interruption, I asked how the BLT could be of service to the students. Their response was shocking.

*We really don't need your help. We just wanted you to be aware of a situation that was brought to our attention and witnessed by other students. There are some students who are bullying some of the special needs students, and we just wanted you to be aware that we are taking care of it (Skogsberg, personal account).*

It would be one week from the date of that conversation when the entire executive board of the Student Council would again visit with the BLT. The student

leaders indicated that they had begun a personal challenge to the entire student body not only to get to know as many students as they could, but also to make a personal connection with someone who was different from themselves. Because of a direct connection to this activity and those later associated with Rachel's Challenge, student leaders from multiple groups partnered and joined forces to also host the national "Mix It Up Day." Additionally, students became verbal with their peers, confronting them in cases of bullying and addressing repeat offenders' behavior with an adult. Short of "on the fly" and "off the cuff" verbal bullying, physical and internet-based bullying became almost non-existent. Getting to this point with bullying was not without its own challenges.

Simply put, they "got it"! Students were not just transitioning into our key outcomes, but the outcomes had become norm. Students were "knowing," "believing," and "doing" things differently. There was a shift in the culture of the building without anyone being the wiser, and the students led the charge.

### ***Bullying and Cyber-Bullying***

One particular area that vexed the administrative team during our first year was the incessant bullying, particularly cyber-bullying. This would be an area that would hit its apex in the second year, and we would see parents, students, and staff members get involved with this issue.

It was shortly after the episode with verbal bullying of special needs students that we hosted our fall curriculum night. Changes had been made in the Illinois General Assembly requiring internet safety training for students, and this information

was shared with parents. In addition, we found that cyber-bullying was growing at an alarming rate. Parents from all walks of life were attempting to address the issue with the school. As was shared with the parents at the curriculum night, while the school wanted to help with the issue, parents and students alike had to take the initiative in addressing the situation, including understanding that the issue had to cross the “threshold” of the school. Through ongoing conversations with our parent-teacher organization, and by sharing information in our weekly newsletters, we were able to communicate to parents that if a situation involving cyber-bullying did not cross the school’s threshold there was nothing the administration could do. It was a local police matter. They quickly picked up on the message, and through students and parents bringing in printed copies of online communication, as well as through conversations with students indicating that the threats made were impacting their learning experience, we were finally able to take action. As rapidly as this issue had grown, we saw a commensurate rate of decline. Again, students took the lead and chose to say something in order to make a difference.

This particular vignette caused specific intrigue to me. When the administrative team met to discuss the then pending influx of cyber-bullying issues being reported, we noticed that parents were leading the charge. Looking back, it is apparent to me that we had unintentionally marginalized the parents. It was not that we did not want the parents to be involved in this change process. In fact, that could not be further from the truth. Our initial drive, however, to get the students motivated to take the lead had left their parents isolated from the targeted changes. To address this piece, the building leadership team expanded its role, collaborated with other

staff, and we began to develop programs specifically designed to seek input from parents, and support their needs as parents.

### ***Leaders Among Leaders***

Hosting the curriculum night activities also provided the opportunity for our 9<sup>th</sup> Period Clubs to share their respective purposes and messages. We saw an immediate spike in the existing club activities, and we had continuous suggestions for other clubs. Within one month, we added the Investment Club and “You Be The Chemist,” a national program sponsored by the Chemical Educational Foundation to enhance kindergarten through grade eight science education. As a result of these additions, we sat at nearly a dozen clubs, and we had student executives from each club to match. Because of all of the ongoing projects from all of the clubs, we began to see conflicts in schedules, overlapping of community-based projects and fundraising initiatives, and student schedules in clubs were forcing the students to have to choose between clubs. Early in October, I was approached by a group of four students, each of them leaders from respective clubs, seeking an audience with me in my office. Happy to oblige, and intrigued at the unified force of four substantial student leaders, we sat in my office and I heard their plea. The executives believed their members were being pulled in multiple directions and felt torn between their commitments to the other clubs and organizations in which they were involved. Without prompting, the suggestion was made, and with approval from each of the student executives and their respective club sponsors, we formed and convened a Presidents’ Council. The school would have a “United Nations” of clubs and

organizations to coordinate efforts and schedules. As a result, we met quarterly to review a schedule of club meetings, fundraisers, community service projects, and other activities.

Again, we saw students being self-advocates and getting involved. The key to this vignette is how student leaders were transitioning from an archipelago mentality of doing something only for their respective organization to thinking globally and reaching out to support other activities.

### ***Moving In, Fitting In, and Getting with the Program***

In the middle of the year, another scenario would come to solidify my belief that the students were making a difference in their school and the subsequent school environment. A young man had just transferred from another community. Each new student was assigned to a student ambassador to help him or her settle into his or her new school. And try as he might, the student ambassador was not able to get the message across to the new student. The young man in question unknowingly approached the Student Council president and called her a whore. Shocked, she confronted the young man and excused herself. He repeated the comment. A young man, Alex, had witnessed the scene, and assisted the student body president by explaining that this was his school and, “We don’t do that here.” Confused, the young man, attempting to “keep face,” confronted Alex stating that he would kick Alex’s butt (modified expletive). As if a wave crashed over the hallway of nearly 250 students, silence fell, and then a roar of “Not in our school!” echoed into the main office, being bellowed by the student body present. The main office happened to be

directly adjacent to the location of this confrontation, and the young man was escorted to the office by a group of students explaining their disapproval of the behavior.

When the situation was discussed with the young man, and subsequently with the boy's father, the student began to cry. The conversation exuded a sentiment from the young man that dumbfounded me to this day. He indicated to his father and me that he was being, as he described it, a punk, and he was sorry. Moreover, the boy was stunned that anyone, let alone the student body en masse, would take the initiative to address a peer's inappropriate behavior and support a classmate. Ironically, this young man later took up the mantle of ownership and before the end of the school year had addressed the inappropriate actions of peers.

This scenario caused me to again consider our student outcomes, and I realized that I had missed one of the primary pieces we are taught in our teacher training courses – each student learns in different ways and at different times. It may have only taken this young man one day to become acclimated with the school's culture, but he began to model the expected behavior for his peers, including other new students that enrolled.

### ***Creating a Student Judiciary***

It was a result of this “Moving In” incident that the student body president and vice president sought me out to ask what they and others could do to address the behavior of their peers. I inquired as to what they meant by “addressing” their peers' behavior. Not surprised, they were already prepared, and initial research had begun

on developing and implementing a Student Judicial Council (SJC). So, with my approval and support from the sponsor, the students expanded their research and prepared themselves to present their findings and suggestion to the Board of Education. By mid-March the students were ready. They presented to the Board of Education, and they were able to hold their own, answering questions with reference to research and findings. The students had gone above and beyond again, and received no objection by the Board of Education to move forward in establishing the SJC.

### ***Rachel Joy Scott's Impact and Embracing her Challenge***

In early spring, shortly after the transfer student's induction, I received a phone call from the principal at the underclassmen campus for the local high school. Brian indicated that he and his administrative team were exploring the possibility of Rachel's Challenge. I had never heard of Rachel's Challenge, so I began my research.

*Rachel Scott, the first victim in the Columbine High School shooting, touched the lives of thousands with her kindness & compassion. Inspired by her many journal writings, we spread her messages worldwide through powerful educational and corporate presentations. We exist to inspire, equip and empower every person to create a positive culture change in their school, business and community by starting a chain reaction of kindness and compassion (Rachel's Challenge, 2010).*

After compiling information and talking more with the high school's principal, I presented information to the BLT. It was through this dialogue that we felt a collective urge to pursue this opportunity. The foundation had been laid for the students, and this was another opportunity for students to see the importance of making a difference. Once the teams had been consulted, the BLT reconvened and selected ten students, a balance of boys and girls as well as seventh and eighth grade students to participate in the initial presentation.

Time seemed to drag on for the students selected to attend, as they were anxious to hear Rachel's message. Also sitting in attendance, I was taken aback not only by the message of our presenter, but also by my students' responses both collectively and individually. They had been touched, deeply, and they could empathize with those who lost friends and loved-ones at Columbine High School.

We returned to the school in time for lunch, and immediately debriefed with the student participants as well as the five other staff members who attended. Having previously directed the adults to hold their comments until after the students had their chance to respond so as to not bias comments, I was again astonished. One student who would later volunteer to help lead Rachel's Challenge at JJHS indicated that he felt he could not in good conscience turn his back on this challenge. He "was in" and there would be no backing down. The other students quickly echoed his sentiment, and with a variety of organizational and natural student leaders in the room, the word spread. Within one week, we were holding our first Rachel's Challenge / A-Okay meeting for those students who were interested. When the response was so great that

we did not have room in the school library, we had to move the meeting to the cafeteria.

### *Summary of Year 2*

While year one had laid the foundation, it was clear to me that year two was one of framing the culture of the building for years to come. The students and staff had found their stride and were keeping pace with the rapid change we found occurring to the culture of the building.

Growth in the number of student activities, membership within the clubs, and participation in after school and weekend events spoke volumes as to student interest. We found that with students participating and having to maintain academic performance even in noncompetitive activities, they strove for academic excellence to ensure they would continue to participate. Student initiative was more evident in the second year than any other, as we saw the proactive approach to problem solving, and students had a sense of community coupled with the idea that this was a team effort. Students began to think on a global scale, and worked to develop a culture of trust among the student body and with their personal relationships with staff. Roles of students shifted from complacent standers-by to those of critical friends and cognitive coaches. It was more than staff believing in the students, the students believed in themselves and their own capacity to be successful. Without intentionally targeting the components of key points for future student outcomes, we were addressing a large number of areas that would cause the students to know, believe, and do differently.

Year three, while appearing much less eventful as compared to years one and two, had its own vignettes that add to the story of empowering students and impacting school culture.

***Finding 3: Student Empowerment CAN Change School Culture***

The environment, specifically the culture of a school, was changed as a result of influencing the atmosphere, attitude of stakeholders, and delineating expectations. This was true from the first day of school during the 2007-2008 school year. The entire student body and other stakeholders from throughout the building including certified and non-certified staff (teachers, custodians, lunchroom workers, secretaries, etc.) met in an all school assembly. Students were asked two questions, which to this day, guide many of the students in the roles they play in high school. “Whose school is this?” and “How many does it take?” were questions I asked from that point on at every assembly, and virtually all interactions with students. It was not that students were just hearing the questions, but they were giving, feeling, and owning the answers. “Our school!” they would shout with a flourish. “One!” One student can make the difference, and one student can ruin it for everyone else. The student body did not hear the message, they lived it.

In some cases, culture was a change in student behavior. In other cases, culture was a change of student interaction within the culture of the building, therefore alluding to the concept of student voice which supported the idea of ownership and empowerment within the building. Students believed they had a voice, could have a say, and could be an active participant in the school. This was a

developed skill and belief on the part of the students, and was indicated by many study subjects when indicating that upon first entering the building, they were fearful, but became energized. A participant in the school was not just a club member or athlete. It was someone who took an active role, sometimes as a leader, either direct or indirect, that had an impact on the culture of the school. A participant was one who took ownership of the school and its environment, and did something to make a difference. These sentiments are shared by all students, but best articulated by Abigail Carey and Delbert Lowery.

*The school made a big difference in my life. I think if I would have gotten another junior high experience, I wouldn't have felt the same way. That school defined who I am. It made me a leader. It made me strong, and it made me confident for who I am as a person. I didn't get along with people all of the time, but that just made me even stronger, and it made me realize that not getting along with everybody is okay. You just have to work things out. That school defines who I am, who my friends are, and that the activities and opportunities given to us, and everything that was available there, helped who I am and who others are today. The school is such a nice school that I don't know how you couldn't love that school. I mean, it's a great environment to be in (Abigail Carey, li 402-411).*

*I think [ownership] made [the school] much better because the kids had much more of a say of what went on. Cause, like in high school now, I look back at it, I can honestly even tell you I don't even know who my dean or my principal or anyone is... that means the student body really doesn't get involved. I*

*really don't know anyone who barely knows any of the administration there, and it feels almost sort of controlling in the sense that they decide what you do and that is pretty much it. But then, when you took the student responsibility into play, it, you felt you had, you felt like that you could change something if you didn't like it* (Delbert Lowery, li 338-346).

When referencing the cause of change to the school environment, “[I]t kind of got students to make better decisions and think about what they’re going to do, the consequences, before they just decided to do something stupid and get in trouble” (Isaiah Steele, li 210-212).

What was it about Abigail, Delbert, Isaiah, and those like them who chose to take on a leadership role versus those who didn't? Why did some students take on leadership and some not? How were all of the students interviewed able to indicate that they had made a difference when not all of the students identified with being in a specific leadership role?

Mrs. Joyner, mother of a student involved in clubs, sports, and who had to work hard academically, made the connection between challenges presented, success, and empowerment, answering the question of why students were still successful despite not being a leader. “I think people, like anybody, when you have a challenge and you successfully rise up to meet those expectations, you walk away with empowerment. And, I think, those challenges were always there” (Mother of Natasha Joyner, li 182-184).

Denver Franks was best able to sum up the faculty's plan of action in how targeting students' strengths helped in their development and more specifically answers the final pending question of this research study.

*I felt like I could be one of those students who could stand out of all the rest. I mean, I'm not saying, like, no one else could. We could all stand out where we have our different outstanding things about us (Denver Franks, li 184-187).*

### ***Year 3: Continuing the Process of Empowerment and Change***

Behaviorally, students had taken the lead in proactively curbing peers actions, and if this was not possible, incidents were reported to a staff member or administrator. It is my opinion that this helped to shape the overall behavioral statistics for the school year. In addition, it helped to improve student performance, as the school saw growth in the state assessment with the result of making adequate yearly progress.

### ***Wanting More and Expecting Better from Teachers and Students***

In reflecting on my third and final year as building principal at Jakobs Junior High School, it would seem to me that students were asking for and expecting better from each other, and moreover, from the staff. I recall an afternoon in October when a small group of students paid me a visit. By now, it was a fairly common occurrence for students to request visits with staff and administration alike for the redressing of grievances as well as for academic support. In this particular case, there had been a

family emergency for one of our social studies teachers, and these students were in the class where I had stepped in to substitute teach and conduct a Socratic Seminar on the Whiskey Rebellion. The students reported feeling that they were not learning to their capacity. In addition, their teacher was most assuredly not teaching to her capacity nor was she teaching to the capacity of the students in the class. Curious, I asked the students what they would have me do, and they responded with no hesitation. They wanted better immediately. Either it would come from coaching of this teacher or it would come from me personally. Yes, I had heard their comments correctly. If I was to expect the students to step up and make a change, they expected the same of me.

For several months following this conversation, I devoted great deal of time to this teacher's professional practice. Whether it was cognitive coaching, modeling effective teaching strategies, random formative assessments in the form of sporadic classroom visits, or conversations with students, significant time was dedicated to improving this teacher's professional practice. And, it worked. Students subsequently indicated a significant improvement in their learning experiences. This was reflected in comments that the students had benefitted from depth of the content studied. This sentiment was echoed by Oscar Hale. Having that sense of ownership, "allowed you to aspire to be a better student, learn more, and far beyond what you would try" (Oscar Hale, li 195-196).

#### ***Finding 4: Culture Impacts Behavior and Achievement***

Change in school culture impacts student behavior and achievement. This unintended finding on my part may initially cause the reader to question the correlation between empowerment of students through ownership in the school culture, and the subsequent impact on student behavior and achievement. In Delbert Lowery's case, he believed that ownership and its impact on the change in the culture of the school, "gave fuller meaning to the school" (Delbert Lowery, li 609). By both theory and practice, the National Middle School Association (2003), the Carnegie Task Force (1989), and Gruhn & Douglass (1956) specify the importance of culture leading to the success of the middle level program. This success was indifferent to pedagogical practice. Whether middle school or junior high school, or some combination thereof, the administrative team had led the staff to a sense of empowerment and student advocacy, which subsequently impacted facets of culture, and programmatic characteristics.

As Simpson's (1990) research indicated, "change threatens stability" and impacts the "comfort of the culture" (p. 35). On this point, and because of our discomfort with the culture that was based on inconsistency, we needed to make a significant change. In fact, when considering student behavior and achievement, it was determined that a change in culture positively impacted student behavior and achievement, as referenced in Tables 5.1 "Behavior Management Data" and 5.2 "Academic Performance".

In additional consideration of culture, comfort, and stability being threatened by change, the vignettes and feedback from students and their parents/guardians led

me to believe that adolescents were malleable. In this case, the preceding school culture was a far greater stressor for the students than the change process and the corresponding instability associated with change of a poor school culture to one of positive focus, support, and success. This sentiment was emphasized by Natasha Joyner who specified, "What we do affects the outlook on the school" (Natasha Joyner, li 207). Of interest was the echoing of this feeling by Natasha's mother, "there was a sense of pride" and "it seemed very obvious with most kids I came in contact with that they were invested in the school" (Mother of Natasha Joyner, li 217-218).

The winter and early spring seemed rather uneventful as we faced no major incidents. Entering into late-February, the president of the student council approached me in conjunction with the president of the school's honor society, seeking the opportunity to push students to do their best and leave a lasting impact on students who would follow them. I did not quite understand, and inquired further. The presidents wanted to host an all school assembly, done in collaboration between the Beta Club and Student Council, to emphasize the importance of performing well on the ISAT. I was not a fan of taking away from instructional time to have an assembly. I did not believe that an assembly would improve test scores, and I was leery of the suggestion that impacting instructional time to have an assembly would actually improve student performance. However, after some cajoling, I acquiesced and the assembly was scheduled. Student leaders again took the lead on researching ways to explain the importance of the assessment, how it impacted students individually and the school collectively, and how performance from current students

also helped to direct modifications to the curriculum. Needless to say, I was thoroughly impressed with the students' research, but even more so with the spoof and spin these adolescents put on the Beatle's song "Help." I could say unequivocally this assembly was educational and representative of the highest form of student engagement resulting from student driven instruction.

In each of these short vignettes, I found that the students involved took a huge risk. Not only did they realize that they needed more from a teacher in the first place, but they also needed something from each other as indicated in the second piece. To have the courage to act as both critical friend and cognitive coach to peers was a tremendous step. But to challenge the status quo and verbalize that students needed more from their teacher and expected more from peers was an astronomical accomplishment. While students may have transitioned to being critical friends for classmates and their instructors, they had begun to understand the importance of cognitive coaching, especially in the relationship of student to principal.

### ***Racial Epithets***

We made it through another year of testing, went off for spring break, and came back revitalized and ready to finish the year. With less than three weeks to go before the promotion ceremony for our eighth grade students, I was making my way through the hallway during a passing period and heard a loud verbal disagreement which seemed to me to be on the verge of going physical. Quickly intervening, I asked the five students involved to step into the teachers' lounge of all places. In isolating the student participants from the rest of the student body, we were able to

rapidly deescalate the verbal exchange and prepare the students for a conversation. Astonished, I looked at a table full of student leaders, including the president of Rachel's Challenge. What had happened that would cause five of the greatest leaders the building had seen blow up into a verbal frenzy at each other? It would come to light that there existed a pending accusation of two students against each other for using racially-charged epithets. Normally, I would have asked the other three students to leave and follow up with them at a future date and time, but I again found myself with an educational moment. Each of the boys indicated that they had personally heard the other reference the other as a "cracker" or "nigger" respectively. Such behavior had always infuriated me, as it was clearly a sign of ignorance and lack of intellectual capacity to use such defamatory language, and I made it clear that I was completely disappointed in both students, not to mention the other three students who felt it necessary to inflame the situation instead of deescalating the conflict.

Looking back on it, I knew that the "racial epithet" conflict would be worked out, and before leaving for the day, the boys had enjoyed the opportunity to converse openly with each other. It just emphasized to me as the building leader that while we had made significant strides to make changes, to provide adolescents with the power to change and improve their school's culture, ongoing training, support, and modeling is necessary.

### ***Summary of Year 3***

Our growing pains continued, but those pains were eased with the continuous growth of students through their empowerment. We had realized as a learning

community that this particular change process was far from over, but it had taken flight and gone the distance. The plane we began to build in flight three years prior was now complete. The flight would require a crew to correct its course, being navigated now by all stakeholders. Occasionally, a need for refueling would arise, but that could be found in new students and staff, and sadly for me, a new principal.

I closed year three the same way I did every day, looking back and reflecting on all that I did as principal, bidding the students good bye as the busses rolled off of the school campus, waving a fond farewell, knowing that tomorrow was a new day that held the light of the future for me and the students I had served.

As a final thought, I was inspired by a response from a parent that I believed to be key for student and educational leaders alike, “When you follow a ‘leader’ who doesn’t lead you, you don’t go anywhere” (Mother of Constance Holden, li 209-210). Leadership comes from empowerment. Change comes from empowerment. Empower students, support the collective change process, and get out of the students’ way, because change is coming.

### ***Summary of Findings***

The targets were the same for all students. Students were expected collectively and individually to succeed and become a better person as a result of their experiences. This was all based on the foundation that students had ownership in their learning community and they were empowered to grow to their individual potential. The path taken to reach this target varied for each student, but the paths

taken were built to students' individual strengths and supported their weaknesses.

Isaiah Steele's mother probably best identifies this concept.

*They were guiding the students to be the best they could be, to lead them to be the best that they could be. You know, a lot was offered in the school for different things that the kids could be interested in to bring out their natural talents. So, I think it like – I guess you could say the school was behind the wheel driving the kids into these different areas and then opening the world up to them. And, saying, 'You could do this.' 'You know, why don't you try this?' But there was so much offered. There were so many roads that these kids could take in the school to, you know, like I said, to open them up to different situations and different ideas... ...Staff was there to support him, regardless of whether he was ready or not to take on a certain role or try new things. (Mother of Isaiah Steele, li 91-99 and 104-105)*

The resulting findings led me to surmise that people, including adolescents, can make a difference. Adolescents, with a support structure, can make and experience a lasting change. This was true for students who were not natural leaders, and even at times had a run in with poor choices. Elvis Parker was one of those students who realized the power of making the correct choice.

*You make your own choices – if they are good or bad, it's your decision. I thought that was applied to the rest of the school. If I did something good, someone would see that, and they would follow your example. (Elvis Parker, li 114-117)*

As intriguing and isolated as this concept seemed, it was powerful to hear

Elvis' father echo similar sentiments. According to his father, the perception was "Hey, you are young adults; you are going to be treated like young adults, and held accountable." Students did not perceive the staff solely as disciplinarians or club sponsors, and the parent responses echoed that feeling. The mother of Oscar Hale felt that, "there were legitimate rules and regulations, but students still had ownership... ..All of the children felt like a family there" (Mother of Oscar Hale, li 236-237). Delbert Lowery also identified the support structure in being able to connect with any adult in that "you can actually talk to any teacher and have a conversation that doesn't involve school. They will spend their time, and even time outside of school to help because they want you to succeed" (Delbert Lowery, li 557-561). It appeared that this experience and lasting impression did not go unnoticed by Constance Holden either.

*I was given the opportunity to make so many changes. Thank you for giving me the feeling of pride, having ownership, and feeling like I'm so capable of taking initiative with any project or situation I choose to conquer... ..I will carry that with me for the rest of my life. (Constance Holden, 541-544)*

Providing the opportunity for challenge and growth contributed to accelerated transition in adolescent developmental stages. There was a clear shift from a conventional adolescent bent on pleasing his or her peers to one who understands the importance of participating in, as George and Alexander note, an unwritten social contract with universal ethical principles. Delbert Lowery synthesizes this premise for us.

*The student body is what makes up the entire school, and they pretty much form its personality... ...Everyone knew what they were supposed to be doing, and how they were supposed to be doing those things. They had priorities, and they had responsibilities... ...You actually realize you are the student body. If you weren't there, there would be no point of the school. So, it's your job to take care of it, and make it the best it can be. (Delbert Lowery, li 254-255, 187-190, and 309-311)*

We saw in Delbert's responses that the accelerated adolescent transition is reflected in the move to high school. Students from Jakobs Junior High brought the idea of feeling of ownership with them and spread it to others, as witnessed by Abigail Carey. "And that ownership of our school makes [it] a great place" (Abigail Carey, li 471-472).

Ownership, by Abigail's own words, enhanced the personal connection students had to the school, and ultimately the school's culture. The result was that students were energized to make a difference, to make a change, and consequently improve the culture of the school. "We're the ones who make it better. We're the ones who make the environment so comfortable - make the environment so great" (Abigail Carey, li 177-178).

The change we saw in the school was echoed in the change we saw in the students. Not only was the culture (what we know, see, feel, and do – the who and what we are on a day to day basis) different, but so were the students. Empowerment was more than having an ethereal presence. Empowerment was having a voice that was heard, listened to, and acted upon. This was the reason why students had the

opportunity to reflect on their own actions and the actions of the student body as a collective entity. Reflecting resulted in an informed way for the students to formatively assess themselves as a collective, and as individuals, which in turn caused the students to make better decisions. The ongoing, descriptive, and even modeled feedback for the students was coming from the students. Not only did they develop the standard by which they would be measured, but they also maintained inter-rater reliability in the outcome measurements. Good was not good enough for the students. We heard this idea from Abigail Carey.

*We had to set a standard. We had to be the best for other people to follow. We were the standards...and you don't want to mess up...I know these people for what they have done. Everybody in this school has done something amazing.* (Abigail Carey, li 281-282 and 439-440)

Based on Abigail's assessment of the shift in standards and accountability, I further surmised that self-imposed accountability accelerates maturation through the stages of adolescence. As we saw before with Delbert Lowery, we again hear the echoing of adolescent stage shifts from Isaiah Steele and Constance Holden.

*You have to take responsibility...It (ownership) got the students to make better decisions. Hey! This is your school. You have to keep it how you want it to be. You have to set the standard and not just coast.* (Isaiah Steele, li 233-234)

“It's living proof that we're helping to change other people's lives, not only in the school, but also outside the school” (Constance Holden, li 435-436).

In seeing the impact she was making, Constance went on to point out key points on involvement, ownership, and motivation. When Constance knew she had ownership in her learning community, she indicated that she “could definitely control things in my community, and whatever I wanted to put my mind to. It gave me a lot of hope, and it definitely gave me a lot of courage” (Constance Holden, li 138-140).

*As I got more involved, if anything, the culture improved. It improved a lot of (student’s) perspectives about the school which made the school better in general...After not giving up and wanting ownership so bad, I was convinced that it (ownership)\_ was the best thing for our school, and it definitely worked.* (Constance Holden, li 73-75 and 103-104)

In each of the forgoing cases, it is shown that student ownership positively impacts student aspirations and increases students’ inspiration to improve. These expectations were reverberated by the mother of Natasha Joyner, “The expectations were high, challenging enough, but reachable...Like anybody, when you have a challenge and you successfully rise up to meet those expectations, you walk away with empowerment” (Mother of Natasha Joyner, li 181-184).

In consideration of the concepts of empowerment and culture and the overarching theme of ownership that arises from the subjects responses, it would appear that ownership and empowerment are interdependent and interconnected. Students cannot take ownership of their school community without first having been empowered to take ownership. Likewise, students cannot feel empowered to make a difference within their learning community without first feeling that they have a voice that is heard and listened to. That the students had ownership and a vested interest in

making a difference, for their own benefit and those students who will follow in their path, is foundational in their ability to make a lasting change. It could therefore be logically presented that both empowerment, or rather the sense of being empowered, and ownership must be established for middle level adolescents simultaneously.

Denver Franks summed it all up, “It’s our school, the students’ school. It takes one to make a difference, and one to mess it up... We have a part in our school. We need to be there to interact and be involved” (Denver Franks, li 161-162 and 177-178).

While I recognized that not all of the change in academic performance or behavior could be traced back directly to the change in culture, there was a clear pattern. As ownership was embraced, students believed they were empowered, the culture changed, and student performance improved commensurately. Clearly, by the end of the third year, substantial change had occurred, and this was a result of empowerment.

As the vignettes and findings were clearly linked, the next chapter dissected the findings into their respective future implications. Based on the findings listed in this chapter, however, I was able to surmise that the third finding was clearly dependent on the first two findings. As a result, the implications for the third finding from the first two findings are likewise limited in scope. Finally, as was indicated in the closing segment of this chapter, Finding 4 was unexpected, but because of the emergence of important implications in this study, Finding 4 is also addressed in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 5: Implications and Conclusion**

### ***Introduction***

This study was designed to explore the impact of student empowerment through student ownership, on school culture. In order to gain insight from the students and parents interviewed, it was vital to hear the personal stories from a random sampling of students and parents to pinpoint how, if at all, perceptions of the school culture had changed as a result of empowering students and giving them ownership in their school community. What follows is a description of my experiences, as the building principal, interwoven and correlated to student and parent/guardian perceptions.

The research question, “What are student and parent/guardian perceptions regarding how student empowerment through ownership in the learning community impacts the school’s culture?” guided me in developing probing questions for participants to elicit a response to this question indirectly so as to avoid any bias in participant response. In other words, there would be no attempt to persuade or otherwise guide participants to respond in such a manner that would steer the findings in a particular direction.

I gathered the perceptions of 12 middle level students and 10 respective parents of those students interviewed. The students chosen for this study were selected randomly from a list of graduates from a select middle-level school. Prior to being interviewed, the students selected an alias to protect their identity. For the purpose of identifying quotes from participants, the names used are the alias names chosen by the students. When referencing quotes from the parents/guardians of the

students, the student's name is identified and the relationship to the student from the parent/guardian's perspective. Parent/guardian participants were a parent or guardian of one of the selected student participants. Graduates of the select middle-level school were selected to gain insight as to the change, if any was perceived, and its subsequent impact on the culture of the targeted middle-level building. The names of the school, neighboring schools, and other students referenced in vignettes have also been given aliases in order to protect their respective identities and the identities of the participating subjects.

### ***Subject Demographics***

Specific demographic groups were not targeted. When randomly selecting students, the following demographic and student background information was noticed. Of the 12 students who participated, there was an equal representation among genders. While students from each of the current classes of freshmen, sophomores, and juniors were invited to participate, only those students currently enrolled as a freshman or sophomore in high school agreed to be interviewed. Seven of the 12 students were freshmen, while the remaining students were sophomores. Of the 12 students, nine were White, non-Hispanic, and three were Black, non-Hispanic. When in the middle level school, two students were receiving special education services under Individual Education Plans (IEPs), four students were in some advanced class (advanced mathematics and language arts were the only two advanced subject areas available), and six students were in general education courses. Eight of the 12 subjects were involved in an athletic activity (as identified by the Illinois

Elementary School Association), eight subjects were involved in a club activity, and five subjects were involved in both an athletic and club activity. Through the course of the interviews, identification of students as leaders was made possible. Half of the students interviewed identified themselves as having some sort of specific leadership role, whether in athletics or in a club activity. Finally, of the students interviewed, when it came time for parent participation, two out of the 12 subjects' parents/guardians declined participation in an interview.

It is noted here that while there was a broad spectrum of student participation in academic and athletic activities, the students participating in this study represented a wide range of students. Specific student characteristics are identified in Table 5.1 "Student Subject Characteristics." The characteristics listed were shared among subjects in whole or in part. Student characteristics were identified to highlight the broad spectrum of student participants. I noted that the students interviewed came from all walks of life, interests in activities, and varied in their leadership capacity as identified by their roles in the activities in which they participated. Prior knowledge on my part allowed for the identification of at least six other activities in which student subjects participated. It was important to recognize the varying backgrounds and interests of the students randomly selected to emphasize that the following findings were not isolated or specific to any one group of students or individual student. The students interviewed allowed for the gathering of perspectives from students with varied experiences.

Table 5.1 – Student Subject Characteristics

Class of 2013	Honors society	Band
A few emotionally challenged	Class of 2014	Student Council
Student Judicial Council	Talent show	Retained
Black (non-Hispanic)	Rachel’s Challenge	White (non-Hispanic)
Multi-Cultural Club	Varied spectrum of socio-economic status	Wrestling
From a divorced family	Scholastic Bowl	Spelling Bee
Presidents’ Council	Raised by a single parent	Guitar Club
Student Ambassador	Choir	Volleyball
Has a sibling who also attended the school	From a blended family	Basketball

***Anonymity and Pseudonyms***

Prior to interviews commencing, pseudonyms for subjects were established to maintain anonymity. It is noted here as it was in Chapter 3 that all names, references to communities, correlations to schools and any other possible name affiliation have been modified to protect the identity of the subjects. While the names were not identified as aliases or pseudonyms, all names in this research study are pseudonyms.

***Findings***

In consideration of the overarching findings that evolved from the interviews conducted, combined with my personal experiences and reflections as building principal, three findings stood out above all others, and a fourth unanticipated finding surfaced. These findings are:

1. Ownership is brought about through empowerment of stakeholders.
2. People make the difference.

3. The culture of a school can be changed as a result of student empowerment.
4. Change in school culture impacts student behavior and achievement.

Finally, the following subsections of this chapter will address the implications for each of the foregoing findings and considerations for future research related to each finding.

### ***Implications for Finding 1 – Ownership Through Empowerment***

“If you’re not going to do something and participate in the process, don’t complain” (Mother of Constance Holden, li 263-264).

The research in this study made the connection and interdependency link between ownership and empowerment on the part of the students and the subsequent impact of ownership and empowerment on school culture. This addresses the key point that led the students to be active stakeholders in their learning community. This did not begin as an attempt to improve behavior and academics in the building. Rather, the focus here was to lay a foundation that would later serve to support substantial change in the areas of student behavior and academic achievement. This change in student activism by being empowered and taking ownership in one’s learning community would not have been possible had it not been for the staff first believing that they, too, could make a difference. Teachers needed to feel that they could take a risk, try new things, make connections with students, and truly make a difference in the life of the students we served. Moreover, the teachers needed to model for students that taking ownership was not only a privilege, but a necessity to

be empowered to make lasting changes. This willingness to take a risk did not come without a plan or significant investment of time in the development of the staff.

While volumes of reading can build the background knowledge of an action researcher, it is necessary for building leaders to embrace and model this behavior for their staff and students. As was mentioned in Chapter 4, the teachers initially did not feel empowered, and so it fell to me as the building leader to help them feel empowered, and to provide a safe environment for them to take risks in the quest to improve the school's culture and subsequently their teaching. Only when the teachers felt comfortable in taking risks, and were willing to demonstrate to the students that it was okay to take risks, did the students feel comfortable in following the teachers' lead.

The perceptions of students and parents correlated to the change in culture. Specifically, the key to impacting teaching and learning was in impacting the culture of the building. In this case, culture was changed as a direct result of empowerment. In addition to focusing on empowerment to change cultural dynamics, we also focused as a building on specific academic targets that we believed also contributed to impacting student performance on the local assessments and ISAT. The reasoning behind this target of impacting student performance on local and state assessments was building the students self-perceptions in being able to have an individual and collective impact on how their school was perceived. Commensurately, empowering the staff meant adding to their collection of professional tools, and providing training on a variety of skills focused on a multitude of interwoven foci to enhance teaching

and learning. To have a lasting change on academics, we honed our focus on reading, writing, and mathematics.

The cross curricular focus on reading and reading strategies (Academic Vocabulary – as indicated through the Marzano Model, Creating Independent Student Strategies - CRISS, literature circles, and a shift to a double-period block of language arts) appeared to have had significant impact on literary knowledge and application. Specific data from local assessment scores indicated that students consistently maintained and improved in this area as a result of staff focus. Through our Response to Intervention (RtI) support system, we used “Be A Better Reader,” “Soar to Success,” and “Wilson” to impact the reading areas of fluency and comprehension. These were key areas of foci as a result of student needs. Individual student data indicated growth in these areas as a result of the implementation of these scientific, research-based interventions through RtI and special education.

Emphasis in the areas of algebra, geometry, and data analysis and probability indicated maintenance if not strong growth in Discovery Education and ISAT scores. Emphasis in writing mathematically and using academic vocabulary, by connecting CRISS and Academic Vocabulary strategies to the mathematics classroom, provided for growth in short and extended response prompts on the ISAT. Scientific, research-based intervention systems were also put into place for mathematical deficits through the RtI, with specific focus on modeling and formulating, transforming and manipulating, inferring, and communicating (Hancewicz, et.al., 2005) through the use of “Moving with Math.”

Finally, writing across all curricular areas, with a consistent set of expectations through the implementation of the “6+1 Traits of Writing,” was put into place. Significant training of implementing writing strategies in all curricular areas, and in connection with the “6+1 Traits of Writing,” positively impacted both the quantity and quality of written responses in all academic areas, but in particular, mathematics.

All of the aforementioned components combined to add to the improvement of student academic performance. The change in culture was no longer limited to a behavioral focus. Rather, as a result of the significant change in behavior, attention was given to improving academics.

Being able to support students also meant that the staff had to establish a strong working relationship with students. This meant being present, both physically and mentally. It is one thing to stand in the hallway during passing period and say hello to kids as they walk by. It is something completely different to see students walking in the hallway; you join them, and walk with them to class, inquiring as to how they think they performed at a recent concert, or how they might have improved at the previous night’s big game.

Getting educators to change, let alone maintain the change in its theoretical practice, was challenging. In any case where the staff was to model behavior for students they must have been given the opportunity to live a tangent journey. In this case, staff had to know what it was like to be empowered and have ownership. Staff had to take risks and be willing to justify their actions without fear of adverse consequences. We had to ensure that any decision made was in the best interest of

the students served. In consideration of this, my first recommendation would be to take the staff on a journey of personal and professional reflection. It is sometimes stated that middle-level educators are born, not made; middle-level teachers either love being at the middle level, or they hate it. In the case of enjoying working with developing adolescents, there is no middle ground. We have to embrace every day as new, and every challenge as an opportunity for growth. Embracing every challenge as an opportunity for growth is an applicable skill set for students and staff alike.

As part of the continuing growth in being a middle level educator, I would suggest a breadth of current literature that addresses this study. As a benefit to the reader, a compiled list is present in Appendix C – “Suggested Readings”. It should be noted that this list is not all inclusive. Rather, it contains suggested pieces of literature that might also better help the future researcher in framing an understanding as to my foundational pedagogy and experiences prior to conducting this study.

As it relates to this study and the impact of other stakeholder groups on ownership and empowerment, specific focus was not made. Specifically, parents/guardians, teachers, administrators, and community members’ perceptions have not been accounted for as they related to the varied stakeholder groups’ self-perception on their own group’s empowerment through ownership and the impact on school culture. The result of this would then lead me to believe that the targeted implications for this finding are as follow:

1. Other stakeholder groups should be studied qualitatively and quantitatively to address perceptions of their respective stakeholder group’s impact on school culture.

2. Students' and parents/guardians' qualitative data from this study should have a quantitative cross reference, and a future study should include surveying of students and parents with similar questions that allow for a scaled response and quantification of findings.
3. Expanding this study to follow students through the final years of adolescence should be done to finalize the link to Kohlberg's research on the stages of adolescence and school culture. Specifically, this study should be repeated with the same pool of possible subjects at the conclusion of their high school experience. Then, the researcher should compare responses between junior high and high school experiences as they relate to ownership, empowerment, and the impact on school culture. Which experience provided for the greatest level of ownership and empowerment? A link in this study should be made directly with Kohlberg's research and an analysis on which level or stage student subjects rate themselves.
4. As it was discovered that staff had to first model the concept of empowerment through ownership in the learning community, it will be vitally important to consider staff perceptions on how their ownership in the learning community impacted school culture. Additional consideration should be given to answering the question of, "How did staff empowerment through ownership in the learning community impact student empowerment through ownership in the learning community?"

### ***Implications for Finding 2 – People Made the Difference***

In consultation with the BLT and staff as a whole, we agreed that we had to improve upon the previous professional practices of the staff to get the students more involved in changing the nature of student behavior that would redefine the culture of the building. Students took on more responsibility, and more importantly, were afforded the opportunity for more responsibility within their school. The result was that the entire staff embraced the challenge of reducing significant student behaviors that resulted in students losing instruction time through suspensions or expulsions.

When we agreed as a staff to make changes, it was not without challenges. A few staff balked at participating in professional book studies, or any other professional growth activities for that matter. This did not dissuade the majority of staff. In collaboration with the BLT, we attempted to address the majority of concerns shared by those few staff members that were more comfortable at accepting professional stagnation. Personal coaching by team leaders, peers, and administrators had the greatest impact on these late implementers of change. For the balance, peer pressure worked wonders. As an example, the administrative team invited teachers throughout the building to present on a variety of different topics. One teacher in particular talked about the importance of “Mix It Up Day” and directly asked some of our late implementers to volunteer. She received no negative response to her request. As a result of student feedback to those late implementers, the positive response from students fueled the impact the experience had on both the student body and those teachers who previously wanted nothing to do with change.

Once we had teachers empowered and they had strategies to make connections with kids, relationships blossomed exponentially. This went beyond greeting students at the door. Teachers had established an identity as making a difference. Because of this modeling of behavior, and the close relationships that were formed, students developed an identity of making a difference which eventually spread homeward to parents/guardians.

Beyond making teachers feel comfortable, students also had to feel comfortable in their school environment. Frequently during my conversations with the student subjects I heard comments about students not feeling as comfortable in high school as they felt in their middle level school. In considering what contributed to this, the students indicated that they did not know or even see the administrators. Some students knew who their dean was, and only one student indicated that he had only seen the principal once. The students indicated that staff and administrative presence helped them succeed, thus people made the difference.

In order to make a difference, staff had to be present and take an active interest in the school community. Sitting behind a desk, and we know it happens quite frequently, is part of the job. As an entire staff, administration included, we had to choose to make getting up from behind that desk part of our jobs. We chose to be present. We chose to be involved in more than just paperwork.

As administrators, sitting behind our desks and having students visit us was crucial. While we were disciplinarians, students needed to see the administration first and foremost as educational leaders. As an example, that meant that we spoke with students about their grades, and followed up with them individually. We let the

students know that we were actively pursuing their performance. We opened our offices up to anyone who needed academic assistance. During our ninth period resource-study hall, the administrative team would have students ranging from the lowest academic level to the highest. Sometimes we had small groups working on a project and they requested to work in our offices. Here again was a great way to make that personal connection with students and to let them see that we are present in their educational lives.

Greeting students daily and bidding them farewell at the end of the day was one of the most rewarding experiences for me as a building leader. Constance mentioned that it did not matter the weather – rain, sleet, shine – she and the other students could count on the entire administrative team to be out and about welcoming students. For me, this was a great way to see, after getting to know the students, who might be coming in with more baggage than the day before.

Kids do not have a poker face, so it was important for the administrative team to be able to sense whether a student was having a hard time to proactively inform their team of teachers, and to mention our observations to the social worker. Students, even on some of their toughest days, were able to realize that the staff somehow knew there was something wrong, and we were there to support them.

As a staff, we realized that talking and working with kids was the way to go. It is, after all, the reason why we went into this field. The staff had to know the students. Specifically, every child deserved to be known by name, by interest, and by a teacher who did not have the child assigned as a student on their class roster. So, as a faculty, we decided to go through our list of the student body and identify those

students who at least ten staff members knew. When we came to students who we did not have at least a “ten count” on, staff took the initiative and went out of their way to make a personal connection with the students. To send a resounding message to a student, have ten staff members with whom the student did not normally interact with, greet them. It was powerful. It was even more invigorating to see the glow on the child’s face when they realized that the staff members also knew of the student’s personal interests and took notice.

As a result of this finding and its connection to the research question, the following points are provided to address additional questions that arose from this research and are provided as suggestion for future study:

1. While this study asks students to identify how many and which people at the school the students felt cared about them, no additional insight is sought as a result of the responses. These responses, however, should be investigated further to qualify and/or quantify why certain adults were identified by the students. What characteristics did these particular adults have? Were there vignettes or personal experiences the students had to give indication as to what caused the students to believe an adult made a difference?
2. Student subjects indicated that they “felt” they could or did make a difference. There was an apparent self-reflective experience identifying what the students saw in themselves. It should be considered, however, as part of a future study on “making a difference” what the students felt or perceived their peers did in order to make a difference.

### ***Implications for Finding 3 – Empowerment Can Change Culture***

No change in culture, as part of this study, would have been possible had it not been for empowerment through ownership in the learning community and people making a difference. Findings one and two are the keystones to the success of changing culture as a result of empowerment through ownership in the learning community.

While it was established that the concepts of ownership and empowerment share a simultaneous dependency in order to impact school culture, we have yet to determine what role faculty played in this significant change. In addition to targeting only students, this study was conducted with students from a suburban area.

Finally, it is emphasized here that a lasting change cannot occur without a change in culture. This means that the stakeholder individual and shared values, beliefs, and attitudes must adapt and change into knowing, believing, and doing differently.

Implications for future study should be considered in the following areas:

1. Conducting either a qualitative and/or quantitative study focusing on the staff and then repeating this study in another setting, perhaps more urban than suburban or rural, may lead to additional insight as to perceptions of staff on changing culture through empowerment.
2. Consideration may also be given to conducting a study in an environment that is grounded in empowerment such as Boys Town, Nebraska where a

long history of student ownership has, since its inception, been the driving force to the establishment of the culture known the world around.

#### ***Implications for Finding 4 – Culture Impacts Behavior and Achievement***

School culture, by its very nature, is reflective of and reflected in student achievement and comportment. Logic would then dictate that this interdependent relationship, similar to the relationship between ownership and empowerment, led to a change in student achievement and comportment with a commensurate change in school culture. Simply put, as the culture improved, so did students' behavior and academic achievement.

The significance of the emergence of this particular finding is immense. The initial study focused only on the indicated impact of empowerment through ownership in the learning community and the subsequent impact on school culture. The subsequent emergence of the connection between improved culture and improvement in student behavior and academic achievement was unfathomable. In making the connection between the first three findings, and then reflecting on the quantitative information available as it related to student academic and behavioral performance, the correlation between improving culture and improving academics and behavior was established.

The change in behavior was reflected in Table 5.2, while change in academics was referenced in Table 5.3. These two pieces, while limited in their scope, specifically identified changes in comportment and academic performance at the

same building where students had indicated that empowerment and ownership impacted school culture.

Table 5.2 – Behavior Management Data (by school year)			
	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
Suspensions	94	75	51
Expulsions	9	3	0

Table 5.3 – Academic Performance (by school year)			
	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
Assessment and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)	Improvement in all areas, and AYP met in all areas	Improvement in all areas, and AYP met in all areas sans reading for “students with disabilities”	Improvement in all areas, and AYP met in all areas
Summer School	37	10	16
Retentions	6	1	0

The staff and especially the administrative team believed that the greatest impact on behavior was the establishment of consistency in expectations and behavioral management procedures. This included timeliness of feedback to students that was descriptive and designed to change future behaviors, thus behavioral management was formative in nature. In addition, the premise of “form follows function” resembled our path to improving academic performance through improving the school’s culture by improving behavior.

In Findings 1, 2, and 3, I established the links between ownership and empowerment and their subsequent impact on school culture. In Finding 4, I found that behavior and achievement were changed as a result of the change in school

culture. This link excluded other possible factors that impacted school culture, which led me to consider the following points for future study:

1. What other variables would have a consequential relationship with school culture which resulted in a change in student comportment and achievement? This question should be considered as independent from, dependent on, and interdependent with ownership and empowerment.
2. As culture is a reflection of the affective domain, change in culture impacting behavior and achievement would logically connect well with a qualitative study. In deference to this assumption, I would recommend a qualitative or mixed methodology to address data which can be linked between culture and comportment and achievement and the connection back to this original study.

### ***Conclusion***

Upon embarking on this study, I had spent my entire career as a middle level educator. Most recently, I served as the building principal at a middle level school, charged with the challenge of making significant change to student behavior and the culture of a building that was running amuck. In collaboration with administrative peers and staff in the building, I witnessed initial struggle to make a positive change; however, within a year's time, the endeavor appeared to be making a difference in students as individuals and as a collective whole. Through the interviews conducted with 12 students and 10 of their respective parents/guardians, data gathered indicated the emergence of change as a result of empowering students through ownership in

their school and school community. This demarginalization of students would cause significant growth through adolescence at a rate that seemed counter to research of adolescent researchers.

This study's purpose was to explore the perceptions of middle level students and their respective parents/guardians on student empowerment and its subsequent impact on school culture. Findings obtained indicated that leadership on the part of the building administration and staff, by way of significantly supporting student personal development, was a key to the success of impacting a school's culture through student empowerment and ownership. The cornerstone of this study was laid in the research question: What are student and parent/guardian perceptions related to the student's impact on school culture through student empowerment, and what factors do they believe will help to foster positive change in school culture?

While the first three findings brought this research back to the original problem statement, of even greater significance was the emergence of the unexpected finding that empowerment and ownership not only impact culture, they impact behavior and student performance. The foundation in the findings led me as a practitioner and researcher to embrace the insight obtained that adolescent students require specific developmental assets. They need to be taught and then trusted to do the right thing. Adolescents need to be met right where they are-in the middle.

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## Appendix A – Participant Interview Questions - Student

I will be asking you a series of questions. You are asked to answer them openly and honestly without any fear of retaliation. The research collected will be used to help adolescents attending a middle level school. Your interview will be digitally recorded, and later transcribed into a typed format to use in this study. Please respond with a “yes” or “no” to the following questions:

- a. Has your parent or guardian signed the permission form allowing you participate in this study?
- b. Would you like your parent/guardian to join you while you are interviewed? If yes, as a reminder, our parent/guardian is here to give support by being present. In order to give natural responses, our parent/guardian will be directed to not guide you in any way. If you need clarification or require that a question be repeated, just ask.
- c. Have you signed the student asset form to participate in this study?
- d. Do you give permission to digitally record your responses?
- e. Upon completing the typing of the transcripts, you are welcome to review your responses to the interview questions. Would you like to review your responses once they are typed?

We will now move into the main interview questions. If you need to have a question repeated, just ask.

1. For the purpose of this study, you will be given an alias – a name to use in place of your own to protect your identity. From the list provided, what name would you like to use?
2. How old are you?
3. What grade will you be in for the 2010-2011 school year?
4. What years did you attend JJHS?
5. Describe the school for me. What was it like there when you started and when you graduated?
6. Imagine you were trying to tell a friend or relative about JJHS. What five (5) words would you use to tell your friend or relative about JJHS?
7. How did you feel when you walked through the school doors each morning?
  - a. What made you feel that way?
8. Have you been back to visit the school?
  - a. How did you feel when you returned to visit?
  - b. What made you feel that way?
9. Did the feeling in the building make the school better or worse?
  - a. What makes you think that?
10. What are the best things about JJHS?
11. If you could wave a magic wand and change something about the school, what would it be?
12. What are the best things about JJHS?
13. When you think about JJHS, whose school is it?
  - a. How does that make you feel?

- b. Why do you feel that way?
- 14. While attending school, did you feel like you could make a difference?
- 15. Did you make a difference at JJHS?
  - a. How do you know?
- 16. Tell me about something you did while at JJHS of which you are proud.
- 17. Was there an experience that made you angry?
  - a. Could you describe that for me?
- 18. How many adults from the school can you name who you think cared about you?
- 19. What kinds of things make you think that an adult cared or did not care about you?
- 20. Is there something that you want to tell me that I have not asked about?

## Appendix B – Participant Interview Questions – Parent/Guardian

I will be asking you a series of questions. You are asked to answer them openly and honestly without any fear of retaliation. The research collected will be used to help adolescents attending a middle level school. Your interview will be digitally recorded, and later transcribed into a typed format to use in this study. Please respond with a “yes” or “no” to the following questions:

- a. Have you signed the permission form allowing you participate in this study?
- b. Have you signed the parent/guardian permission form to allow your child to participate in this study?
- c. Do you give permission to digitally record your responses?
- d. Upon completing the typing of the transcripts, you are welcome to review your responses to the interview questions. Would you like to review your responses once they are typed?

We will now move into the main interview questions. If you need to have a question repeated, just ask. The questions you are going to be asked are similar to those asked of your child.

1. For the purpose of this study, your child was given an alias – a name to use in place of his/her own to protect his/her identity. For the purpose of this study, the transcripts and findings will reference you and your responses as \_\_\_\_\_’s mom/dad/guardian.
2. How old is your child?
3. What grade will your child be in for the 2010-2011 school year?
4. What years did your child attend JJHS?
5. Describe the school for me. What was it like there when your child started and when your child graduated?
6. Imagine you were trying to tell a friend or relative about JJHS. What five (5) words would you use to tell your friend or relative about JJHS?
7. How did you feel when you walked through the school doors?
  - a. What made you feel that way?
8. How did your child feel when he/she walked through the school doors?
  - a. What made him/her feel that way?
  - b. How do you know?
9. Have you been back to visit the school?
  - a. How did you feel when you returned to visit?
  - b. What made you feel that way?
10. Has your child been back to visit the school?
  - a. How did he/she feel when he/she returned to visit?
  - b. What made him/her feel that way?
  - c. How do you know?
11. Did the feeling in the building make the school better or worse?
  - a. What makes you think that?
12. What are the best things about JJHS?
13. What does your child say are the best things about JJHS?

- a. What makes them think this?
- b. How do you know?
- 14. If you could wave a magic wand and change something about the school, what would it be?
- 15. If your child could wave a magic wand and change something about the school, what would it be?
  - a. Why do you think that?
- 16. When you think about JJHS, whose school is it?
  - a. How does that make you feel?
  - b. Why do you feel that way?
- 17. When your child talks about JJHS, does he/she indicate whose school it is?
  - a. How does that make you feel?
  - b. Why do you feel that way?
- 18. While your child was attending the school, did you feel like he/she could make a difference?
- 19. Did your child make a difference at JJHS?
  - a. How do you know?
- 20. Tell me about something your child did while at JJHS of which he/she is proud.
- 21. Tell me about something your child did while at JJHS of which you are proud.
- 22. Was there an experience that made your angry?
  - a. How do you know?
  - b. Could you describe that for me?
- 23. Was there an experience your child had that made you angry?
  - a. Could you describe that for me?
- 24. How many adults from the school can your child name who he/she thinks cared about him/her?
- 25. What kinds of things make your child think that an adult cared or did not care about him/her?
  - a. How do you know?
- 26. How many adults from the school can you name who you think cared about your child?
- 27. What kinds of things make you think that an adult cared or did not care about your child?
- 28. Is there something that you want to tell me that I have not asked about?

## Appendix C – Suggested Readings

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