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# Bridging the Achievement Gap: An Exploratory Study of a Virginia School

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Bridging the Achievement Gap: An Exploratory Study of a Virginia School

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Psychology Department from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for           Highest Honors            
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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## Introduction

The achievement gap is the phenomenon whereby “on almost every measure of academic performance, be it the SAT, ACT, or state mandated examinations, African American student performance trails, by large margins, that of their white peers” (Paige & Witty, 2010). Interacting with the minority students of Tilletts County (TC) through mentoring led me to believe that the achievement gap was present within the TC school system and this suspicion was proved by examining the publically available standardized achievement results for the district (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). That being said, I strongly believe that something needs to be done about the problem, and if anything is currently being done, those efforts need to be evaluated to determine why low minority achievement is a persistent reality among TC schools. For this reason, I am researching heavily documented correlates of academic achievement in the Tilletts County School (TC) system to find out the extent to which these variables affect the achievement gap phenomenon within the district. This research will be accomplished by comparing and contrasting relevant literature as it intersects with interview responses about the phenomenon from important actors (teachers, faculty, administration) within the school system. Research conclusions and recommendations will be shared with the Administration of TC at the close of the study and will hopefully be utilized as a resource to help TC increase minority achievement in the district. This project is of the utmost importance to me because I have mentored minority students of the TC system, who struggle academically for four years and yearn to contribute to a solution.

To accomplish the goals of this study, I will use triangulation, an approach that takes seemingly different and possibly contradicting methods that are actually ways to develop a more comprehensive understanding and approach to the problem at hand. In particular, the research

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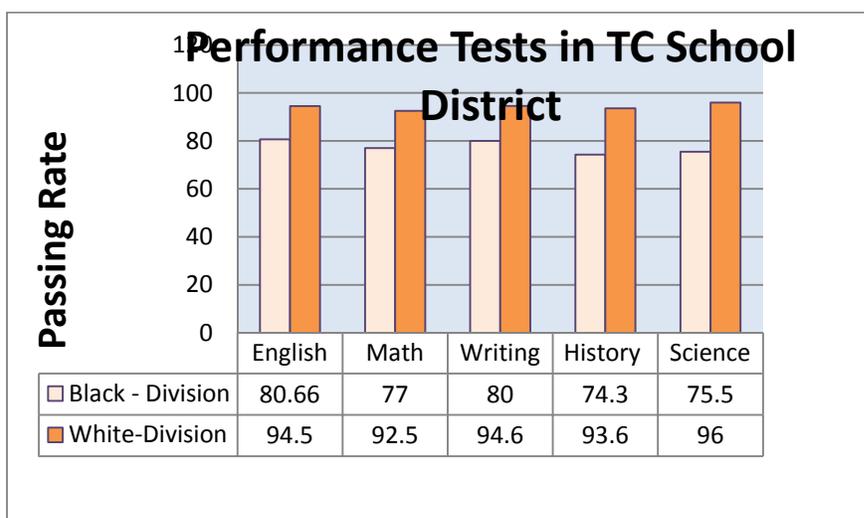
will be exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. The study will be exploratory in the sense that I will be utilizing a comprehensive literature review to ground my understanding of the achievement gap broadly and how it relates to my particular local research environment. The achievement gap has been a nationally documented problem for over fifty years and this review will cover sources that give national context to the achievement gap. The research will resemble descriptive studies in the fact that I will describe the achievement gap specifically as it exists in Tillets County school systems by examining statistical data on student achievement.

Lastly, the study will exhibit characteristics of explanatory studies to the extent that certain factors identified through the exploratory and descriptive portions will be examined in more detail to determine why, and to what extent, do these identified variables exist in the local school system. In particular, school ethos, multicultural competence, and the gap between research and practice are the variables that I will examine in this study. These three factors are heavily documented and inextricably tied to the academic achievement of at-risk minority youth, thus making them extremely relevant to this research. I will study these variables through quantitative structured interviews and through the review of literature.

The literature pertaining to my local research interest begins with the identification and description of the achievement gap in the local Tillets County School System. The Virginia Department of Education website on the “school report cards” page gave me access to the information about student achievement in the district broken down by sub-group (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). This easily accessible page gives public access to a variety of indicators that relate to academic achievement including the breakdown of yearly standardized test scores by race and subject, drop-out rates, adequate yearly progress, graduation rates, and school related disciplinary offenses. The VDOE website proves to be very helpful to my research

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because of its rich database of relevant information that I can utilize to illuminate the severity of the local achievement gap. In particular, the most recent data for the TC school division as a whole, shows, on average, 16.78% less African Americans passing yearly standardized than Whites from 2006-2009. The name of the Virginia School system and its schools were changed to a fictitious one for the purposes of this study to preserve the anonymity of the school system.



School ethos is the first variable I will examine as it relates to the achievement gap in the TC school system because a number of sources suggest that it is one of the most powerful protective factors for academic achievement. School ethos refers to the culture of a given school that can affect a child's academic performance. A culture that is documented to breed success includes high expectations, caring and support, and youth participation and involvement. (Benard, 1992). In fact, Rutter, 1982, posits that, "supporting a school ethos of high expectations as a protective shield" is an extremely important variable within successful school systems (Rutter, 1982, p.56). Furthermore, successful schools, "share certain characteristics: an academic emphasis, teacher's clear expectations and regulations, high level of student participation, and many, varied alternative resources" (Benard, 1992, p.8). Also, "research on successful programs

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for youth at risk of academic failure has clearly demonstrated that a school-wide climate of high expectations is a critical factor in reducing failure and increasing the number of college bound youth” (Benard, 1992, p.8). Additionally, school ethos, as inculcated by administrators of a given school, is commonly noted as an invaluable characteristic of successful charter schools (Reinventing Public, 2010). The research clearly shows the importance of school ethos in its relation to academic achievement and that is why a portion of the qualitative interview questions will focus on that topic.

Multicultural competence and culturally responsive teaching are closely linked variables that also will be focused on during my research. Culturally responsive teaching, “stresses the ability of teachers to respond to their students by incorporating elements of student’s culture in their teaching” and multicultural competence refers to the ability to do so by, “using the cultural knowledge, prior experience, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant” (Irvine and Armento, 2001, Gay, 2000, & Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011) corroborated these themes and emphasized the fact that teachers are often not comfortable or equipped to teach minority students in the most effective and helpful way. (Charity-Hudley, 2011). There are specific characteristics of colloquial language variation specific to minorities that make transitions to academic language notably challenging (Anderson, 2010). Teachers with a high level of social competence are able to navigate the idiosyncrasies of a student’s culture to make learning more accessible and less aversive. This competence can come from pre-teaching service learning, through teacher training, or from life experiences (Cress, Collier, & Reitenauer 2005; Carter 2003).

A report on the alignment of standards for the incorporation of diversity in teacher education programs explains that, “two areas of reform are receiving strong agreement across

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various teacher education reform reports were that teacher education programs should ensure strong pedagogically informed disciplinary preparation and develop multicultural competence in their students” (Carter, 2003). A sign of the importance of multicultural competence and pedagogy is the fact that teacher education programs are now including that factor in the alignment of their standards. Multicultural competence is so important now that a scale has been created and implemented to measure new teacher’s level of multicultural competence before they enter certain school districts (Williams, 2003). Research strongly emphasizes multicultural competence and culturally responsive pedagogy and that is why that theme is emphasized in the content of my project’s quantitative interview questions (Carter, 2003).

The third variable that will be examined within my research is the extent to which research guides the practices that affect minority student achievement within the TC school district. From extensive studies of academic risk and protective factors related to the achievement gap, researchers and practitioners have created and tested a myriad of school implemented interventions that have resulted in significant measurable increases in the academic success of minority students. (Chubb & Loveless 2002, Donaldson & Peske 2010, Martinez and Klopott 2005). In many cases, these interventions, changes in practices or a combination of them have led to the substantial narrowing of the gap and improvements in the decrease of high school dropout rates by indexes of +25 to +42 on the What Works Clearinghouse’s index measure, and increased levels of college enrollment (Hawkins et al. 2004, Avid 2006, WWC, 2006). Chubb and Loveless, in *Bridging the Achievement Gap*, even statistically analyze the results of major achievement gap related interventions such as private school vouchers, reduced class sizes, and high stakes testing (2002). Furthermore, (Abbot, Walton, Tapia & Greenwood, 1999) explains

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there has been a difficulty in schools nationally incorporating research successfully into classrooms, possibly because of the failure of top down professional development models.

The undeniable gap between research and practice has become a national concern and is a possible reason that best practices are not always being used in school systems. (Malouf & Schiller 1995, Cooper 2007). *In Practice and Research in Special Education*, Malouf and Schiller emphasize the salience of the research to practice gap conundrum (Malouf & Schiller 1995). Cooper, 2007, provides more support for the push to close research to practice gaps with the end goal of increasing academic achievement of minority students (Cooper, 2007). The take home message from these sources is that the research on causal factors, protective factors, and best practices needs to be applied and put to practice successfully. Questions about this issue will certainly be included in the qualitative interviews for my study.

The paucity of research based directed action might be because, “reading research takes a low priority for teachers, unlike many practitioners in other fields” (Viadero, 1994, 36). Teachers have a mentally and physically demanding job that is already extremely time consuming and taxing. They direct a significant amount of energy into the management of their classrooms and when their students have breaks for lunch or between classes, teachers are busy maintaining their lesson plans, communicating with other teachers, or contacting parents. After a day’s worth of work, which usually extends way beyond the time school lets out, teachers often are responsible for grading a large number of papers, exams, quizzes etc. It simply is not reasonable to expect teachers to go home and sift through research. Also, “because the majority of teacher educators do not conduct research nor assign reading of research articles as a part of their pre-service training, teachers learn to disregard research the moment they enter the field” (Arends, 1990). For these reasons, “collaborative approaches, uniting researchers and practitioners in research

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and professional development designed to translate into research practice” appear highly promising (e.g., Greenwood, Delquadri, & Bulgren, 1993; Huberman 1990).

Public school systems could possibly reach out to local institutions of higher learning to ascertain faculty and/or student researchers who would be more than willing to help synthesize literature, carry out reports, and/or evaluate the effectiveness of programs. Research is mandated to graduate in many institutions and students would value the opportunity to conduct research in the field. In return, school systems could keep up on the latest research and ensure that their strides towards bringing the achievement gap are the most effective and promising ones. If not student researchers, school systems could contract researchers part-time for help.

The need for the collaboration of researchers and practitioners in the school system is even more relevant when analyzing literature that notes the failure of the professional development model to foster effective incorporation of research into practice. Huberman expounds on this point (Huberman, 1990). According to Huberman, the professional development workshops held for teachers and administrators do not succeed in meaningful change of practice based on research. (Huberman, 1990). According to the literature, “the traditional professional development model; brief workshops, has not led directly to direct implementation” (Huberman 1990, Joyce & Showers 1995). Furthermore, an article in the Kaestle explains that researchers have traditionally, “published their findings in professional journals and trusted that others would read the results and use the findings in their classrooms (Kaestle, 1993). The aforementioned research warrants the examination of the professional development structure in the TC school system and I hoped to be able to cover it in my research.

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As an advanced undergraduate researcher, I seek to accomplish the collaboration with practitioners of the TC school system while exploring the phenomenon of the achievement gap in the school system. I will accomplish this by ascertaining feedback on various topics, supported by research that may have significant effects on the achievement gap in the context of TC schools. My goal is to ascertain a multifaceted qualitative assessment of the overall nature of the achievement gap as it specifically relates to the TC School division. This will allow the forthcoming literature review to be better tailored to the exact nature of the phenomenon as it appears in the division, thus greatly increasing the efficacy and relevancy of the recommendations, information, or insights that will be shared with the school system at the conclusion of the research.

This research project is rather extensive in scope and as such, there is no possible that I can address all potential research avenues. That being said, there are certainly examples of literature I believe to be very promising to foster future research and/or a possible follow up study in TC. In particular, Paige & Witty comprehensively outlines the history of the achievement gap and the current state of the gap, providing concrete statistics that operationally define the gap, evaluating the most common explanations of the gap, navigating proposed solutions of the problem and also offering a new perspective on what the elimination of the gap will require (Paige & Witty, 2010). Furthermore, a major reoccurring theme of the book is that, “To completely close the achievement gap—not just in a few schools or even a few districts, but on a national basis—will require support for school achievement and cognitive development from student’s home and community environments as well” (Paige& Witty, 2010). This axiom corroborates with the research of community psychologists who believe that strong risk and protective factors that effect minority achievement exist in the school, home, and the community

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and that comprehensive interventions that integrate the three areas are the most promising and effective models of change (Benard 2002, Kober 2001).

Additionally, Supporting Effective Teaching Through Teacher Evaluation is a detailed report about the positive attributes of charter schools, specifically highly effective teachers that the Center for American Progress believes are closely correlated to high academic achievement of at-risk minorities (Donaldson, 2010). The report meticulously covers all aspects of teaching evaluations and it certainly will be added to the conclusion discussion of my honors thesis where I discuss potential solutions to the gap. A major limitation is that the report is myopic and only focuses on one type of intervention in the school environment. Martinez & Klopott offer an analysis of how change on the high school level can contribute to the narrowing of the achievement gap, especially as it pertains to college enrollment of minority youth. This report is good for offering another possible solution but it is lacking in that it does not integrate the home and community into the strategy of the intervention (Martinez & Klopott, 2005).

The proposed research conducted in the TC school system sought to examine the extent to which school ethos, multicultural competence, and the research-to-practice gap exists in the school system and how they affect minority achievement. Quantitative structured interviews were conducted to gather information from teachers, faculty, and administrators that examine their views on the achievement gap, interventions currently in use by the district, and the way research is currently utilized to affect decisions made in relation to at-risk youth who are affected by the gap. Furthermore, I sought to explore the extent to which beliefs held by teachers, faculty, and administrators, about the achievement gap, align with what is actually known from formal research about the phenomenon. Negative school ethos, including misconceptions about the achievement gap and the students affected by it are common, and these conceptions often affect

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the way teachers, faculties, and administrators address the achievement gap in their schools and classrooms. Analyzing the presuppositions of the teachers, faculty, and administrators is a very important first step to addressing the achievement gap and the research-to-practice gap. This research will explore the extent to which the research-to-practice gap exists in TC and subsequently offer research based tools, strategies, and interventions to bridge both gaps through a comprehensive literature review.

### **Results**

The first question asked to the participants of this research was, “why, in your opinion, does the achievement gap exist and persist in TC schools?” Two themes tied for most reoccurring response, with six participants touching on each theme respectively. Any variation of inadequate parental support was tied with low socioeconomic status. The parenting response was the response that a great amount of the students that are under-achieving come from low socioeconomic back grounds. These responses are presented together because participants often described them in relation to one another and also because research suggests their correlation. In respect to the aforementioned variables, participant four stated that, “between our majority and minority population there is a huge economic difference” and expanded, explaining that these at-risk kids do not have the same support at home for homework and encouragement for school, and that their parents are working more jobs, and often evening jobs in particular(Px4). Another respondent replied with a similar answer explaining how some at-risk kids are from a single parent household where the parent works a night job so when the student does come home their parent is asleep. Not only that, but “you better not wake them up either!” because the parent gets little rest before the night job (Px4).

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The participant explained the reality about the night jobs to emphasize that there are often fewer opportunities for parental interaction with at-risk youth and that this is closely related to SES. The lower the SES, the more likely the parent is to have more than one job and less time to support their child (Px11). The same participant even stated that she has had students that have “never showed their mom their report card” and a student who told her that his mother dissuaded him from college aspirations (Px11). In the same vein, another participant said that he simply couldn’t give students grades for getting materials sent home and signed because of the aforementioned issues (Px12).

Participant eight, a principal at his school, speaks on the issue of student background as well stating that there is a “relatively diverse and polarized community. Challenges exist in our school because we have students who come to our school with significant background knowledge and significant educational and extra-educational opportunities that their families have provided and we have other students that come to us that have not had those opportunities and when those two cultures clash in a building, if you have a polarized and diverse community that comes into a school it is possible to have polarized and diverse achievement results that reflect that diversity” (Px8). This explanation speaks to a pressing challenge that the district faces as it relates to bridging the achievement gap.

Overall, even though faculty of the TC school system identified parents and low SES as a salient cause of the achievement gap in the school system, they did not absolve themselves of responsibility. Many participants said they treat their students as if they were their own children and set expectations for them accordingly. Likewise, most all of faculty reported it being their job ultimately, to be responsible for their student’s achievement regardless of the student’s home life. The faculty just wishes parents were more involved. In fact, on the second interview

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question: “Whose responsibility is it to help underachieving minorities reach their academic potential? (school, home, community etc),” all of the respondents from the school system, 17, answered some variation of “all three.” All believed in a shared responsibility and most emphasized the school as the entity which should have the most responsibility.

One respondent said, “The school should forge the most responsibility, communicate with parents and use the resources of the community” (Px5). Another stated, “Typically the responsibility falls on the school but that implies that it is imposed or a burden upon the school. It is important for the school, community, and faculty to realize that responsibility is inherently ours and we have to meet kids where they are in school and differences in kids, albeit inconvenient it is a reality and we have an obligation to meet them where they are” (Px8). Another simply states, “all three and it is a big challenge to bring all three together.” These responses indicate that schools are on the right track as far as believing in the power and necessity of the “educational triad,” the alignment of which is emphasized by Paige & Witty, (2010). They support the conclusion strongly that all children can learn at high levels when taught at high levels. They add to this statement by saying, “Being taught at high levels includes support and commitment from the entire education triad---home, school, and community” (Paige & Witty, 2010).

Resilient children who have the ability to overcome a myriad of risk factors and negative environments often experience protective factors, in some shape or fashion, from the home, school, and the community. A child who has caring and support, high expectations, and the ability to participate meaningfully in their environment, has a great chance of being resilient and overcoming risk factors to become successful in life. (Benard,1992). For these reasons, it is an important goal to get the home, school, and community aligned and interview responses suggest

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that faculty of the TC schools system do reach out to parents with mixed success. At the same time participant ten notes that, “within TC there is a lot of ‘well if their parents aren’t there, there is nothing we can do’” (Px10). This is an extremely dangerous paradigm to be present in any degree in the school system. This mindset is fatalistic, takes onus off teachers and faculty for student achievement, and creates a culture where students are almost destined to fail due to lack of high expectations and support by the primary actors in their school experience (Benard, 1992).

TC needs to continue to do its best to oppose the defeatist outlook about the lack of parental support among at-risk student’s educational experience that exists among some teachers in the TC school system. An explicit goal of The Multicultural Affairs Unit, (MAU) is to foster and sustain relationships with parents. Specifically, this goal manifested in the 2009 strategic plan for TC which said the MAU was , “to implement research-based activities that align with the Johns Hopkins Network for Parent/Partnership Model, the work of poverty expert Ruby Payne, and others, in order to involve minority parents in the education of their children” (TC, 2009). The fact that the MAU was supporting a researched based model for parental outreach is promising but further evaluation and follow up research needs to be conducted to analyze the efficacy of this model.

Complimenting that initiative is the division wide parent workshops that are held in the district. The home environment, and specifically parental expectations, knowledge, and accountability as it relates to their children’s achievement in school is a critical factor, pivotal to bridging the achievement gap (Paige & Witty, 2010). The school system leadership should continue to stress parental outreach and interaction and can look further into more research to identify additional parental outreach strategies and curriculum.

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The Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP), an effective comprehensive initiative to increase the social, emotional, and academic outcomes of students, utilized parental outreach as one important component of the program. In the first and second grades, the SSDP utilized the “*catch em being good*” seven session curriculum that offered behavior management strategies (McCarthy & Brown, 1983). In the second and third grade a curriculum was used entitled “*preparing for school success*,” a four session curriculum that is designed to, “improve parent-child involvement and enhance children’s school success by improving parents’ abilities to provide a positive learning environment at home, help their children develop reading and math skills, communicate effectively with their children’s teachers, and support their children’s school success” (Hawkins and Catalano, 1999). Another curriculum is utilized by the SSDP called “*preparing for the drug-free years*” that seeks to, “reduce drug abuse and related barriers to learning and increase pro-social bonding by helping parents create opportunities for children to be involved in meaningful ways with their families, set and reinforce clear expectations for their children’s behaviors, teach their children to resist negative peer influences, reduce family conflict and control emotions, and practice consistent family management” (Kosterman, Hawkins, Spoth, Haggerty & Zhu, et al., 1998). All of the above curriculums are good examples of parental outreach initiatives that can be examined and possibly put to use by TC.

Parental workshops and training are great ways to bolster the support for at-risk students through their guardians, a limiting factor of these initiatives is participation. The most at-risk students have parents who are often work a lot and have limited transportation and can generally be difficult to get them to come to the school for initiatives. Some participants in the current TC study even noted that they had students who had never showed their parents their report card. If a parent cannot even get to reading their student’s report card for whatever reason, it will be even

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more difficult getting that parent out to the school for a workshop. TC's current outreach to parents should be examined and evaluated to see how it can increase parental participation from the parents of students who need it the most.

Heiber addressed this particular issue at a recent Symposium for the Achievement of African American Males at Virginia State University in the Spring of 2011 (Heiber, 2011). In a workshop entitled, Using STEM Education to Raise the Achievement of African American Males, he spoke to a new initiative he is spearheading in the District of Columbia to make home visits to under achieving and at-risk students at the schools he works with. The home visits have been exceptionally effective and nature of the visit holds parents directly accountable for their student's outcomes. In a home visit, a faculty member of the school system would come out to a home, meet with a student's guardian, explain to them the pressing concerns as it relates to the student, and create a plan of action that all parties agree to. If this plan is not followed up by the parent, a faculty member of the school system will come out to the home of the student on a weekly basis until the parent begins to comply and receive adequate pressure to buy in to the plan. The efficacy of this program is promising and is currently being evaluated by a third-party. When the evaluation is complete, TC could probably benefit from an analysis of the results of the home visit initiative and maybe in the future it can be implemented as a solution to the very difficult task of reaching out to parents (Heiber, 2011). Academic coach whose purpose is to monitor, evaluate and intervene on behalf of at-risk students could take up the responsibility for the home visits.

The most common explanations for the cause of the achievement gap in Tilletts County schools, as answered by teachers and administrators, were low socioeconomic status and inadequate parental support for student's achievement. The correlation between SES, home

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environment, and student achievement is strongly suggested by research. Paige & Witty state that, “we know that the degree to which parents read to their children, and the amount and quality of dialogue between parent and child are powerful determinants of the quality of cognitive development a child will experience” (Paige & Witty, 2010). Benard, 1992, makes shows that parental expectations are a contributing factor for children who grow up in poverty and yet are still successful in school. (Benard, 1992). The research strongly asserts that the intersection of SES and parenting is a pivotal interaction that can set children on a path to success or failure, both academically and cognitively.

The strong correlation between risk factors at home and academic achievement makes it easy to think academic achievement, for at-risk youth, is a class and social issue that needs to be dealt with at home, and thus there is nothing much teachers and schools can do to help underachieving students (Paige & Witty 2010). It is very dangerous for faculty in the school system to dwell on a student’s risk factors at home whether it be SES or subpar parental support. Although one’s home environment, SES, and parental support are important factors that have the ability to heavily affect student achievement, it is important to note that these factors do not solely determine achievement. It is imperative to note that there are other protective factors that exist in the school and the community that mitigate the effects of the aforementioned risk factors. These protective factors can push a child to be resilient and extremely successful in school.

Resiliency, as described by prevention psychologist Bonnie Benard, is the ability to overcome negative life experiences, variables, or risk factors to ultimately become successful in life and have positive life outcomes(1992). Benard explains that resiliency exists most commonly when a child has someone to offer them caring and support, to set high expectations, and when a child is given opportunities to participate meaningfully in their environment (Benard,

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1992). These protective factors that lead a student to academic success and resiliency can come from outside of the home from any role model! This includes, a pastor, coach, teacher, or mentor for example (Benard 1992). Furthermore, there is a substantial amount of research that proves the correlation between academic achievement and teacher expectations (Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968). In fact, Belinda Williams has an entire section devoted to the emphasis of high expectations, caring and support, from teachers as an effective strategy (2003). Furthermore, Paige and Witty, in *The Black White Achievement Gap* argue that the quality and efficacy of teaching and schools is the most pivotal and controllable factor that correlates with academic achievement. They argue that great schooling can overcome any risk factors faced in the home or community. (Paige & Witty, 2010).

The third most common response to the question: “Why, in your opinion, does the achievement gap exist and persist in TC schools?” were answers related to teacher quality and preparation. Participant one stated that there is often a “gap between teacher’s expectations and student’s background. I don’t think that teachers can always relate to the students and vice versa so a lot of the material the teachers present and the way they present is totally not relevant to the students” (Px1). Participant ten commented on the issue saying, “teachers sometimes lose track of relationship building – some educators think they have to hit the ground running with curriculum [instead of building relationships first]” (Px10). In the same vein, yet another participant stated that, “inability for teachers to reach their students” is an issue that leads to the achievement gap in TC (Px12).

Responses posited by faculty that teacher quality is a cause of the achievement gap in the TC school system are well supported by literature. A great amount of research shows that teacher quality has a powerful impact on student achievement and that teacher efficacy varies greatly

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(Aaronson, Barrow & Sander 2007, Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain 2005, and Gordon, Kane, & Staiger 2006). To that end, the TC school district sets goals to seek out qualified and diverse teachers while also providing a number of professional development opportunities throughout the school year. (TC, 2009). Although this is true, some teachers still do not feel as if they have enough preparation to address at-risk students. This leads one to ask what are the specific types of professional development being offered and does any of it focus on culturally relevant pedagogy as a highly referenced strategy to aid in the closing of the achievement gap?

Literature suggests that culturally relevant pedagogy will aid teachers in reaching their students. (Delpit 1995, Williams 2003). Furthermore, teacher education programs across the country have begun to realize the importance of increasing the multicultural competence of teachers before they enter the teaching realm. In a report describing the alignment of standards in teacher education programs as it relates to diversity, researchers state that, “two areas of reform are receiving strong agreement across various teacher education reform reports were that teacher education programs should ensure strong pedagogically informed disciplinary preparation and develop multicultural competence in their students” (Carter, 2003).

Culturally responsive teaching, “stresses the ability of teachers to respond to their students by incorporating elements of student’s culture in their teaching” and multicultural competence refers to the ability to do so by, “using the cultural knowledge, prior experience, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant” (Irvine and Armento, 2001, p.61; Gay, 2000, p.102). Paralleling the theme of culturally responsive teaching, Billings in *Closing the Achievement Gap*, states that, “teachers and principals need to receive training that helps them address diversity in learning rates and styles. Very few teachers believe they were adequately trained to handle the many

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responsibilities of teaching. Many teacher education curricula focus on subject area content and not on evaluating and effectively teaching to student cultural experiences. This leads to a body of teachers who do not know how to evaluate their students and meet each individual learner's needs" (Billings, 2003).

Multiple teachers interviewed in the TC schools system attest to this fact and explicitly stated that they could benefit from more support on this facet of teacher efficacy. That being said, the TC Office of Multicultural Services offers cultural responsive training to new teachers and to the "minority achievement leader" that exists in each TC school. [One vacancy is currently being filled] Yet, still there is a problem with teachers knowing how to reach at-risk students. This begs the question, are the culturally responsive training initiatives reaching all teachers? Furthermore, is the type of culturally responsive training that is being implemented matching the needs of teachers? Interviews with the Multicultural Affairs Unit and examination of the research used to guide the culturally responsive training, show that the content and material that is being implemented and taught in the multicultural training initiatives is based off the most up to date literature and research on bridging the achievement gap, research based instructional strategies, and multicultural competence. In fact, the Multicultural Affairs Unit has an impressive library with multiple copies of the most up to date and relevant research on everything related to the achievement gap. This library is a resource for anyone in the district and may be underutilized by faculty. Further research can examine the extent to which the resource is currently utilized. The library could be advertised or highlighted more in an effort to increase its use. Its' contents could be advertised on the MAU's website and the school leaders could strongly suggest its use by faculty, especially during professional development sessions.

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Besides top-down multicultural competence training offered by the Multicultural Affairs Unit, is there a supplemental way to prepare teachers with the necessary training, after they enter the district that will enable them to be highly effective with at-risk students? The answer to that question seems to be yes. Exemplary teachers exist within the TC school system that are doing extremely well with at-risk students. These exemplary teachers could be identified by superintendents or other school leaders, and used to help other teachers with their efficacy through learning communities created within the school. (Liethwood, 2010) These exemplary teachers could hold workshops on effective classroom management techniques and other relevant topics. Also, other teachers could sit in and observe their classroom and vice-versa.

Louis and Marks explain that, “although being observed at work is not easy, teachers whose colleagues observe their classes report higher levels of satisfaction than those whose classrooms are their singular domain” (Louis & Marks, 1996). Effective teaching will not spread through TC schools if teachers continue to work in silos. Participant 12 states that we, “used to have a team structure where all core teachers teach the same kids. It was great, but because of the specialization within the kid’s schedules at this time, the school is unable to do it anymore logistically” (Px12). It seems like this particular school within the district has moved away from the collaborative model that is recommended as a strong achievement gap closing strategy. Although the format was changed to allow for a greater choice of classes, schools within TC really have to determine the opportunity cost.

Williams, stresses the need to create structures to promote collaboration among teachers. An added benefit from shared planning time, peer workshops, observations, and collaboration is the powerful effect of peer pressure (2003). Peer pressure increases teacher engagement because it is usually coupled with valued professional feedback from peers. When teachers collaborate

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with demanding colleagues, their best work becomes visible. Of course, their failures may also be visible, but other norms, especially teachers helping one another, cushion the potentially negative impact of more exposure (Williams, 2003). This peer pressure fosters a collective responsibility which implies accountability, “if not external constituencies, at least to peers. Open discussion of teaching are not always comfortable because they sometimes require admitting one’s own deficiencies, or pointing out the flaws in a colleagues approach. Genuine peer review and discussion are still rare in most US schools (Williams, 2003). A feasible yet innovative strategy to help continue to close achievement gaps within TC is to increase the opportunities for collaboration and accountability among teachers through peer professional development, observations, and shared planning times. Interview responses suggest that there are exemplars in the TC school system that have a high level of multicultural competence that correlate with high levels of teacher efficacy. There is a great opportunity to use these teachers as a catalyst within their schools to foster and model effective teaching of at-risk subgroups.

Less common, but duly noted responses to interview question one that asked the participants what they believed to be the cause of the achievement gap in the TC school system were; zoning, historical antecedents, and lack of minority teachers. One respondent spoke to zoning and another spoke to historical antecedents while two respondents spoke to historical antecedents of oppression. As it relates to zoning, TC created two new schools; Rosemont Middle and Forest Elementary last year, as a result of the increasing population of the students in the school system. Participants of the interview explained that Du Bois middle school was turned into a central office for the school system and stopped functioning as a school. Also, Rosemont, which respondent 11 said used to be considered “the country club” as it relates to student make up, received a significant increase in at-risk students this year as a result of the rezoning (Px11).

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A participant explained that many of the teachers in Rosemont were not prepared to successfully engage the increase in at-risk students. The participant explained that she had been at that particular school system for over ten years, and Rosemont used to have a lot more at-risk students before previous rezoning took most of that population away from the school. Now, this participant explained, it will take time for teachers to adjust their pedagogy and approach to align with characteristics of the new population they received.

Several participants noted historical antecedents that could play a part in the achievement gap within the school system. Participants stated that “with some of our underachievers it is not in their cultural history to see education in a certain way...just like I’m happy I’m finished high school and in some families do not even see college as an option. They sometimes encounter resistance to college aspirations. Parents suggest finishing high school and going to work. One respondent commented on the social factors involved saying that, “Because Tilletts is such a small community people end up in the same jobs generationally over and over and over” (Px9). Historical antecedents are noted in literature as being a common explanation of the achievement gap. Paige and Witty note that often People note the history of oppression; “blacks being legally prohibited from learning to read during slavery, being restricted to constitutionally supported separate but equal laws, being forced to attend poor schools, and being forced to work in the fields while white children were in school” (Paige & Witty 2010).

Schools cannot determine nor change the class and race of its students and thus, schools and teachers have to accept this fact and respond to these variables accordingly. Academic success has been achieved by many at-risk minority students despite risk factors that correlate with class and race that may exist because of historical antecedents. For this reason, teachers and

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schools need to focus on what they can do to offer exemplary schooling for these at-risk kids that will mitigate the negative variables they have going against them. (Paige & Witty, 2010). It is important to note that the historical antecedents answer only was mentioned once or twice during the course of the interviews with all the participants and when it did occur, the participants did not use the response to avoid responsibility for student achievement.

Another response that was less common but significant is the comment that “I do believe we need more minority teachers” in the district (Px2). An article in the Chicago Defender entitled, “Wanted: Black Male Teachers Across the Nation” succinctly presents the unavoidable disparity in the number of black male teachers in the United States. Apparently, “only two percent of the nation’s nearly 5 million teachers are African American” (Billingsley, 2010). “That’s one in 50 teachers. Something is wrong with that picture,” says U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. “As a country, we have a huge challenge to make sure many more of our young Black boys are successful. Our graduation rates have to go up dramatically, our dropout rates have to go down. To get there, I’m convinced we have to have more men of color teaching, being role models, being mentors and doing so not just in high school but on the elementary level.” (Billingsley, 2010). As one African American teacher puts it, “My biggest challenge as a teacher was the recognition of the lack of cultural sensitivity, particularly when it came to some white teacher’s inability to understand and nurture young Black male students” (Billingsley, 2010). Interview responses within the TC research suggest that lack of minority teachers, especially African American males is certainly an issue present in the school system.

Without an appropriate level of comfort with the minority population that currently is in the most dire of academic situations nationally, teachers will be unable to give their students the best education possible. Fockoff concluded that white and Black students did better on state tests

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with teachers of their own race (Fockoff, 2004). The findings indicated that recruiting more minority teachers could generate important gains among minority students. One of the reasons is that minority teachers better understand cultural differences and can “break down the students’ stereotypes,” according to the study. (Billingsley, 2010).

The above conclusion is powerful in that the aforementioned research study confirms what teachers have already observed in TC about cultural dexterity and the effect of minority teachers within the classroom. In addition to integrating cultural competency into the classroom environment and style of teaching, this article suggests that African American male teachers serve as invaluable role models to minority children who can model positive behavior from the teacher and also envision a positive future through education. To this end, the TC 2009 strategic plan states that, “hiring and retaining a diverse, highly qualified workforce remains a goal of the Human Resources Department” (TC, 2009). The limiting factors to this end are budget cuts and low supply of minority teachers. The 2009 Strategic Plan states that budget cuts have limited hiring and thus limited the acquisition of more diverse teachers. The other problem is that minority teachers are in high demand and difficult to acquire in substantial numbers (Px14). In a 2011 NAACP meeting, the superintendent said that he is in the process of putting together a task force to examine the issue empirically. Ascertaining more minority teachers is an important goal and one piece of the puzzle which is the solution to bridging the achievement gap. When the budget increases and ceases to be cut, ascertaining more diverse teachers should continue to be an important goal.

The third question posed to the participants of the research asked, “How conscious are the teachers, faculty, and other administrators of the achievement gap in this school and in the TC school system on a scale of 1-5?” (Five being the highest level of awareness and one being

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the lowest.). The answer to this question was consistent across participants and all actually replied four or five on the scale of consciousness about the achievement gap, indicating a high level of awareness in the division. First and foremost, the majority of the participants cited the significant amount of data that is collected and aggregated that is used to examine how all subgroups are performing in the district. This data collection consists of Standards of Learning tests (SOL<sup>2</sup>s), as well as more frequent benchmark tests. This data is presented to the faculty of the school system in the summer before school begins, as well in school during staff meetings. The need to become accredited and to make adequate yearly progress has demanded the use of achievement data aggregated into subgroups that highlight the achievement gap inadvertently (Paige & Witty, 2010).

To the question about level of consciousness of the achievement gap, participants responded, “I think everyone is aware of it but nobody knows exactly how to fix it” (Px1). Px9 explains that the school district is, “well aware of it” and that, “It’s a matter of people not knowing what to do with an under achiever” (Px9). Px4 stated that the school system is, “very conscious, it has been goal of the school system to narrow that gap, some years more than others. It hasn’t been pressed upon us as much in the last couple of years. We had a lot of meetings on the gap, breaking down the sub group scores about why aren’t we reaching these kids but I don’t think we have ever gotten anywhere with it” (Px4). From dialogue with the participants, it is clear that the faculty of the TC school system understand the extent to which the achievement gap exists in the division.

Although knowledge of the achievement gap is ubiquitous in the school system, interview responses and the VDOE data suggest that the district is not exactly sure how to address the issue. The school division could benefit from the superintendent being more

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proactive in crafting a strategic plan of action to address the gap. This notion is supported by participants like participant nine who says, in reference to the achievement gap in the division, there is, “awareness and acceptance that it does exist. I just don’t think the division has a clear vision of what they need or want to do” (Px9). It is vital that leadership confront this issue head on in proactive, explicit, and research guided ways. 31 studies of effective school districts in the United States were analyzed and synthesized in a meta-analysis conducted by Kenneth Leithwood in 2010 that lists and expands on the top ten characteristics of effective school districts. In this meta-analysis, the first characteristic of effective school districts outlined is a “district-wide focus on student achievement” (Leithwood 2010). “Fourteen studies provide direct evidence about the importance of this characteristic” and the need to, “develop a widely shared set of beliefs and a vision about student achievement” (Leithwood 2010).

The number one characteristic of effective school districts is a clear vision and direction as it relates to bridging the achievement gap. The study by Leithwood explains that, “district efforts to create a shared sense of purpose about student achievement are fundamental strategies for generating *the will to improve*” (Leithwood, 2010). Leithwood expands emphasizing the shared nature of the vision saying that it should be common knowledge to everyone in the district and that what was notable about effective school districts is the, “extent to which these districts used their visions to guide instructional improvement” (Leithwood, 2010). A strong shared vision that is functional and used to guide practice is a vital factor in effective school districts. The interview responses from faculty of TC indicate a current lack of vision and direction as it relates to bridging the achievement gap. The responses suggest that the past years, before the current superintendent, there was a notable emphasis on the achievement gap and steps were taken to explicitly address the phenomenon within the district.

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At the present time, on paper, there exists a set of superintendent priorities that include general statements that, “we will ensure the progress of our students, we will help our students graduate, we will teach our students to be productive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and we will partner with the community and focus our efforts and available resources” (Multicultural Affairs Unit Report, 2010). Furthermore a relatively new vision created at the TC School Board states that, “the TC school board strives to develop the **premiere** public school system in Virginia that expresses the uniqueness and potential of our community”. Evidence from Leithwood’s research, “stressed the critical role of the superintendents” in creating and pushing the vision. The fact that the current superintendent of TC is only been in office since February may explain the lack of a current awareness of the vision simply because he may still be in the process of formulating a new vision.

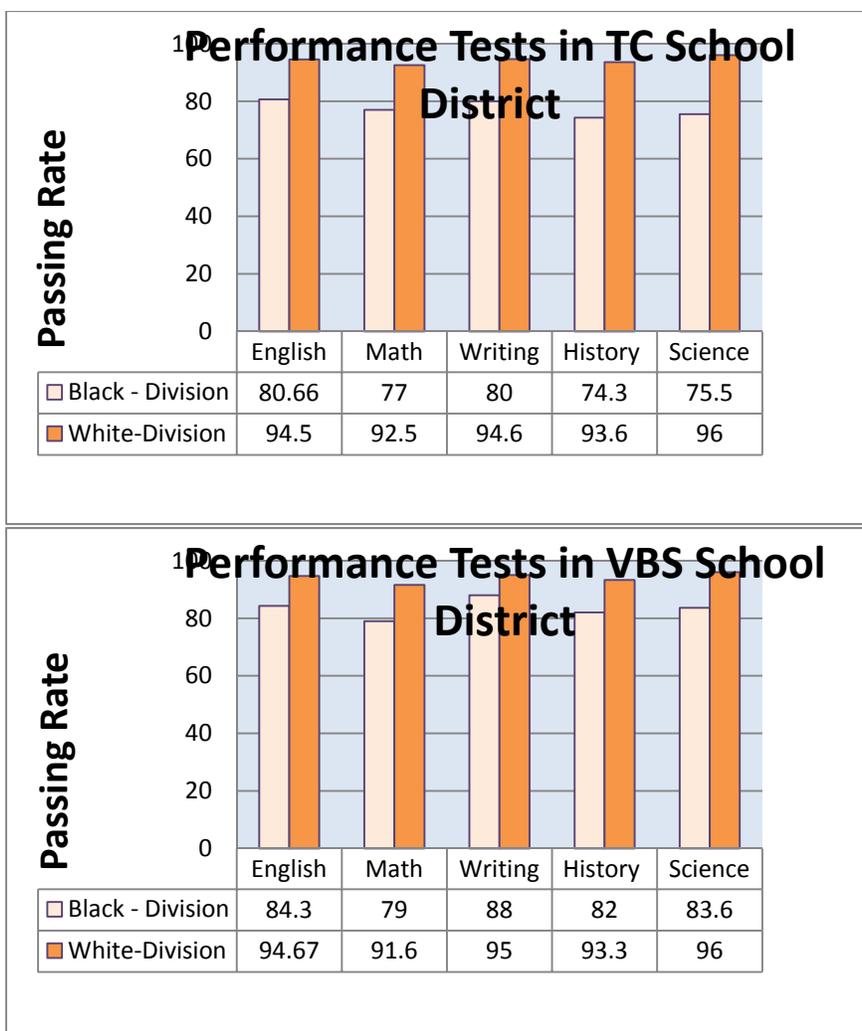
The purpose of question five was to transition from awareness to action. It asked, “To what extent do the building administrators (Principals, Vice Principal's, etc and district administrators (superintendents, etc), emphasize bridging the achievement gap in school?” To this question, some participants felt as if administrators are doing a good job at addressing the achievement gap whereas others feel that the division as a whole is not adequately addressing it. In one school Px1 stated that, “on a scale of 1 to 5, it is heavily emphasized, “noting that guest speakers and presentations are held in relation to the issue (Px1). Surprisingly, within the same school, another participant says they, “feel like it was emphasized much greater in years past and that it is not addressed specifically anymore. There is talk in general about raising the scores” (Px3). This comment is particularly disconcerting because Leithwood emphasized the explicit reference to “closing the [achievement] gap” in district wide visions and also a study called *Six districts, one goal of excellence*, covered in Leithwood’s meta-analysis emphasized the

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importance of “getting past the rhetoric of ‘all students can learn’ by developing programs, policies and teaching strategies that lead to higher levels of achievement” (Leithwood 2010, Cawelti 2001).

It is rather apparent that effective school districts address the achievement gap explicitly and do not skirt around the issue by stating that its mission is to raise the achievement of all students without giving due recognition to the unique challenges and specific approaches that the achievement gap of at-risk students embodies. One relevant example of the incorporation of vision explicit in its reference to the achievement gap is the Virginia Beach City Public School division (VBCPS) who has some of the smallest achievement gaps in the state. They have taken a progressive stance towards bridging the achievement gap and are making remarkable strides towards reaching that end. After realizing the critical needs of their school system as it relates to low academic achievement of at-risk students, the VBCPS created a strategic plan to address the issue.

Objective three of the VBCPS strategic plan states that, “each school will improve the achievement for all students while closing the achievement gap or identified student groups, with particular focus on African American males” (VBCPS 2011). The acknowledgement and specific allusion to African American males as an important at-risk sub-group is exactly the type of explicit vision that Leithwood explained is a pivotal characteristic of effective school districts. The leadership of VBCPS intimated, at the 2011 *Spring Symposium on African American Males and School Success*, that the aforementioned vision has been both the crux and the catalyst for specific interventions and initiatives that have helped the school district begin to close the achievement gap in a significant way.



Corroborating the statement about the last superintendent's emphasis on the gap, Px5 states that the "former superintendent would talk about the AG" (Px5). Furthermore, the previous superintendent explicitly made multiple allusions to bridging the achievement gap directly within the district's strategic plan (TC, 2009). Following up on the aforementioned comment by participant nine comment, the participant notes that the new superintendent has only been in the position for a year so it is unclear whether or not the emphasis will come with time.

Reiterating the past emphasis on the gap and adding some past perspective, one participant states that, "about four or five years ago the gap was even more severe and many people were on the 'we need to fix it' wave. There was a cultural competence kick, we attended

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conferences and it [The achievement gap] started decreasing. The difficult thing this year is budget” (Px10). An administrator from another school in the district paints a different picture, saying, in relation to bridging the achievement gap, it is “part of our DNA, we emphasize this routinely, we look for trends in schools” and “we do monitor kids that are at-risk and we look for trends of what courses are causing challenges for these students. We look at who are the teachers of these courses and who are the kids” (Px8).

Administrators in the TC school system display more knowledge and awareness of achievement gap initiatives when compared other faculty. On the contrary, teachers who participated in the interviews were candid in expressing their lack of awareness of what the district’s vision and strategy is. This highlights the fact that a mission and vision is only as good as the extent to people know what it is. The current superintendent has valuable opportunity to illuminate and bolster the current vision and priorities of the TC school system. In the way of bolstering the vision, the superintendent can explicitly state goals to bridge the achievement gap between identified subgroups. Currently the issue is avoided completely and the only mention to achievement differences occurs subtly in the statement, “we will recognize that all students have unique needs. This includes meeting the “average” learners’ needs as well as the special education and gifted learners” (Multicultural Affairs Unit, 2011) This statement is somewhat ambiguous. There is no explanation of what an “average” student is. Furthermore, underachievers and at-risk groups are not addressed at all.

In comparison, the Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS) not only identifies bridging the achievement gap of at-risk subgroups explicitly, they identify African American Males as a high risk subgroup that will receive additional support. Furthermore, they provide measurable objectives with a timeline to get it done. Specifically some of these include the,

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“increase by 5 percent the percentage of African American males scoring pass advanced on reading and mathematics SOL tests over the next three years” and to “increase by 10 percent the percentage of African American males receiving an advanced studies diploma beginning with the Class of 2011” (VBCPS, Symposium Report 2011).

The VBCPS is ambitious and laudable in the fact that they go beyond the minimum goal of raising SOL scores of all groups to standard and explicitly outlines the goal of increasing the advanced pass rate and advanced diploma rate of African American Males. This is highly commendable because SOL scores are the bare minimum of standards and currently in Virginia, only 23 percent of African Americans graduate high school with an advanced diploma and only 39 percent of African Americans are taking rigorous course work in high school (Jonas, 2011). The way in which the VBPS system clearly and explicitly makes progressive goals relating to the achievement gap, and explicitly outlines measurable objectives to follow up on the goals, and furthermore enumerates key strategies to achieve these goals is laudable. There is clarity of vision and action to meet this vision.

Question number six asks, “If the achievement gap is recognized, what solution or interventions are being implemented to address the issue?” To this question, a myriad of responses were given but none more frequently than response to intervention, also known as RTI. Participants in each school, as well as the Office of Minority Services, spoke to RTI as a core strategy to raise academic achievement within TC. RTI is a promising national model that can trace its roots to the 2004 reauthorization of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). “With its reauthorization, the process of identifying students with learning disabilities (LD’s) is at the forefront of educational issues in the United States. Regulations set forth in the reauthorization of the act, “permit the use of data (response) obtained

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when scientifically based intervention is implemented with a student (to intervention) to make eligibility decisions under LDs” (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden 2007).

The authors of the Handbook for Response to Intervention note that the regulatory provision behind the reauthorization of the IDEA, “reflects a fundamental paradigm shift that closes the gap between instruction and assessment” (Jimerson et al., 2007). Tessie Rose Bailey, an expert from the National Center for Response to Intervention explains the shift saying that before RTI school utilized a pre-referral system to identify students with disabilities and,

“in a pre-referral strategy what we see is we wait till a student fails in some way, is recognized as failing, is referred to a team, folks try to come up with an intervention that will, in a sense, remediate that deficit before we make a referral to special ed and in RTI we’re really looking at a preventative framework and we use, what we refer to as screening tools, to predict who may be at risk for failure as opposed to waiting until a kid fails before they are referred and in a preventative model those students who are screened and who might be at risk for poor learning outcomes then receive interventions to prevent them from having struggles in the future, and those students who then don’t respond to highly qualified or highly effective interventions may be referred to special ed” (Bailey, 2010).

Although RTI began as a way to better detect and address learning disabilities, it has evolved and, “can also be viewed as a school improvement model” (RMC, 2009). Early universal screening is a fundamental aspect of the model and it sets the foundation for the prevention framework that the expert from the National Center for Response to Intervention elaborated upon. The universal screening places students into any one of three advancing tiers of intervention based on data such as passing rates on standardized and benchmark tests

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In particular, TC schools identify students who are in SOL range of approximately 435 to 406 for RTI (Px12). Tier one of RTI is core instruction and that is the standard teaching that occurs throughout the school. The RTI model suggests that 80 to 85 percent of students should be reached in tier one. Tier two consists of strategic interventions and is supposed to reach approximately 10 to 15 percent of students and tier three refers to intensive interventions that are to reach the last 5-10 percent of students. (RMC, 2009 & VanDerHeyden, 2007). “Research has been conducted on the effects of RTI approaches on both student (e.g., increasing student reading, decreasing student difficulties) and systemic (e.g. reducing the number of referrals to and placements in special education) with positive effects (Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005), showing that the model has promise.

Supporting this assertion is that fact that numerous states have taken up the model such as Florida, Idaho, Michigan, Ohio, and more (Fuchs & Dehsler, 2007). Still though, it is important to note that researchers acknowledge that further study needs to be carried out to ensure effectiveness on systemic outcomes and to better understand how to scale the program up (VanDerHeyden, 2007, Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). Specifically, RTI researchers Fuchs and Deshler argue that,

“practitioners need scientifically-validated instructional protocols that are likely to accelerate student progress in pivotal skills aside from early reading (e.g., math and writing) and in content areas (e.g., social studies and science). Generally effective instructional protocols are critical because in an RTI framework instruction is the “test” against which student response is measured. Without validated instruction (implemented with fidelity by practitioners), RTI cannot be a valid method of disability identification or early intervention” (Fuchs & Deshler 2007)

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RTI is but a framework to provide high quality instruction and interventions aligned to the level of student needs, and a system to tailor these interventions based on empirical response data.

Fuchs and Deshler note that there is a paucity of “instructional protocol,” or the specific interventions and curriculum called for in the RTI model. This means it is currently up to each state, division, and individual school to determine what types of interventions and curriculum they feel is effective and necessary to intervene on behalf of RTI students at each tier. The RTI system could argue effectiveness and validity better if a research proven instructional protocol was standardized and used everywhere the RTI model is being implemented.

On the other hand, the current lack of federal regulatory institutional standards for RTI interventions and curriculum allow for, “greater flexibility and discretionary decision making; more room for innovation” (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). Instructional protocol in the TC school system, as it pertains to RTI, begins at Tier 1 with the expectation of high quality teaching of the core curriculum. The interview responses of the TC achievement gap research suggest that teachers implement the curriculum of their choice and the extent to which teachers are successful with this curriculum varies and speaks to teacher efficacy as it intersects with difficult to reach at-risk students (Morris, 2011).

Tier two of RTI intervention in TC schools consists first and foremost of math and reading specialists. These specialists are utilized to intensively teach and tutor RTI tier two kids in smaller class settings. Participant five elaborates saying that students identified as not passing their SOLs, barely passing them, or falling behind in their coursework receive an, “additional class on top of their math or English class” in which specialists, “teach ahead or remediate something they do not understand” (Px5). The TC RTI model keeps struggling students in the classroom instead of taking them out and tracking them into a slower pace program.

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Williams, (2003), informs that, “more often than not, racial and ethnic minorities and students from lower SES back grounds are over represented in the lower or non-college bound groups and assigned the least qualified teachers” The TC RTI Tier two model that utilizes math and reading specialists is to be lauded because it does just the opposite of the maladaptive tracking phenomenon that Williams speaks of. Instead of taking at-risk students out of the classroom, they leave them there and provide them with mandatory intensive additional support given during a block of elective time that the specialists use to focus specifically on RTI student’s needs. Furthermore, because RTI addresses a significantly smaller portion of the school population, these second Tier RTI remediations are more likely to be one on one and tailored to the needs of a few versus the entire classrooms that tier one instructors must reach out too.

Participant five shed more light into the RTI endeavor in TC schools mentioning that it is the, “3<sup>rd</sup> year of the initiative and 1<sup>st</sup> year that it is in elementary schools” Also, RTI in TC currently only exists in the middle and elementary schools, the aforementioned comment means that RTI is a rather new framework within the division. Increases in student achievement, especially among at-risk subgroups who will inevitably be folded into the RTI system through universal screening, should be analyzed closely to determine the effectiveness of the RTI model within TC in the upcoming school years.

A myriad of measures of student achievement are taken by TC including SOLs and benchmark testing that can help evaluate the RTI initiative in TC but I was unable to ascertain specific information regarding its current effectiveness in the school division as a whole. That being said, participant six revealed that RTI is a five year process and that the TC school division is currently in year number four.

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Another academic support that was reported to exist in TC schools is the Advancement Via Individual Determination program, also known as AVID. This program, as described by the Institution of Education Sciences What Works Clearinghouse;

“is a college-readiness program whose primary goal is to prepare middle and high school students for enrollment in four-year colleges through increased access to and support in advanced courses. The program, which focuses on under-served, middle-achieving students (defined as students earning B, C, and even D grades), places students in college preparatory classes (e.g., honors and Advancement Placement classes) while providing academic support through a daily elective period and ongoing tutorials” (What Works Clearinghouse, 2010).

A 2008 report on the efficacy of AVID explains the origins of the program, saying that,

“The AVID program began at Clairemont High School in San Diego County, California, in 1980, when the primarily middle-class suburban high school became desegregated as a result of a court-ordered mandate imposed on the SanDiego Unified School District (Swanson et al., 1993). The desegregation effort resulted in the enrollment of 500 students from outside of the Clairemont High School district who were of primarily African American or Latino or Hispanic descent and from low-income households Swanson et al.). To provide the same rigorous curriculum for all students in the school, Mary Catherine Swanson, chair of the school’s English department, placed 30 of the new students in advanced courses. Although they lacked the prerequisite coursework for the classes, Swanson provided an AVID elective course in which students received tutoring to improve writing skills and were taught note-taking and study skills. The AVID program was reportedly so successful in increasing scores on standardized tests and

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securing underrepresented student enrollment in 4-year colleges that by 1997 more than 500 high schools and middle schools in 8 states and 13 countries had introduced the program.” (AVID, 2006)

As of 2010, according to the creator of AVID, the program is being used in 4,500 schools in 45 states and 16 countries and serves over 400,000 students in grades 4-12. Furthermore, AVID has been used by urban, suburban and rural schools and, “most AVID students are underrepresented minorities - Latinos and African Americans - who may lack a college-going tradition in their family and whose success is critical to closing the achievement gap” (WWC 2010 & AVID Center. AVID General Data Collection 2009-2010). Despite, the scale, rapid growth, and widespread use of the AVID program, there are very few quantitative studies that soundly measure the statistical causality of program efficacy variables such as increase in grade point average, increase in SOL scores and increase in participation in advanced classes as a result of AVID, although descriptive data exists that strongly suggest AVID’s positive effect on students (Black, A. C., Little, C. A., McCoach, D. B., Purcell, J. H., & Siegle, D. 2008, AVID Center 2009-2010). An evaluation of AVID research concludes that:

“Many studies have established support for the AVID program. However, results have not converged entirely about its effectiveness in changing targeted outcome variables” (Black et al., 2008).

One study compared the performance of AVID schools and districts as a whole with those with similar student demographics but not implementing AVID (Watt et al., 2006). At the university level, AVID students’ performance was compared with that of the university’s freshman average (Swanson, 1989). Most of these studies were descriptive in nature and did not include reports of statistical significance or effect size” (Black 2008).

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All of these studies give qualitative support for the AVID program as it relates to relevant achievement gap variables such as student achievement, standardized test scores, and college acceptance and enrollment rates and one study. All of this in mind, the researchers evaluating all of the aforementioned literature conclude that, “none of the studies reviewed in our survey of current research were of sufficient scientific rigor to allow for causal inferences related to the AVID program” (Black et al., 2008). These same researchers set out to conduct a scientifically rigorous study to examine AVID effectiveness both quantitatively and qualitatively using a mixed methods design.

Qualitatively, the researchers conducted interviews and self-report questionnaires of parents, teachers, and students. To the qualitative portion of the study all parties expressed strong success in raising student outcome variables. The quantitative variables measured included, “(a) self-reported grades, (b) time spent on homework, (c) earned grades, (d) school absences”, scores on state standardized mastery tests, time spent on homework, college plans and eighth grade algebra enrollment. (Black et, al 2008). Two cohorts of fifty students used the AVID model and tested against a third control group as a comparison that did not use the AVID program. The results showed that cohort one of the experimental group showed positive effects over the comparison in college plans, time spent on homework and enrollment in eighth grade algebra enrollment.

Experimental cohort two, showed positive effects on self-reported grades and, “three variables related to performance in English and language arts, an area of particular focus of the AVID program” (Black 2008). This study shows positive effects as a result from the AVID program on achievement gap related variables such as enrollment in challenging curriculum (eighth grade algebra enrollment), grades, English performance, and college plans. A limitation

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of this study is its length. The study was conducted over the course of two years in middle school. To fully understand the effects of the AVID program, longitudinal studies that follow AVID cohorts throughout high schools with AVID programs are needed. Also, it is important to note that teachers were trained on the AVID program during the first year of the study. More time and experience implementing the program would logically increase the efficacy of teacher's delivery of AVID so further study examining veteran AVID instructors will potentially yield positive results as well. Overall, there is a mountain of qualitative research that supports the efficacy and usage of the AVID program. Also, the fact that the program has spread to 45 states and 4,500 schools is telling of the extent to which a wide body of educators value AVID as a worthwhile intervention.

Furthermore, there is an AVID data center that tracks all information and data collected by the program. This center's data collection shows that 88 percent of AVID graduates apply to college and 74 percent are accepted (AVID Center 2009-2010). Twice as many African American students who are in AVID take AP tests than non-AVID African Americans, 17% to 8%. And four times as many AVID Latino students take AP tests than non-AVID students, 53% to 14% (AVID Center 2009-2010). Furthermore, "Students who take algebra in eighth grade are prepared for more advanced coursework in math and science once they reach high school. They are also more likely to attend and graduate from college than eighth-graders who do not take algebra. AVID encourages its junior high students to pursue college-preparatory coursework such as algebra, and they complete it at an impressive rate" of 61% versus the national average of 22% (AVID Center 2009-2010). Additionally, "AVID students complete university entrance requirements at a much higher rate than their non-AVID peers" (AVID Center, 2009-2010). Although not causal, meaning that AVID may not be the only variable effecting these outcomes

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of student achievement, the data correlates AVID strongly with student achievement, enrollment in advanced classes, and college enrollment of their participants, the majority of which are minorities, first generation, or at-risk.

Lastly, Black, 2008, does provide solid quantitative causal data supporting the efficacy and potential of AVID, despite the limitations of its scope. Research suggests that AVID is a strong program that increases participation in advanced classes, test scores, and competency in academic strategies such as WIC-R. These outcomes are positively correlated to the variables relevant to the achievement gap and thus, TC should keep moving forward with AVID and ensure that the program has all the necessary 11 components to be effective as described by Guthrie, 2002. (Guthrie & Guthrie, 2002). Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morrison, 2006, sought dropouts' opinions about why they left high school without graduating and 32 percent said they were failing school (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morrison, 2006). AVID targets the middle achievers, of which, are mostly B and C range. This means that a large portion of the students affected by the achievement gap who are in the C, D, and F range will not be covered by this program. That reality is important to keep in mind because it shows that AVID, by itself, will not solve the achievement gap within TC.

It was evident within some schools within the TC school system that AVID is strongly emphasized and is gleaned from responses from participants such as Px2 who speaks of how the whole school has been "AVIDized," meaning it is highly emphasized and pervasive throughout the school and how others emphasized how it was "big" under the current principal's leadership (Px2 & Px4). All schools visited did not show the same level of emphasis for AVID in the responses. The subjective nature of interviews could mean that AVID just did not come out in some interviews versus others or it could be interpreted that some schools emphasize AVID

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more than others. Either way, the TC school system should ensure that the AVID program is being carried out, emphasized heavily by school leadership, and also run by a seasoned and respected teacher (Guthrie, 2002).

The MAU is unit within the TC school system whose purpose is highly relevant to the achievement gap. The stated goal of the Multicultural Affairs Unit (MAU), listed on its' website as of 2011 is to, "provide resources and collaboration with building principals, Academic Services staff, and community stakeholders to facilitate the elimination of the achievement gap" (TC, 2011). They accomplish this goal through Minority Achievement Leaders (MALs), an Advisory Committee for Minority Student Achievement (ACMSA), reaching out to the community and the home to build relationships and partnerships that will aid underrepresented students, afterschool tutorials, overseeing, researching and evaluating mentoring initiatives, summer school remediation and acceleration, and spreading multicultural competence to the faculty of the school system.

One Minority Achievement Leader is to exist in each school within TC, although one position is currently vacant. These MALs are regular teachers and their position as a MAL is secondary to that. First and foremost, MALs are trained in multicultural competence and culturally responsive teaching by the director of the MAU. It is then the expectation, that the MAL take the knowledge about multicultural competence and spread it at their given school. (Px14). The most common way for this to occur is through workshops which may be implemented once or twice a year and which might be integrated into a school staff meeting. Furthermore, the MALs are a part of the school improvement team for their given school. Their presence on this team gives them a direct audience to building level leadership and they can use

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this to advocate for minority concerns. Also, MALs participate in special projects underneath the auspices of the MAU from time to time.

A MAL within TC spoke to their position saying that it is an, “excellent program to have at school” (Px15). The MAL expanded saying that, “the responsibility is to provide training for the staff at the building level and the extent to which a MAL can facilitate this depends on how perceptive the admins are to them. Most of the time it is not a problem.” (Px15). When asked how often they are able to offer the training, the MAL said once or twice a year. (Px15). When asked about the strengths and weakness of the MAL position, the MAL noted that the very fact that there exists a MAL position in every school is laudable and the opportunity to voice concerns and opinions to the school improvement team is valuable.

When speaking to the limiting factors of the MAL position, the MAL heavily emphasized that, “time is an issue because it is a supplemental position” and that MALs, “don’t really get a birds eye view, you don’t really get to see everything that’s going on” (Px15). When asked how the MAL initiative could be strengthened, this particular MAL said that they would really like to have more interaction with minority parents. Also they noted that it, “would be helpful to have about three or four MALs [within each school], one per grade level that could really take on the need of minority parents. This was proposed in the budget two or three times but it is always cut out” (Px15). It is evident that this MAL sees the position as great concept and a position with a lot of potential for good in respect to minority student advocacy and achievement. Like the participant stressed, the limiting factor is time and teachers are already taxed as it is without the added responsibilities that come with the position of MAL.

Furthermore, it is great that MALs are on the school improvement team and can voice opinions and concerns. That being said, without the time needed to get a “bird’s eye view” of

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what is occurring in a school as a whole as it relates to minority issues, the advice and concerns expressed by a MAL to a school improvement team is limited to the perspectives gained from a MALs own individual classroom. To overcome this limiting factor, MALs could possibly meet with teachers briefly over the course of a week or month during planning times, lunch, etc. to gain a sense of the climate of the school as it relates to minority issues and concerns and see what the needs and concerns are. Time will still be a concern but it is worthwhile to analyze this position in depth and see how it can be better utilized or revamped.

To their credit, MALs do meet with the director of MAU once a month and have been utilized in minority initiatives such as the creation of an achievement video on Teaching with a Multicultural Perspective in which MALS and English as a Second Language teachers collaborated (Px15). This video, created under the auspices of the Multicultural Affairs Unit includes, “(1) The Effects of Vocabulary on Student Success, (2) The Iceberg Theory of Culture, (3) After-School tutorials: A Response to Intervention, (4) Worksheets Won’t Grow Dendrites, (5) Strategies to Support the Limited English Proficient Student, (6) Connecting to Involve Parents in the Education of their Children, (7) Strategies for the Diverse Classroom, and (8) The Silent Epidemic (Px15).

The Minority Student Achievement Advisory Committee (ACMSA), another initiative under the TC Multicultural Affairs Unit, is charged to, “be advocates for and monitor the partnerships with the community business, and Chamber of Commerce and Tourism in eliminating the achievement gap for all students in Tilletts County Public Schools” (ACMSA, 2010). The 2010 ACMSA creates an Annual Evaluation Report to the TC School Board and the most recent 2010 report described the meaningful measures the committee observed to bridge the achievement gap. It observed and described how TC has attempted to reach every student, it

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describes the outreach that has been realized throughout the school division and the TC community, and it expanded upon the extent to which TC units collaborated with ACMSA to enhance outreach through the school division (ACMSA, 2011).

Participant 16, a member of the ACMSA elaborates about the committee giving much insight on the initiative. First of all, the participant noted that the ACMSA did not meet at all semester because of the turnover with the superintendent and also because of “structure” and other things and that there have been two meetings this semester thus far (Px16). The comment about the superintendent is understandable and interview responses across the district noted his arrival and how this has affected things within TC to some extent.

Participant 16 next comments on the presence of MALs on the council saying that, “Minority Achievement Leaders are good for the committee. They can tell whether students responded well to intervention or not, what’s coming down the pipe” (Px16). She then goes beyond the role of MALs saying that the ACMSA discusses process and protocol, speakers, systems, program and community response, and political response within TC. Also, the participant says that the diversity of views on the ACMSA is excellent and that there is “multiple buy-in,” alluding to the fact that the committees composed of a variety of parties including a representative from the College of William and Mary, a rep from NAACP, a rep from Big Brothers Big Sisters, a rep from the Community Action Agency, MALs, other reps from TC and also parents (Px16). The committed participation of the enumerated community partners is but one example of how the MAU follows through with its goal to create and sustain partnerships beneficial to student success and positive outcomes.

Despite the amount and quality of members on the ACMSA , the participant notes that the, “school board committee should occasionally attend the meeting and invite direct

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communication with the members” (Px16). The responses from participant 16 about the makeup of the committee reveal that it is very multifarious at the given time but occasional representation from the school board would increase the ACMSA’s effect. In respect to the ACMSA, the participant asserts that, “most people are in agreement that there are improvements of the achievement gap but few are in denial that there is still something wrong” (Px16). The ACMSA sees, “minority achievement as an ongoing problem that requires collaboration between all parties” (Px16). Also in reference to the ACMSA the participant states that, “people serving are committed to the issue deeply” (Px16). These responses further speak to the integrity and validity of the committee’s members.

Next, participant 16 goes to say that, “ACMSA’s strength is also its weakness. It is an advisory committee and can, “solicit, provide feedback and recommendations but it cannot make change” (Px16). Maybe the occasional attendance of school board members to the ACMSA meetings would lead to more agency in this regard. In another vein, participant 16 says that it is “hard to believe anything will happen with the economic recession going on” (Px16). The school system has undergone budget cuts, possibly making new initiatives a difficult endeavor. Participant 16 also speaks to the perceptions of minority based initiatives positing that, “if they start to see minority achievement as something good for all students they can elevate best practices” (Px16). For a long time, minority achievement has been seen as the “extra thing,” drawing the conclusion that, “they [minorities] need special resources. They need unique attention yes, but attention shouldn’t just be housed in one place. Should be a part of teacher competency” (Px16).

Furthermore, she notes that part of being a competent teacher is to be able to teach every student in your classroom, when stuff is relegated to Multicultural Affairs, it is subject to budget

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cuts, initiatives become voluntary and often not taken seriously” (Px16). For one, the previous commentary speaks in ideological approach to addressing minority student achievement. On one hand, teachers must recognize that initiatives and training sponsored by Multicultural Affairs will, “raise the level of all boats” in respect to both minority and majority student populations. Accepting this notion will give teachers more of a reason to take the Multicultural initiatives more seriously. On the same chord, people must realize that underrepresented populations do need specifically tailored interventions that meet the common needs, hurdles, and risk factors that are common among certain sub-groups. Accepting this allows for strategies that will be much more effective for specific at-risk sub-groups as opposed to general student achievement strategies that are good in their own right, but are not as effective for particularly at-risk sub-groups with unique and specific needs.

Overall, the perspective that many within TC do not take the multicultural affairs initiatives as seriously as they should, may be a reason why barely any respondents to the interview questions about the achievement gap in TC mentioned or elaborated about the MAU and its pivotal role in the equation. Lastly, participant 16 argues that, “what is really missing is a strategy to integrate minority achievement into the main vision, strategy, etc.” (Px16). This particular response provides support to the conclusion that there is currently no comprehensive, wide-spread, strategic plan or mission within TC that is widely accepted and known about. In 2009, before the new Superintendent, the strategic plan incorporated the MAU into the district’s vision, long term plan, and short term objectives to a great extent.

Another goal of The Multicultural Affairs Unit is to foster and sustain relationships with parents. A 2009 goal of the MAU, stated in the 2009 strategic plan for TC was to involve

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minority student's parents in their children's education (TC, ) Initiatives by the MAU to reach out to parents are commendable and are expanded more in detail in prior sections of this report.

The increase of efficient and effective use of time is a strategy emphasized by Williams, 2003, to aid in the closing of the achievement gap in schools. (Williams, 2003). Research acknowledges that, "changing the way time is used is one of the most difficult tasks of school reform" (Smith, 2000). "But all of these schools [In multiple case studies presented in *Closing the Achievement Gap*] restructured so that teachers had more time to work together. Working together not only strengthened personal bonds but also infused teachers with new enthusiasm about instruction" (Williams, 2003). One of the schools in the case study implemented a schedule that provided teacher teams with weekly two-hour meeting in which they develop curriculum, teaching strategies, and student assignments (Williams 2003). TC schools could see if they could benefit from shared planning time as is suggested by Williams, (2003).

"One way to achieve this [efficient and effective] is to add time to the school day or school year by adding supplemental before and after-school programs. The institution of summer programs and flexible schedules can also increase academic learning time" (Williams, 2003). These strategies speak directly to a number of matching solutions and interventions to help close the achievement gap, stated by participants of the TC research. Particularly, it is apparent that after school tutorials and mentorship programs are in place; both of which are monitored, researched, evaluated, and sponsored by the MAU to some extent.

Currently, after-school tutorials exist among the elementary and middle school levels of schooling in TC to some extent. In fact, after school tutorials were highlighted in a recent report of the Multicultural Services Office that states, "student data cards were used to evaluate the progress of participants in **after-school tutorials** based on several variables. Beginning reading

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levels were recorded in the fall of 2009. The results from the study of tutorial programs for five elementary schools showed that 85% of the student participants experienced an increase in their reading levels” (Multicultural Services, 2011). Furthermore, the Multicultural Affairs report expands speaking to volunteer/mentor programs, how they are a core initiative given attention to within the district, and how they truly are a partnership with the community. The report explains that the afterschool volunteer/mentor program,

“was expanded to include division wide training. A group of 25 retired residents from the Ford’s Colony Community provided encouragement and support to under-represented minority students in completing their school work. Eighty five students from the College of William and Mary’s swim team and football team completed volunteer training to assist TC students. One hundred fifty students from the William and Mary College Partnership for Kids program also completed volunteer training to assist students during after-school tutorials. Through volunteerism, students had an opportunity to build meaningful relationships with adults. Mentor-student relationships assisted students in a number of ways: building self esteem, creating a lasting connection with students, and supervised tutorials. Annual survey results showed that TC students who were matched with mentors modeled more positive social behaviors, have fewer misconduct referrals, and attend school more regularly” (Multicultural Services 2011).

Benard, 1992, confirms these positive correlations with mentors and resiliency of at-risk students noting that caring and support, high expectations, and opportunities for participation can come from any role model in the home, school, or community. These results are so salient and relevant to bridging the achievement gap that they were cited as essential by Williams in 2003(Williams 2003). There are a myriad of mentoring and tutoring organizations based out

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of the College of William and Mary and its' student population that are integral in TC's after school support for students.

College Partnership for Kids, explicitly mentioned in the TC Multicultural Services report, is one of the college based outreach organizations that currently mobilizes 325 William and Mary student participants to tutor in 11 schools over 500 hours a week among TC schools including: Laker Elementary, Montgomery Elementary, Washington Elementary, Ross Elementary, Greatview Elementary, Tribble Elementary, Dubois Elementary, Zildjian Elementary, Elementary, Rosemont Middle School and Edgewood Middle School. (William and Mary, 2011). Project Phoenix, another William and Mary student based outreach organization, consists of approximately 75 William and Mary students that tutor at Rosemont and Edgewood Middle schools on a weekly basis. (William and Mary, 2011).

Additionally, Tribe College Outreach is a student organization that focuses on college preparation and SAT assistance with approximately 30 students from Eastside high school. Approximately 15 mentor/tutors from the College of William and Mary participate in this program twice a week for 13 weeks each college semester. Beyond this there is Distinguished Gentlemen, an initiative spearheaded by a W&M fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha, that mentors anywhere between five and 20 at-risk students at Rosemont Middle School. Also, there is Pearls of Great Price which is bi-weekly mentoring program consists of about 20 mentors and 15 girls that addresses at-risk students at Rosemont Middle School as well. Rites of Passage is a mentoring initiative at Edgewood Middle School that addresses underrepresented students as well. This initiative is a collaboration between mentors at William and Mary and faculty of Edgewood Middle School. This initiative usually consists of about 7-15 mentors and 15-25 students and is held on Saturday mornings from 9am to noon.

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At the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year, the budget for Rites of Passage transportation was cut by the school system so buses were no longer being funded to pick the students up from their homes and taken to the school for the initiative so Rites of Passage stopped meeting. Through some advocacy and support from the mentors at the College of William and Mary, funding was able to be ascertained through a W&M community engagement grant months later. Since then, Rites of Passage has been struggling to get its student participation increased to where it used to be. Club Swag is yet another mentoring organization based out of William and Mary and led by Crystal Morales of approximately 15 mentors and 20 students and is located at Eastside High School.

Project Discovery is a program sponsored by the Community action Agency of Tilletts that focuses on increasing access to college for first generation college students and under-represented minorities. This program operates in each high school and middle school within the district and is spearheaded by a phenomenally dedicated woman from the agency who does a great job with the students she works with. It is important to note that the capacities of Project Discovery are limited by the fact that she is one woman working across four different schools with little, to no mentor support as opposed to the other mentor programs that have plenty of mentors to share the weight of their respective initiatives. That being said, offering Project Discovery additional mentor support could be an issue that could be taken up by William and Mary's College Partnership for Kids and/or Project Phoenix, both of which have a relatively large mentor constituency.

This analysis of support needed for local mentoring initiatives could also be addressed by Advisory Committee for Multicultural Student Achievement. Furthermore, the 2009 strategic plan emphasizes that, "a review of data supports that most W-JCC schools maintained rapport

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with community/business partnerships established in 2006-07 with no significant additions. The Office of Multicultural Affairs has expanded its outreach to the church community by providing the framework and training for evening church tutorials via a partnership with the James City County Community Action Agency and Project Discovery” (TC, 2009). This result is consistent with a 2011 interview response from faculty of the MAU (Px14). This is an excellent example of where TC, the Multicultural Affairs Unit in particular, has done a great job of linking the school and community’s resources. This highlights success of long term goal number one of the Multicultural Affairs Unit, listed in the 2009 TC strategic plan that stated their goal, “to provide historically underserved students with access to the services and resources needed to experience academic and other success in school through establishing community/business partnerships” (TC, 2011).

From the matrix below, the first thing that is noticeable is that the TC sponsored afterschool tutorials do not cover the high schools. When asked about this, a TC faculty member explained that the after-school tutorials on the high school level are in abeyance because of the lack of participation and use of the program by students on the high school level. This issue needs to be further examined to determine exactly why this resource is not being utilized by high school students. The 2009 strategic plan of TC shows that one of the MAU’s objectives is to monitor and evaluate the K-8 mentoring initiatives and after-school tutorials that occur in the district. Mentoring initiatives are monitored through surveys that query variables such as the extent to which mentorship has increased confidence and academic skills. As of 2009, the number of students in TC reached through mentorship are as follows: Elementary - 586; Middle Students - 257; High School - 33; for a total of 876 students served through mentoring (TC, 2009)

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Leadership of the mentoring and tutoring initiatives should examine what schools need the most emphasis and work there so the valuable resources that mentors and tutors represent are best placed. For instance, Eastside High School was said to have the least amount of minority and lower SES out of TC's three high schools but it has three separate mentor/tutor support initiatives. Participant nine states that there is a, "9% or 10% black population at Eastside versus close to 22% black population at Henderson and Prarieview not as high with black population but more rural lower SES white students" (Px12) In comparison, Henderson and Prarieview schools identified as having more minorities and lower SES students, have but one mentor/tutor support initiative.

Also, the matrix shows the conclusion that all of the middle schools are well supported through mentoring and tutoring initiatives meaning there is a great opportunity for students there to bond with a positive role model who can set those expectations, show them that caring and support, and offer them those opportunities to participate that are protective factors for resiliency (Benard, 1992). It is important to also note that Big Brother Big Sisters Mentoring also serves students from TC but the TC strategic plan of 2009 reported a low number of matches at the time (TC, 2009).

Mentoring and Tutoring Initiatives								
Across the TC Schools	Tutor/Mentor Program							
School	TC After School Tutorial	College Partnership for Kids	Project Phoenix	Tribe College Outreach	Club Swag	Distinguished Gentlemen	Pearls of Great Price	Project Discovery
<b>Elementary</b>								
Laker Elementary	X							
Montgomery   Elementary	X	X						
Washington Elementary	X	X						

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Forest Elementary	X					
Ross Elementary	X	X				
Greatview Elementary	X	X				
Tribble Elementary	X	X				
DuBois Elementary	X	X				
Zildjian Elementary	X	X				
<b>Middle</b>						
Rosemont Middle	X	X	X		X	X X
Edgewood Middle	X	X	X			X
James Booth Middle	X					X
<b>High</b>						
Eastside High			X	X		X
Henderson High						X
Prarieview High						X

Summer school programs, a suggestion by Williams of *Closing the achievement Gap* exist within TC. Px14 notes that some of the summer programs, “average about 150 kids” and that students can take them for credit and to pass the SOL (Px14). They also include, “math acceleration for kids who just quite are not on schedule for taking algebra one” (Px14). That being said, participant fourteen notes that, “Participation varies, last summer there were not enough minority applicants to run it so I didn’t” (Px14). Annual Improvement Goal number two of the department of accountability, assessment, and research in 2009 was to actually “evaluate summer school programs” and “approximately half of the literature review from the Educational Research Service was done” (TC 2009) At the time, consultant Dr. Davida Mutter was writing the literature review for the remedial summer programs. The fact that evaluation of the summer programs was a goal of TC is excellent and moreover, the fact that a literature review was being completed in 2009 about summer programs in general, is a testament to research guided practice. Furthermore, the fact that an outside consultant was utilized to write the review, shows flexibility within TC to offer outside expertise when needed. In the future TC needs to try and come up

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with ways to increase participation in these worthwhile programs that aid in the achievement of at-risk and underrepresented students.

The recommended practice of efficient and effective use of time to close the achievement gap, emphasized by Williams, is referenced the 2009 TC strategic plan speaks directly to ways they had accomplished this feat. In fact it states that, ‘the elementary **use of time** division-wide committee of teachers is meeting to determine time allocations for subject areas, reduce the amount of transitions during a day, review centers rotations, and consider placement of an intervention/enrichment period into a 6.5 hour instructional day. A report of proposed recommendations will be presented to the School Board in June of 2009’ (TC, 2009). The very fact that a “use of time” committee existed is a testament to the fact that TC has taken time management seriously and it has taken strides to further maximize the time that exists in the school system. This theme is evident within the 2009 strategic plan and is evident in the TC RTI component that includes the utilization of an elective class that is devoted to RTI instruction.

Another main activity of the MAU is to, “*To provide professional development in Multicultural Education* to better serve the educational needs of a diverse student body” (TC, 2009). This is accomplished in a number of ways spanning from the culturally responsive training of teachers and MALs, to guided readings, workshops, and guest speakers. For example on, “October 28, 2009, The Multicultural Affairs Unit hosted a workshop featuring speaker, Dr. Ron Ferguson from Harvard University. The workshop included 14 TC Principals and 63 teachers along with Central Office and Student Services staff, and members of the College of William and Mary and other community organizations. The workshop focuses on objectives such as increasing the student of all students, especially those at-risk and it was led by the Director of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University (Office of Multicultural Affairs, 2011). TC

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also hosted a dropout summit in January 2010 which, “focused on research from the Silent Epidemic Report and the discussion centered on how communities can adopt strategies to deal with the drop out issue (Office of Multicultural Affairs, 2011). In regards to increasing the multicultural competence within the district, the MAU is doing a great deal but the need for more training is still evident by interview responses in the district that consist of teachers noting themselves or their peers unpreparedness to effectively reach at-risk kids (Px12, Px11).

To the question, “To what extent is research used to analyze the achievement gap in context of the national phenomenon as it relates to TC schools?” participants spoke to guided reading partaken within the schools and across the district to a certain extent. Participant two explains that, “Dr Stevenson has us all reading certain books which are presented through discussions at faculty meetings each month and he emphasizes things to incorporate into lessons” (Px2). The fact that the principle guides relevant readings and research is commendable and contributes to “instructional leadership,” a characteristic exhibited by leaders of districts that are particularly effective at bridging the achievement gap. (Leithwood, 2010). Togneri and Anderson and a myriad of other stress that, “significant improvements in student achievement depend on significant improvements in the quality of classroom instruction” (Togneri and Anderson, 2003 & Paige & Witty 2010). At-risk and under-represented populations are more sensitive to the quality of instruction at school than majority students (Leithwood, 2010).

“While consistently effective leadership is widely believed to be a key variable in a school and district’s success (e.g., Florian, 2000), the need for leadership to be instructionally focused as well is especially strong in districts serving diverse student populations. Neither district nor school leaders in these contexts can allow the quality of instruction in their schools to be anything less than the best that is possible”

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The studies that were examined in Leithwood's 2010 meta-analysis of schools effective at closing the achievement gap showed that high-performing districts invest, "in instructional leadership when they:

- Change the conceptions of leadership expected of senior staff and others
- Hold principals accountable for the quality of instruction in their schools
- Encourage principals to supplement the instructional leadership in their schools with central office expertise when needed
- Provide opportunities in the district for principals to further develop their instructional leadership capacities and;
- Use expertise external to the district to help develop instructional leadership in the district" (Leithwood, 2010).

Effective principals in effective schools take ownership of the specific instruction that takes place within their schools. The interview response from participant two in TC reveals a principle that devotes time to guiding instruction within the school by conducting guided readings, lesson from which, can be incorporated into classroom instruction. This vignette is commendable and this type of leadership seemed to be in effect within TC in 2009 according to the 2009 strategic report results. The 2009 report indicates,

"Central office administrators were charged by the Superintendent to observe classroom instruction and did so on a weekly basis during last 2007-08 school year. Dr. Mulligan has also visited each school over the last two school years to observe the use of instructional strategies and debrief with faculty at the end of the day. Executive staff members of the school division have attended these debriefings. Division-wide professional development has been provided on Research-Based Instructional

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Strategies (RBIS), Direct Vocabulary Instruction (DVI for building academic background knowledge), the integration of technology in lessons, developing common assessments with Virginia curriculum expert Dan Mulligan, and utilizing local benchmark assessments to inform instruction. In addition, principals have provided ongoing follow-up in their individual schools during early release staff development days and team planning that is ongoing throughout the year.

This description of initiatives was the status under Long Range Goal number two of TC to, *“provide professional development to ensure the routine use of quality research-based instructional strategies in all content areas”*

Effective school districts, described in Leithwood’s meta-analysis, offered necessary professional development for principals for instructional leadership. Furthermore, principals were offered coaching and mentorship directly from superintendents as well as on going consultation of mid-level central office staff with expertise in instructional leadership (Leithwood, 2010). The expertise comes from research and professional development aligned to the topic of instructional leadership. The segment of the 2009 TC strategic plan report provided above, shows strong direct correlations with the instructional leadership described by Leithwood in 2010. In TC, the 2009 Superintendent had central office administration observing classrooms and providing feedback on a weekly basis.

Furthermore, TC utilized an outside expert on instructional strategies to observe and offer feedback to the teachers and other faculty of the school system on a regular basis. Beyond that, principals provided additional follow up at staff meetings. The TC initiatives for professional development and classroom observation of instructional strategies does not exactly match that of the effective districts characterized in Leithwood’s 2010 study but there are certainly important

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parallels. In particular, both TC and the districts in Leithwood's study charged administrators with the responsibility of providing instructional leadership through classroom observation and corresponding professional development. In Leithwood's example, Principals were the main administrators charged for implementing the instructional leadership on a building level, except for one example when central office expertise was solicited by a principle. In TC's case, central office administrators were the ones charged with implementing the instructional based leadership on the building level.

As to the extent to which TC is using research to aid with the closing of the achievement gap, an issue addressed in question number seven, participant eight noted that the, "school division is using research more and more.. Reports are read by the school division covering trends in student performance and best practices" (Px8). This response is excellent and it is corroborated by information in report given by the TC Office of Multicultural Services which highlighted workshops, reading series, and summits held in the division. As it pertains to reading series, "elementary principals and faculty participated in professional reading discussions over a two year period...and a division wide decision to read the same book,

"What Really Matters in Response to Intervention: research Based Designs" offered a unique common understanding among faculty regarding interventions. Author Richard Allington offered candid, practical strategies needed to accelerate struggling students to match their grade level peers, some of which will be implemented in 2010-2011"

Not only is this a clear example of division wide emphasis on research, this is an example of research being turned into practice. Throughout the 2009 TC strategic plan, research to practice and data driven strategies and evaluations were emphasized over and over again. First of all, there is an entire department dedicated to accountability, assessment, and research. Secondly,

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the 2009 TC report described how it was conducting a literature review of summer programs, how research was being used to strengthen TC's outreach to parents, and how research was being used to evaluate and guide best approach mentoring initiatives in the district. Also, The College of William and Mary primary science curriculum was developed for gifted learners and an audit of the World language classes resulted in specific lesson and curriculum development (TC, 2009).

Research underpinned a number of professional development initiatives in 2008 and 2009 through a professional development model being implemented by Academic Services entitled Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (TC, 2009). These professional learning communities sought to cover:

- Research-Based Instructional Strategies (RBIS),
- Background Knowledge
- Direct Vocabulary Instruction (DVI)
- School-Wide Active Reading Strategy
- Classroom Observations
- Monitoring the —Attained Curriculum
- K-8 Benchmark Assessments
- Common Assessments (team or department)
- Annual SOL & No-Child-Left-Behind Results
- Use of Time in Middle and High Schools—Cohort Study Group
- Reading Renewal, K-10
- AVID Renewal, 6-12
- Gifted & Talented Education/Emerging Scholar
- Instructional Technology (IT)
- World Language Review

The above list is a portion of what the school system covered through its professional development programs in 2008-2009. A key characteristic of districts effective at closing the achievement gap is the extent to which they, “align the focus of professional development with district and school improvement initiatives,” especially when they are aligned to the district's

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literacy and math programs (Leithwood 2010). The 2009 TC strategic plan report shows that professional development occurred for the research based instructional strategies (RBIS), for the Response to Intervention (RTI) initiative, for AVID, for the increased use of instructional technology, and for the increase in background knowledge through Direct Vocabulary Instruction. Long range goal number two of TC Academic Services in 2009 was to, “provide professional development to ensure the routine use of quality research-based instructional strategies in all content areas” and it seems as if that is exactly what they did (TC, 2009). Participant number 13, a three-year teacher in the district, spoke to the professional development saying that there exists a great number of opportunities to get involved and participate within the district.

The aforementioned stated goal to connect professional development to RBIS and content areas and the observable follow through of professional development in numerous areas, shows that TC was on the right track in 2009 as it relates to the alignment of their professional development resources with their strategic plan. This accomplishment is one that mirrors those of effective school districts listed in Leithwood’s 2010 report. To continue closing the achievement gap, TC needs to continue aligning its resources in such a way that its’ development intersects with its strategic plan. Also, TC must realize the current room for improvement as it relates to professional development within the district. One can see from the aforementioned list that professional development covers a great deal of topics within TC. That being said, more explicit on emphasis on direct and clear strategies to reach at-risk students affected by the achievement gap was called for by participants in the current 2011 study. In reference to competency with at-risk sub-groups as it pertains to the achievement gap, participant 11 asserts that, “you know what you know because you experienced it, but as far as in services about the achievement gap, how

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to reach their students etc, it is done informally. There is currently a black male teacher in the school who is a great resource but in general we have folks that are not comfortable standing up and asking for help and asking what do we do? An in-service was even proposed but it was denied at the time” (Px11). Participant 12 corroborates the assertions of participant 11 saying there is, “not enough professional development on how to reach out risk students. How do I relate to that child and what type of strategies do I use to address a kid who is lacking the big three: food, shelter, love” (Px12).

These statements are powerful indicators that specific achievement gap and at-risk strategies need to be taught to teachers. This theme is even reiterated by a 2009 survey response to a multicultural workshop described in the 2009 TC strategic plan report. The responses suggest that participants’ awareness about the need for specific multicultural strategies increased but that now they need concrete strategies of how to reach the at-risk subgroups.

The limiting factor as of 2011 seems to be the lack of a clear vision or new strategic plan to align resources to. This is probably a result of having a brand new superintendent Soon the superintendent will clarify the district’s strategic plan and vision and charge the school system to advance the effective practices it was beginning to solidify in 2008 and 2009.

Another initiative within TC that is relevant to the achievement gap is The Learning and Life Academy (LLA), which is an outgoing alternative education program in TC that was established to remediate seventh and eighth grade students who are two years below grade level, have poor attendance, are disengaged in class, or have failed math or English (Vaughn, 2008). School board members, parents, guidance counselors, principles, and teachers can recommend a student to the program and potential candidates must apply and be interviewed (Vaughn, 2008). These criteria suggest that the academy is a non-compulsory option and that any student removed

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from school for disciplinary reasons must agree to the program rules and dress code to gain acceptance into the program. Furthermore, “students must agree to attend regularly, be on time, dress appropriately, and not cause disruptions on the bus or in class. Parents must agree to facilitate those factors and attend a workshop every nine weeks” (Life Academy, 2007).

Also, “The academy uses an academic curriculum that relies a great deal on EdOptions, an internet based system of learning that allows students to work at their own pace” in addition to a full time staff of teachers (Alternative School, 2008 & Roll, 2008). LLA also has a character education component that covers areas such as positive attitude, respect, responsibility, and self discipline (Mungin, 2011). During the lunch period, LLA implements a “re-do café” consisting of a mandatory homework makeup session in which students are not allowed to eat with their peers until late assignments have been completed (Px17). Additionally, students who fail a test have mandatory afterschool remediation (Px17). Both strategies are part of efforts to make school a “no failure zone” and leverage peer pressure to motivate students to do their work (Px17). Furthermore, LLA seeks to partner with the home and community via quarterly parental workshops and home phone calls (Mungin, 2011 & Px18). The program began in 2007-2008 targeting suspended and expelled students (Schiff, 2007).

The program served 32 students and completed with 20 students from 2007-2008 and the passing rate on standardized tests that year was reported to be 90% (Robertson, 2008). Gary Matthews, the Superintendent at the time noted that Mungin proposed an idea to create, “an eighth grade academy for at-risk youngsters, as this age-group was prime for dropout. Both Stephen Chantry, Executive Director for Academic Services, and I supported its implementation, especially in light of the ongoing discussion of this age group in the professional literature on graduation rates and dropouts” (Robertson, 2008). By mid November of 2008, the LLA academy

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was to receive its first batch of at-risk seventh and eighth graders that was expected to raise the academy's population to nearly 50 students (Robertson, 2008).

By March 2009, the principal of LLA reported having 35 students in the program (Mungin, 2009). For the 2008-2009 year, it was reported that 83 percent of LLA students had passed their writing SOLs, 68 passed their math SOL and 90 percent of the students improved their math scores from the year before when they were not in the LLA academy (Lester, 2009). For 2009-2010, LLA reported a pass rate of 91 percent on the writing SOL, 89 percent on the reading SOL, 83 percent on the science SOL, 77 percent on the math SOL, and 57 percent on the social studies SOL (Kennedy, 2010). Despite the reported successes of LLA, in 2010, TC proposed closing the Learning and Life Academy to create a new alternative education program.

The new proposal centered on the creation of three academic deans, one for each middle school. The proposal for three deans is estimated to cost \$225,000, with programming improvements slated to cost 45,000. The Academy currently services 40 students with a budget of \$570,000, so the new plan will save the district an estimated \$300,000 at a time when the division 'seeks to restructure in light of a multi-year significant budget challenge.' According to the new proposal, "deans would coordinate student discipline and academic data to determine how to "facilitate success" for students. Deans would also track student cases and monitor student behavior issues that seem to be caused by the transition to middle and high school. They would participate in conflict resolution and would play a role in coordinating student discipline. The deans would also collaborate with 'drop out prevention specialists' at the high school level along with counselors and administrators to increase student achievement and prevent dropout. Schools are mandated to decrease drop out rates to meet AYP benchmarks.

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The proposal suggests tripling the number of students served by the alternative education unit from 40 to 120. The proposal, prepared by Scott Burckbuchler and Assistant superintendent for Academic Services Dianna Lindsay, says the introduction of deans in the middle school will be more preventative than the current program which pulls students out of their homeschools into a different school environment. According to their findings, “The proposal for Deans is also consistent with the philosophical underpinning that it is best to address the needs of students in their home schools as we build a community of learning to which our students needs are met.’ In addition to the deans, adjustments would be made in the in-school suspension models, community building expectation and the use of out of school suspensions.” Last winter, two community meetings were held to address drop out prevention. During both sessions, suspensions were identified as contributing factors to students dropping out.

In a recent press release, school board chairman James Nickols stipulated that the proposal was the product of “three years of study and discussion among board members, administration, various concerned individuals and community groups.” Nickols reiterated that the proposal addresses the systemic challenges of discipline, absenteeism, and parental involvement while expanding the division’s alternative education to reach more at-risk children.

Despite the estimated \$300,000 savings or the increase in its target population from 40 to 120 students that would result from closing the LLA Academy and serving its students in their zoned school, community members have spoken out vehemently against eliminating the program. In a 2010 Virginia Gazette article, Clive Fenton, a Tillets resident and arguably the programs most vocal supporter, argued that the LLA program should remain in its current format (Fenton, 2010). And during a December 2010 school board meeting, a combination of 21

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parents, LLA students, and at least one William and Mary student mentor spoke passionately against eliminating the LLA academy (Robertson, 2010). But there are countervailing opinions on this issue. For example, local education advocate John Whitley “has been pushing for the deans” and views “pull-out programs like LLA as a cop-out because public schools are supposed to provide a social and cultural element” (Robertson, 2010).

An overview of all the information related to LLA reveals that the achievement data, if accurate, is incredible. In order to be enrolled in the LLA Academy, a student must either be one or more years below grade level or severely failing in their current grade. Consequently, if the reported gains made by this at-risk student population are legitimate, the LLA academy could be cited for making enormous strides in closing Tillets County’s achievement gap. To wit, the Academy boasts a cadre of education partnerships across the community, to include William and Mary student mentors, parents, and community agents. Yet in spite of all the positive press the school has received the last three years and seemingly overwhelming community support, the TC school system has decided to shut down the LLA program.

This begs the question, “Why would the school division move to shut down such a seemingly successful program?” According to a former LLA faculty member, the school division may be shutting the program due to its lack of sustained, quantifiable improvement. Noting the high turn-over rate among the program’s faculty and the Academy’s ineffective leadership, this former instructor called into question the fidelity of the seemingly phenomenal SOL pass rates so often utilized to trumpet the Academy’s success. Specifically, participant 18 suggested that a closer examination of the purported SOL gains against the actual number of students enrolled at the Academy (as opposed to the smaller number of students who may have been assessed during a given testing cycle), may shed a different light upon the actual achievement within LLA.

Specifically citing the paucity of research based instructional strategies implemented by its administration and excessive discipline issues among its student body, this instructor's assertions, if correct, could significantly undermine the LLA program's community support. And yet, because the decision to close the program is final, it is important to look forward. For the sake of the current LLA Academy students, our new charge must be to analyze the effectiveness, strengths, and weaknesses of the new academic coaches. Because ultimately, those three deans will be measured by their ability to develop and implement a concrete plan to close the achievement gap for all at-risk middle school students in Tilletts County.

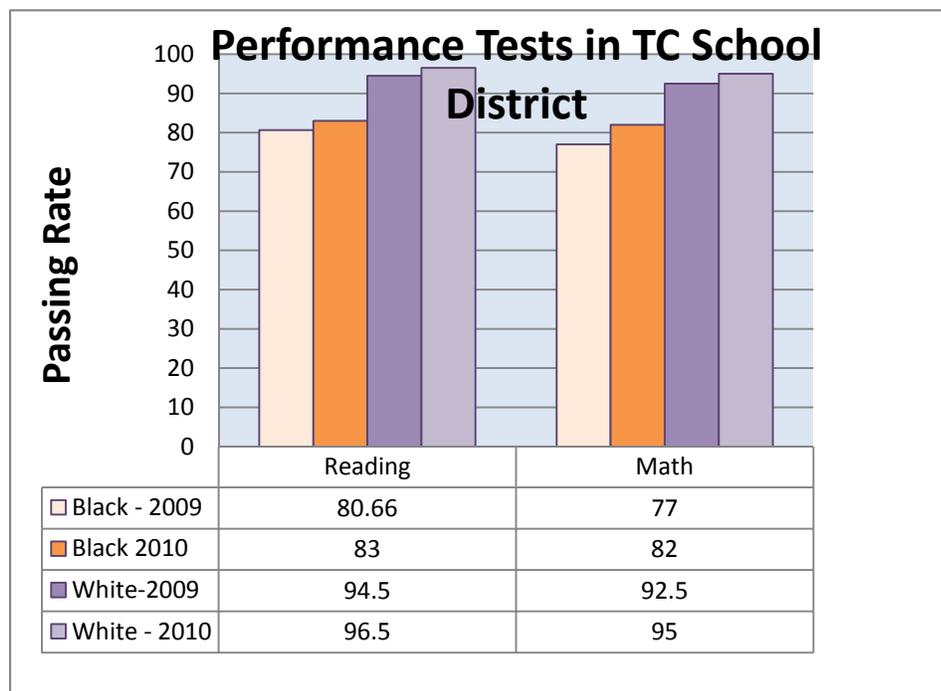
### **CONCLUSIONS**

When I first began researching the achievement gap in the district, I was limited to data of student achievement listed on the Virginia Department of Education school report card webpage. This webpage enumerated the pass rates, divided into subgroups, of students in the district from 2006 to 2009. This snapshot showed an average gap of 16.7 percent across all tested subjects between African American and White students in the district. The tested subjects included English, Math, Writing, History, and Science. In particular math, and reading, the two most common variables examined in reference to the achievement gap, were 77 and 80 respectively as compared to 92.5 and 94.6 respectively for White students. After researching the achievement gap within the district more thoroughly, I was able to ascertain more longitudinal data related to student achievement in the district. This data was graciously provided by the Multicultural Affairs Unit that was extremely helpful during the course of this research project.

The most recent data from 2010 shows blacks passing at approximately 83 percent on both math and reading, a gain in both categories. In comparison, whites increased their math and reading scores by approximately three percent. This shows that both sub-groups have increased

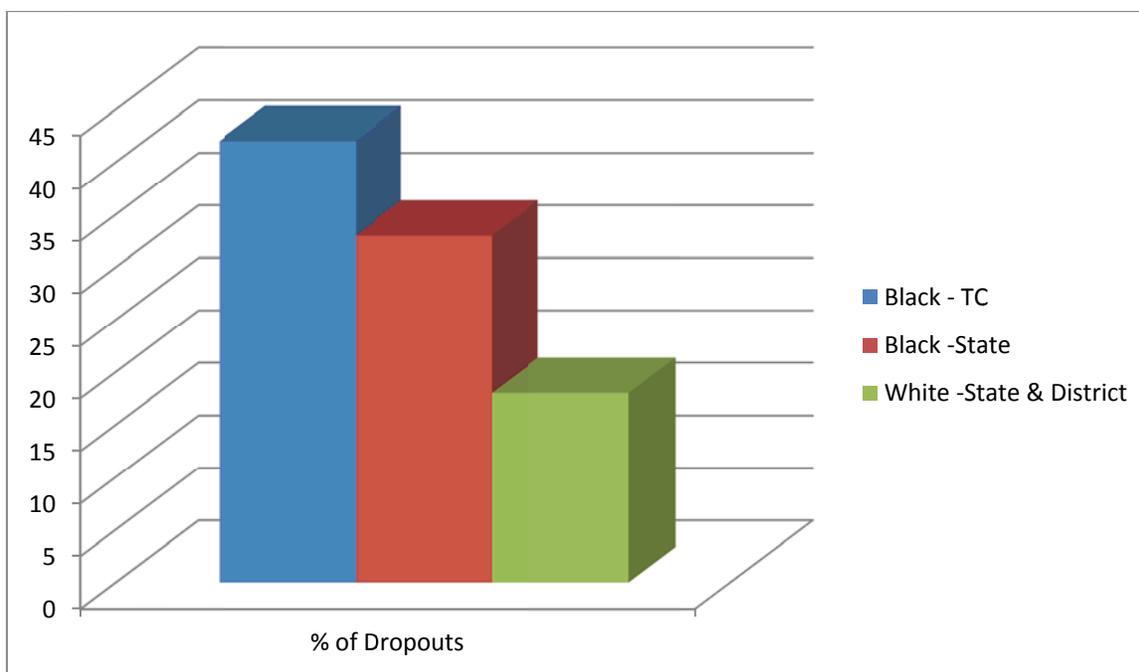
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levels of achievement although the gap between the African American and White sub-group has remained relatively constant from 2009 to 2010 due to simultaneous increases.



Longitudinal data from the MAU suggests progress has been made in closing the achievement gap just within the last five years. The passing rate for reading of African American students was 62 percent in 2006 whereas now it is closer to 83 percent. Likewise, the passing rate for Math of African American students within the district was an even lower, 52 percent, whereas now it is just above 80. It is important to juxtapose this achievement data with the drop-out rate data for TC provided on the VDOE report card. This data shows of 2009, that only 59 percent of black students graduated high school within four years and 57 percent graduated within five years. This means that approximately 42 percent of black students do not graduate from TC schools compared to the state dropout rate for blacks which is 33 percent and the for the state and division drop-out rate for whites that is approximately 18 percent.

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When examined longitudinally, it is evident that TC has made strides towards raising passing rates on SOL tests since 2006 among the black students who had not dropped out. In reading, the passing rate among African American students increased by 20 percent and 30 percent in math. At the same time, all parties must realize that a double digit gap still remains between White and African American sub-groups on all passing rates within the district according to the VDOE and data provided by the MAU. Even more importantly, the standardized tests do not account for the 40 percent of black students who drop out of TC schools. In this context, achievement is relative.

Although it is commendable that achievement has increased greatly among the black subgroup since 2006, this achievement only accounts for less than 60 percent of the black subgroup that enters the school system. Furthermore, gaps exist between the number of African American students taking advanced classes and receiving advanced diplomas, correlates of college enrollment and success. This means that although they have come a long way, the

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district has a lot more work to do in the fierce urgency of now to reach the goal of having all students achieve at high levels and also, the goal of greatly reducing drop-out rates among black students.

The dropout rate for black students in TC, at 40 percent, is a huge concern. The average drop-out rate for students across the state is even lower at 33 percent and the average dropout rate for white students across the division and state is even lower at 18 percent. These numbers make for compelling evidence that something needs to be in the TC school system as soon as possible to get more black students graduating from high school. The What Works Clearing House, “an initiative of the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences” whose purpose is to rigorously investigate what works in the field of American Education, lists a number of proven dropout intervention programs that TC could possibly benefit from looking into (WWC, 2011). One, the Accelerated Middle Schools program, was found to have an improvement index for staying in school of +18 percentile points and of +35 percentile for progressing in school. *Accelerated Middle Schools*,

“are self-contained academic programs designed to help middle school students who are behind grade level catch up with their age peers. If these students begin high school with other students their age, the hope is that they will be more likely to stay in school and graduate. The programs serve students who are one to two years behind grade level and give them the opportunity to cover an additional year of curriculum during their one to two years in the program” (What Works Clearinghouse, 2008).

Another drop-out prevention program, *ALAS*, showed an improvement index for staying in school of +42 percentile points at the end of the intervention (ninth grade) and +19 percentile points for progressing in school. *ALAS*,

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“(Spanish for “wings”) is an intervention for middle and high school students that is designed to address student, school, family, and community factors that affect dropping out. Each student is assigned a counselor/mentor who monitors attendance, behavior, and academic achievement. The counselor/mentor provides feedback and coordinates interventions and resources to students, families, and teachers. Counselors/mentors also serve as advocates for students and intervene when problems are identified. Students are trained in problem-solving, self-control, and assertiveness skills. Parents are trained in parent-child problem solving, how to participate in school activities, and how to contact teachers and school administrators to address issues” (What Works Clearinghouse, 2006).

This intervention is particularly relevant to TC because the core counselor component which purpose is to monitor, provide feedback, and coordinate interventions with students, teachers and families, parallels the stated goals for the new Academic Coaches that are to be put in place within the school system for at-risk students. These goals are to, “meet with and evaluate students, preparing Individualized Learning Plans for them, and following up to see how they’re progressing with their personal and academic goals” (Lester, 2011). In the formulation and implementation of the Academic Coach’s roles, responsibilities, and strategies, a lot could be taken from the *ALAS* model which has proven to be effective.

Another relevant and effective dropout prevention program is *Check & Connect* which has an average improvement index for staying in school is +25 percentile points and +30 percentile points for progressing in school. This program,

“is a dropout prevention strategy that relies on close monitoring of school performance, as well as mentoring, case management, and other supports. The program has two main components: “Check” and “Connect.” The Check component is designed to continually

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assess student engagement through close monitoring of student performance and progress indicators. The Connect component involves program staff giving individualized attention to students, in partnership with school personnel, family members, and community service providers. Students enrolled in *Check & Connect* are assigned a “monitor” who regularly reviews their performance (in particular, whether students are having attendance, behavior, or academic problems) and intervenes when problems are identified. The monitor also advocates for students, coordinates services, provides ongoing feedback and encouragement, and emphasizes the importance of staying in school” (WWC, 2006).

The individualized attention to students given personnel who monitor and intervenes on behalf of students also parallel the function of the new academic coaches of TC and there is a lot to gain from a close analysis of the components of this program compared to the function and purpose of the new academic coaches of TC.

It is of the utmost importance that more is done to greatly decrease the number of African Americans dropping out in TC. The dropout rate reinforce negatively affects the economic upward mobility of African Americans leads to more African Americans without health insurance, in prison and dying early (Paige & Witty , 2010).Paige & Witty argue that the achievement gap correlates directly with the income gap between African Americans and Whites in America. In 2004 the average black family income was a little more than half that of a similar white family’s income. African American dropouts over age of 25 make approximately \$22,795 a year. African American high school graduates make approximately \$34,614 a year. African Americans with some college make \$46,960 a year and African Americans with a bachelors or higher make \$75,901 a year. These figures clearly show the large increases in African American

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yearly income between African American dropouts as opposed to those who finish high school, some college, and four years of college. By this logic, one can reason strongly that a decrease in the dropout rate alone in TC will significantly increase the socioeconomic status of a large portion of its residents (Paige & Witty, 2010).

Also, 52 percent of African American high school dropouts get their health care from the government, 28 percent of African Americans who don't go to college will go w/o health insurance during some point in the year and 4 percent of African Americans that drop out of high school will be incarcerated at some point in their lives. 52 percent of the current dropout rate in TC which is approximately 40 percent, is 20.8 percent. This means that 20.8 percent of African American who go through the Tilletts county school system will get their healthcare from the government. This is one in five African American Students in TC. 28 percent of the 40 percent dropout rate is 11.2 percent, which means that 11.2 percent of African American dropouts in TC could go without health care during this year. That is more than one out of ten. The numbers strongly suggest that decreasing the dropout rate in TC will help close the income gap between African Americans and Whites within the district as well as lowering the amount of African Americans who receive government healthcare or do not have health care at all and furthermore it will reduce the amount of African Americans incarcerated.

Interview responses shed light onto a number of topics relevant to the achievement gap within the district. First of all, interview responses showed a great deal of commonality in reference to the reason why participants believed the achievement gap exists within TC. The most common responses were lack of parental involvement and low socio-economic status. Behind that, participants noted themes such as historical antecedents of oppression, culture, and teacher quality and preparation, specifically as it pertains to at-risk students. All of these

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responses aligned with common variables discussed in literature about the achievement gap nationally.

To the second question about whose responsibility it is to help underachieving minorities reach their academic potential, every respondent replied with a variation of the answer, “the home, school, and community” (Morris, 2011). At the same time, the respondents expressed a strong desire to increase the involvement of at-risk parents and a yearning to get them more committed to their children’s education. In the same breath, most participants expressed the realization that regardless of the level of parenting or risk factors outside of the school, it is the school and teacher’s job to embrace a student and teach them at whatever level they begin despite of outside variables. One participant did express that some teachers use lack of parental support as an excuse for not being held accountable for at-risk student learning, but this theme was not pervasive across responses. Overall, the responses suggest that faculty of TC are taking responsibility of student despite their background, all though they do believe at-risk student achievement as an issue that is ideally addressed at the home, school, and community levels.

Outside of analyzing the perceptions of faculty about variables related to the achievement gap, this research project sought to discover and analyze the initiatives that are currently in place that could be successful, to any extent, at closing the achievement gap within the district. This goal was accomplished and it is clear that a number of measures are in place that are to affect the achievement gap in some way. First of all, the district has a Multicultural Affairs Unit whose main purpose is to provide resources and collaboration to facilitate the elimination of the achievement gap. Under this office, exists a myriad of initiatives that include: multicultural competence exposure and training, Minority Achievement Leaders, a Minority Student Achievement Advisory Council, parental outreach, afterschool-tutorials and mentoring

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evaluation, community partnership building, evaluation of research and data, and a library of relevant literature.

As the increase in multicultural competence among school faculty, especially teachers, is an area of focus related to the closing of the achievement gap heavily suggested by research, the Multicultural Affairs Unit (MAU), focuses a great deal of attention on this. Specifically, the MAU has sponsored excellent workshops by exemplary educators across the country to speak to issues related to the achievement gap but particularly multicultural competence and culturally responsive teaching. Furthermore, the MAU trains teachers new to the school system and Minority Achievement Leaders (MALs) on culturally responsive training. The MAU also has a video workshop that teaches culturally responsive training. To the end of increasing multicultural competence and raising the level of culturally responsive teaching so that teachers will be better enabled to reach at-risk youth, the results of the current research suggests that the MAU is doing a lot in efforts to raise multicultural competence. That being said, interview responses across the district speak to a great number of teachers who are not exactly sure how to reach an at-risk child and would like more professional development on how to achieve this. An interpretation of these results begs several questions that can be answered in subsequent research internal or external to the district such as; how far reaching is the current culturally responsive teaching initiatives? How could these efforts be intensified or scaled up to reach more teachers within the district? How effective are the current workshops? Furthermore, is there a supplemental way to address multicultural competence that would compliment the workshops and speakers? To the question about alternatives to workshops, recent research on school districts effective at closing the achievement gap show that exemplary teachers can be identified and utilized within a school who can share their practices and experiences with other educators. This implementation of this

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is certainly a real solution to consider within the district. The other questions go beyond the capacity of this study and will require additional research by the MAU, school district, and/or outside researchers. It is important to know, that the lack of multicultural competence, culturally responsive teaching, and knowledge about how to reach at-risk students is a salient national problem that has yet to have a silver bullet solution. Despite these circumstances, TC and the MAU are taking progressive and commendable strides towards that end and should be commended for their efforts which should most certainly continue.

Another initiative under the auspices of the MAU are the Minority Achievement Leaders that are to exist at each school. These leaders have a valuable role on the school improvement team and are tasked with spreading multicultural training to their given school. The limiting factors of this initiative are lack of time because MALs are also full time teachers, and lack of a “bird’s eye view” of what is going on related to minority achievement in their respective schools. The position of MAL could be evaluated with the end of creating more capacity for impact within the MAL’s schools.

The MAU also has an initiative called the Minority Student Achievement Advisory (ACMSA) which basically shares the same mission of the MAU to aid in the raising minority achievement. It does so by enlisting a strong committee of an eclectic membership. The diversity of the committee is one of its main strengths and representatives serve from the school, community agencies, parents, and local college. The limiting factor of the committee is that they can only advise.

The MAU also reaches out to parents through workshops, drawing from research based models of parental outreach. The limiting factor with parental outreach is the extent to which TC or the MAU in collaboration can solicit parent participation, especially those parents of at-risk

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students. Difficulty ascertaining and sustaining parental support for at-risk students is pervasive and recalcitrant problem ubiquitous across the United States. Often time at-risk parents are of a lower SES and thus a lot more often than parents with a good SES. Furthermore, at-risk households are also single-parent, placing more onus on the one parent to provide the essentials of shelter, food, and water, essentials that can unfortunately take precedence over emphasis on their child's education. Dr. David Heiber, of Concentric Circle Educational Solutions has recently leading a team that conducts home visits to meet the parents of students who are at-risk and underachieving within schools. Preliminary reports describe this method as extremely effective but additional evaluation still needs to occur to confirm these results and to prepare the intervention for scale to public schools. TC should keep track of this initiative to see if the results will be compatible with TC. Also, a review of literature showed some exemplary workshops that can be examined the potential to be incorporated into future current parental outreach initiatives. These parental outreach workshops, utilized in the Seattle Social and Emotional Learning Development Project include "catch me being good" for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, "preparing for school success" for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, and "preparing for the drug free years" for middle school students. All of these programs teach parents strategies and skills for how to foster a positive home environment that supports student learning.

After-school tutorials and mentoring are another big initiative within the district that have play a role in closing the achievement gap. After-school tutorials, as described in the 2009 TC strategic plan are:

"programs were framed as a "research best practice" that has significant impact on student achievement. After-school programs provided for academically enriching activities by allowing for a wide range of instructional strategies in response

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to various levels of student readiness, interests, learning styles, and needs.

Assistance was also provided to reinforce class work encountered during the school day and assigned homework”

After-school tutorials are considered a third tier of Response to Intervention and were successful at improving student outcomes as of the 2009 TC strategic plan report. Updated evaluations are needed to examine the current status of the tutorials but something that was gained from interview responses is the fact that after-school tutorials have been stopped at the high school level this year as a result of lack of participation. This reality suggests the need to examine the participation at these after-school tutorials and ways that it can be increased.

Mentorship initiatives are heavily present within the district and offer the components of resiliency for at-risk children by giving them opportunities to bond with role models that have high expectations, offer caring and support, and give opportunities for participation. All seven of the mentoring initiatives are based out of student centered programs out of the local College. These initiatives reach a myriad of different schools and include a roster of anywhere between five and 150 mentors. Outside of the college based mentorship initiatives exists mentorship related programs from external non-profits such as Project Discovery and Big Brothers, Big Sisters although the TC 2009 strategic plan suggests their capacities are limited by variables such as lack of mentor support. Overall, the mentorship initiatives are far reaching in the district but are least felt on the high school level. These initiatives are actually monitored and evaluated by the MAU to a good extent, although some of the smaller programs have not been evaluated recently. TC should continue to support mentoring initiatives within the district as they are a way to provide at-risk students with components necessary for resiliency that is correlated with high academic achievement.

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In general, the MAU is an excellent resource within the district that does very much as it pertains to addressing the achievement gap. There is concern as to the general perception of the MAU is across the district though. Participant number 16 expressed feelings that the MAU is sometimes marginalized and that its' initiatives are sometimes seen as the "other thing" The participant goes on to say that MAU initiatives are often voluntary and subject to budget cuts. The TC should continue to support the MAU's initiatives and to do what is necessary to highlight the MAU as a resource vital to the solution of the achievement gap within the district because at the time of the interviews for this research, almost no one explicitly mentioned the MAU in the interview question asking about the solutions or interventions within the district that are in place to aid in the closing of the achievement gap.

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a district wide initiative in its fourth year of implementation that corresponds with increases of student achievement across the district. RTI is a national preventative framework that allows keeps struggling or students in the middle to low range of achievement in the classroom with their peers. Instead of the outdated maladapted practice of tracking students into slower classes with lower expectations, they keep students in the classroom with their peers and provide them with an additional class every day, during and elective block, that is taught by a math or reading specialist that focuses on student's individual needs. This program is research based and being adopted nationally as an effective model for raising student achievement. A core component of the RTI framework is the universal screening that places eligible students with a certain criteria into RTI classes. Students with lower levels of achievement and passing rates, such as at-risk subgroups, are automatically involved in the program based on criteria. Through this screening mechanism, at-risk students are receiving much needed extra educational support. This model is in its fourth year of a five year plan of

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implementation within the district and should continue to be supported. After the fifth year, it should definitely be comprehensively analyzed for the extent to which it helped close the achievement gap among students in the district.

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is a district wide initiative based on a national model that seeks to accelerate student learning and participation, as well as success in advanced and college preparatory classes, with the end goal of AVID students enrolling in college. AVID has been evaluated by a myriad of qualitative and quantitative research and the program strongly correlates with successful educational outcomes of its participants, many of which are at-risk subgroups. Interview responses revealed a possible difference in the level of emphasis of the AVID program across schools. This theme should be verified and looked into by the district, but one must realize that the absence of interview responses related to AVID in certain schools could certainly be the result of the subjective nature of interviews. The limitations of this research prevented outreach to the AVID coordinator for the opportunity to examine specific AVID data from the district but future research, internal or external, should examine the extent to which the program affects at-risk subgroups, completion rates of the program, and the number of AVIDs students applying and enrolling in college.

Going back to the remarkable gains in the district between 2006 and 2010 among African American students, from interview responses and the content of the 2009 TC strategic plan, a lot of these gains can be correlated with previous leadership on the superintendent level that made bridging the achievement gap a primary and salient goal in the district. Interview responses suggest that the previous superintendent focused on the achievement gap a great deal and emphasized it often. The 2009 TC strategic plan concretely shows a number of initiatives put into place, researched and evaluated by the district that were explicitly to the end of closing the

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achievement gap. Interview responses also reveal that there is a new superintendent in the district and he has not placed a specific emphasis on bridging the achievement gap. In fact, responses show that there is a current lack of a pervasive vision that faculty are widely knowledgeable of. Research of school districts effective at closing the achievement gap stress that a specific district wide vision, mission, and/or strategic plan needs to be in place and aware of, that addresses the achievement gap specifically.

Responses and evaluation of current stated superintendent priorities show that there is no specific mention of the achievement gap at all. The issue seems to be skirted around by platitudes of the need to raise student achievement for all, with emphasis on the “average” learners, as opposed to gifted and special education learners. If the TC is to continue with its trend of bridging the achievement gap, it needs to really take up where the strategic plan in 2009 left off as it related to bridging the achievement gap initiatives and vision. The new superintendent needs to bring the issue up in and make it okay to talk about. The achievement gap is a polemic issue and that may deter him from tackling it immediately but the issue must be brought up and acted upon. At the present time, interview responses suggest that the achievement gap is something to be hushed and down played. Instead, talk of increasing achievement of all students is the surrogate for candid talk about the achievement gap that does exist within the district. A local model of this has been effective is Virginia Beach Public Schools. (VBPS, 2011). That district specifically incorporates bridging the achievement gap into its strategic plan. Furthermore, the district is not afraid to target at-risk populations such as African American Males specifically so that the particular population can receive the unique attention it needs to aid in the closing of the achievement gap.

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On the subject of leadership, the research on effective school districts also emphasize instructional leadership as a key characteristic of districts exceptionally effective at closing the achievement gap. Instructional leadership is the concept whereby district and building level leadership are held directly responsible for improving the quality of the teaching that occurs within their school. To this end, instructional leadership involves principals and superintendents who are knowledgeable enough about curriculum and instruction that they themselves can model effective teaching practices, observe and evaluate teachers in the classroom, and provide them with the constructive critiques necessary to aid them in direct professional development. Furthermore, instructional leaders are masters of aligning the professional development that occurs within their schools with the strategic initiatives set forth by the school to raise student achievement.

The 2009 TC strategic plan shows that at least in 2009, instructional leadership was definitely present to a great extent. Central office leadership were visiting classrooms on a weekly and bi-weekly basis to observe how teachers were utilizing research based curriculum and professional development was aligned to match the needs of the strategic initiatives occurring within the district. Professional development could currently be enhanced within the district by utilizing teachers effective with at-risk youth to provide in-service training to teachers. Furthermore, a model of peer review and sharing of knowledge would benefit the school system. This model would allow peers to observe each other in the classroom, offer feedback, and allow peer pressure to positively hold fellow teachers accountable for at-risk student achievement. Furthermore, this model would give teachers the opportunity to break their silence about their deficits and reservations that exist in relation to their ability to reach at-risk students. Interview responses within the school system revealed that a lot of teachers are not comfortable putting

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their weaknesses out in the open, thus preventing necessary and mutually beneficial conversations, about how to reach students, from occurring.

Several inferences can be drawn from question number 15 of the TC research interviews relating to the extent of which information related to causes and solutions to the achievement gap is shared between schools in the district or across districts. While participant eight claims that information is shared within the district, other participants elaborate further (Px8). Participant 12 notes that, “principles talk to each other” and specifically, participant five note that *middle* school principals meet monthly (Px5, Px12). Additionally, participant six says that there could be better sharing of information between the levels of the school system, elementary, middle, and high.

In relation to the possible need for more sharing between levels of school within the district, participant nine reveals the phenomenon whereby students are allowed, “to pass through middle school without consequence and only consequence comes in 9<sup>th</sup> grade when they hit the wall academically” (Px9). This situation described speaks to the specific need for more communication between the middle and high school levels within TC. Over all, there is an impression that schools communicate a lot within the particular level of school within the district whether it be elementary, middle, or high. The responses suggest that more communication could occur between the levels of school within the district. Furthermore, no respondents spoke to any communication between districts, a strategy that is being heavily implemented across some extremely proactive and progressive school districts across the country (MSAN, 2011).

A strategy that TC could adopt is that of collaborating resources, research, and best practice across school districts that are taking progressive measures to bridge the achievement

gap within their districts. This can occur through the participation in the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN). The MSAN,

“is a national coalition of 25 multiracial, suburban-urban school districts that have come together to study and eliminate achievement gaps that exist in their districts. MSAN districts have student populations between 3,000 and 33,000, and are most often well established first-ring suburbs or small/mid-size cities. Additionally, the districts share a history of high academic achievement, connections to major research universities, and resources that generally exceed neighboring districts.

Across MSAN districts racial disparities on an array of achievement data demonstrate wide gaps in performance between students of color and their white peers. Since 1999, MSAN has worked fervently to achieve the parallel goals of closing achievement gaps that persist in their districts while ensuring all students achieve to high levels. To this end, districts work collaboratively to conduct and publish research, analyze policies, and examine practices that support the Network's mission: to understand and change school practices and structures that keep racial achievement gaps in place” (Minority Student Achievement Network, 2011).

An integral component of the MSAN is a research-practitioner council (RPC) that consists of two representatives from participating district. One of the important functions of the RPC is to highlight, “highlight programs, policies, and practices in MSAN districts that have shown evidence to increase the achievement level of students of color, particularly African American and Latino/a students (Minority Student Achievement Network, 2011).

The ability to share successes, strengths, and weaknesses as they relate to school policy, procedure, practices, research, programs and framework that aim to bridge the achievement gaps

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of sub-groups and raise the academic achievement of all, could certainly be an invaluable asset to the TC school division. Its participation in the Minority Student Achievement Network is a promising strategy that could offer additional informed consultation among participating districts who are all striving to achieve the same goal.

To aid in the increase of student achievement for all in TC schools, especially among at-risk sub-groups, more collaboration could occur between TC and the College of William and Mary. The College of William and Mary has a wealth of resources including its students, faculty, and special funds set aside for community based initiatives. As far as students go, currently there are a great deal of students who mentor and tutor students of the TC schools system and that is fantastic. Furthermore, some participants conducting in depth research are utilizing TC schools as a case study. The TC school system should continue to be amenable to these research partnerships and the College of William and Mary should encourage them. There are actually a number of William and Mary grants that are given including the Sharpe Grant, that fund students research in the local community. Also, there is a community engagement grant that usually is untapped by students that is specifically for community outreach. This year Rites of Passage is benefitting from a few thousand dollars from this fund that is funding transportation to and from the school for the kids who want to participate in the mentoring program. This is one example of how the College's resources can be leveraged to aid the school system.

William and Mary academic departments could be consulted and utilized during the creation and evaluation of the new strategic plan. The College is a hub of knowledge and experts in almost every field. When the finances and budget is being considered for new programs and initiatives or even existing ones, collaborations and partnerships should be fostered with the state of the art Mason School of Business. When the TC school system is deciding what direction to

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head in for the bridging of the achievement gap or when they want to see what the potential impact for an initiative like the Academic Coaches might be, the School of Education can be consulted. Also, the School of Education should have close partnerships with the Dropout Prevention Specialist of TC. Furthermore the School of Education could host directed professional development. To vet the quality, efficacy, and relevance of the existing multicultural competence initiatives within TC, experts such as Professor Anne Charity-Hudley out of the Community Studies department would be exceptionally helpful in continuing to give her workshops on Language Variation in U.S. schools. Also, the public policy department could be utilized to examine the effect that new policies will have on achievement related initiatives.

As this was an exploratory study at its heart, this research started broad and sought to qualitatively assess the state of the achievement gap in the TC school system with specific emphasis on heavily noted achievement gap related variables such as school ethos, multicultural competence, and professional development. From the research I several themes have become clear. First of all, everyone in the TC school system is aware of the state of the achievement gap because of federally mandated standardized tests and because of benchmark tests that are heavily emphasized and which break achievement data down by sub-groups. Also, this research revealed a number of responses by participants in TC about the reason why the achievement gap exists within the school system. All of responses given are common responses noted in literature and the most common response in TC was lack of parental support and low socioeconomic status followed by teacher quality.

Everyone interviewed in the district believes that it is the home, school, and community's responsibility to raise the academic achievement of at-risk minorities. Generally there was some disappointment with lack of involvement with parenting but overall respondents did not take

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onus of themselves for the responsibility of raising academic achievement for those who need it most. It was also found that raising the academic achievement of all students is currently a priority within the district but specific mention of bridging the achievement gap and targeting of at-risk groups has not been specifically addressed as it used to be in the district by the last superintendent. Response to Intervention was identified as key preventative strategy with much promise in bridging the achievement gaps within TC and the extent to which RTI accomplishes this goal is certainly a needed topic of empirical future studies within TC.

Specifically, researchers could analyze the effect RTI has on at-risk sub-groups. The extent to which AVID reaches at-risk sub-groups within TC is also content for future study. Furthermore, the current study was able to gain a surface level glimpse of the professional development and the multicultural training that occurs within TC. Future studies could be based focus solely on one of the aforementioned topics to really ascertain a thorough understanding of how professional development and multicultural competence training works within TC and the extent to which they are effective and aligned to the strategic plan. Also, future study in TC could examine the impact and function the new Academic Deans will have on closing the achievement gap. Further study could also examine the impact of the new Superintendent of TC and the extent to which he takes an explicit and progressive approach to closing the achievement gap within TC. Lastly, further study could delve into the extent to which the opportunity gap exists within TC and how the opportunity gap and achievement gap go hand in hand.

	Participant Descriptions	Location
Participant number (Px)		

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Px1	Avid Coordinator	James Booth Middle
Px2	Assistant Principal	James Booth Middle
Px3	Math Specialist	James Booth Middle
Px4	Math Specialist	James Booth Middle
Px5	Principal	James Booth Middle
Px6	Teacher	James Booth Middle
Px7	Teacher	Eastside High
Px8	Principal	Eastside High
Px9	Counselor	Eastside High
Px10	Teacher	Eastside High
Px11	Teacher	Rosemont Middle
Px12	Teacher	Rosemont Middle
Px13	Teacher	Tribble Elementary
Px14	Principal	Rosemont Middle
Px15	Teacher & MAL	Rosemont Middle
Px16	ACMSA	Community Learning & Life Academy
Px17	Principal	Learning & Life Academy
Px18	Former Faculty	Learning & Life Academy
Px19	Principal	Tribble Elementary

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