

Fall 2005

# A Case Study of the Impact of Zero-Based Staffing and the Teacher Selection Process in the Improvement of Academic Success Indicators in an Underachieving Elementary School in Maryland

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A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF ZERO-BASED STAFFING AND THE  
TEACHER SELECTION PROCESS IN THE IMPROVEMENT OF ACADEMIC  
SUCCESS INDICATORS IN AN UNDERACHIEVING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN  
MARYLAND

by

David F. Reeder

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program for Educational Leaders

School of Education

Duquesne University

May, 2005

***DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY***  
***SCHOOL OF EDUCATION***  
***INTERDISCIPLINARY DOCTORAL PROGRAM FOR***  
***EDUCATIONAL LEADERS***

***Dissertation***

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)

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A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF ZERO-BASED STAFFING AND THE TEACHER  
SELECTION PROCESS IN THE IMPROVEMENT OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS INDICATORS IN  
AN UNDERACHIEVING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN MARYLAND

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## Abstract

This case study examined the process of zero-based staffing as a reform model for improving academic achievement at an underachieving elementary school in a county school system in Maryland. The process of zero-based staffing involved the involuntary transfer of all professional staff from the building. This study examined the zero-based process used to restructure the school, the teacher selection process, and the characteristics of the teachers selected for the school. A qualitative design methodology was employed to examine the processes through a naturalistic inquiry approach. Four semistructured interview instruments were utilized to gather data from the superintendent, principal, teachers, and the teacher selection committee. Superintendent, principal, and teacher interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting. The teacher selection committee was interviewed as a group. The researcher attended a variety of school meetings and visited classrooms as an indweller to gain perspective regarding the school culture. In addition, Maryland State Assessment data was examined to compare student achievement before and after the new teachers were hired for the school. The comparison of Maryland State Assessment data from one year to the next indicated improvement in both reading and math. This improvement was significant enough to remove the school from the state list of failing schools. Results of the study indicated that the use of zero-based staffing as a reform model was effective in facilitating the hiring of teachers with common characteristics and values. Primary characteristics and values of these teachers included the belief that all children can learn and a positive and caring attitude. These attitudes combined with the willingness and expectation to engage in continuous and collaborative learning improved student performance.

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“We must never cease from exploring. At the end of all our exploring will be to arrive at where we began and know the place for the first time.”

T.S. Eliot

My dissertation is dedicated first to my family for the sacrifices made to help me reach this important professional goal. It is also dedicated to all those who assisted, advised, and prodded me to persevere.

Thank you!

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“Control is an illusion. It’s seductive because it gives a feeling of power. Something to hold on to. So it becomes addictive. It’s hard to give up even when it’s not working. You can’t start a journey until you let go of habits holding you back” (Bolman & Deal, 1995, p. 31).

The formation of habits in an organizational culture can affect the school improvement effort. The ability to change habits that permeate a culture requires an understanding of organizational theory. Scholars in the area of literature on organizational theory attempt to describe and bring coherence to a variety of concepts, definitions, and generalizations that explain organizational life (Hoy & Miskel, 2001). One perspective includes the considerations of Chester I. Barnard that describe the interactions between formal and informal organizations. He summarized his ideas describing organizational life in terms of structural and dynamic concepts. Barnard identified the structural components as individual, cooperative system, formal organization, and informal organization (as cited in Hoy & Miskel, p. 19). The dynamic concepts included free will, cooperation, communication, authority, decision-making process, and dynamic equilibrium. These two areas are interrelated as formal and informal components of organizations. “In strong cultures, beliefs and values are held intensely, shared widely, and guide organizational behavior” (Hoy & Miskel, p. 180). Reforms that are attempted in organizations must contend with the values and beliefs held by the people who work in these settings.

Various models depict the organizational environment in terms of inputs and outputs with a variety of simple and complex interactions that comprise the internal dynamics. One example is a systems model for schools that includes input and output as discrete subgroups. The transformation process includes “structural system (bureaucratic expectations), cultural system (shared orientations), political system (power relations), and individual system (cognition and motivation)” (Hoy & Miskel, 2001, p. 31).

To understand and predict the behavior in schools, it is useful to examine the six pairs of interactions among the elements in terms of their harmony. We posit a congruence postulate: other things being equal, the greater the degree of congruence among the elements of the system, the more effective the system (Hoy & Miskel, p. 29).

Creating congruence between elements in a school that lead to student achievement and success is not an easy task in some well-defined cultures.

The interactions between these elements are continually in a state of flux, which creates new ways of interacting and interconnecting with the environment. Margaret Wheatley (1999) uses science and principles of quantum physics to stimulate our thinking about organizations, leadership, chaos and change. She speaks of “order out of chaos” as a new mantra that organizations, as well as nature, use to structure and restructure the environment to move to a higher level of functioning, and therefore, survival. According to Wheatley, "And the turbulence that relentlessly confronts organizations has led many companies to experiment with more fluid and responsive forms of organization” (1999, p. ix).

Public Law 107-110 commonly known as the “No Child Left Behind Act” (NCLB, 2001) is providing some of the stimulus that has required school systems to examine how to structure or restructure organizations to meet the demands of

accountability. NCLB requires accountability related to academic achievement indicators. These indicators require states to develop tests that measure student achievement in math and reading. Other indicators include attendance and graduation rates. A matrix provides districts and schools with either a passing or failing score. NCLB requires districts and schools to disaggregate their data based on ethnic categories, limited English proficiency, free and reduced meals (FARM), gender, and students with disabilities. The law mandates the use of scientifically based research to guide the design, selection, and implementation of instructional programs. Failure to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) in any one of the disaggregated subgroups places a school on alert status and could ultimately result in reconstitution.

In Maryland this accountability movement started in 1993 when the Maryland School Performance Program (MSPP) was created. The intent was to increase the monitoring of school improvement as a function of student achievement at the school level. To fulfill this requirement, the MSPP used criterion reference testing at Grades 3, 5, and 8 to assist and compare student achievement and school effectiveness across the state. This assessment provided school-wide scores that could not be disaggregated by student, ethnicity, economic status, or other factors. In addition, high stakes testing was implemented in high schools requiring all students to take exit tests in English 9, government, biology, and algebra I.

Additional tests are being developed in English, science, math, and history so that the passing of 12 high school assessments will comprise a large portion of the graduation portfolio. Schools in Maryland are rated on the basis of attendance rates, test scores, and

dropout rates with accountability for student achievement and school performance resting on the administrators and teachers in individual buildings.

The initiatives by the Maryland State Department of Education have reaped positive results. The final report of the Visionary Panel for Better Schools was published by the Maryland State Department of Education in January 2002 and titled “Achievement Matters Most.” *Education Week* ranked Maryland number one in the nation in standards and accountability, according to the report. The last decade has been devoted to establishing rigorous academic standards, developing assessments, and reporting results. The difference between transformation and reformation is clearly delineated, as is the importance of teachers in the school improvement process. “The Visionary Panel knows what every parent knows, what every student knows: there is no substitute for a good teacher. Teacher quality matters—*it matters more than anything else*” (Maryland State Department of Education, 2002, p. 4). The Panel made eight summary recommendations:

1. Develop a statewide K-12 curriculum . . . .
2. Align K-12 curriculum and testing . . . .
3. Widen the focus of accountability from low-performing schools to all schools . . . .
4. Make every school accountable for the performance of every child . . . .
5. Certify only those teachers who can demonstrate high-level knowledge and teaching skills . . . .
6. Place more highly qualified teachers and principals in our lowest performing schools . . . .
7. Shift the focus of the principal from administration to instruction . . . .
8. Demand full funding of existing reform plans designed to solve our worst educational problems (Maryland State Department of Education, 2002, pp. 7-12).

The task of raising the achievement level of all children as prescribed by Public Law 107-110 is the challenge of all school districts in the nation. Recommendation #6 of the Visionary Panel is a component that has created some consternation in school districts

and possibly should be further qualified by adding “highly qualified teachers and principals who are effective.” These highly qualified and effective professionals may be the key to sustained improvement and transformation of an educational community. Continuous improvement will require a collaborative model that will engage our best and brightest educators in a dialog that challenges the status quo. “What will keep participants coming back to the table is an emerging realization that they are wrestling with the idea that their competence is directly and indivisibly linked to the competence of the system” (Zmuda, 2004, p. 28). School systems must identify and provide the proper motivations for attracting and retaining highly skilled and qualified participants at the table.

School systems are attempting different types of pay systems that reward staffs in a variety of ways for improving test scores and student achievement indicators. Chamberlin, Wragg, Haynes and Wragg (2002) conducted a review of literature in regard to performance-related pay. The study indicated that proponents of performance-related pay claim that motivation of staff, as well as recruitment and retention of high quality staff, is enhanced. Some of the problems identified with performance-related pay included neglect of unrewarded tasks, disagreement about goals, competitiveness, lack of openness about failings, cost, and possible demotivation of those not rewarded. The review was conducted as part of the Teachers’ Incentive Pay Project at University of Exeter which examined the threshold assessment and performance management for teachers in Wales and England.

Alfie Kohn (2003) is not a proponent of merit pay as evidenced in his article “The Folly of Merit Pay” in which he states, “To the best of my knowledge, no controlled scientific study has ever found a long-term enhancement of the quality of work as a result

of any incentive system” (p. 31). He further asserts that school-wide merit pay may in fact contribute to “. . . cheating, gaming, teaching to the test, and other ways of snagging the bonus (or dodging the penalty) . . .” (p. 44).

The schools of Tennessee have instituted a new system of reward (Glenn, 2002). Teachers who have been ranked as highly effective based on test-score gains averaged over a three-year period receive \$5,000 bonuses if they move to or stay at one of Chattanooga’s high-priority schools.

The NCLB legislation requires testing in Grades 3 through 8 (Public Law 107-110). School districts are searching for ways to achieve better results. It is likely that these test scores will enter into teacher deployment and rewards. Each state has implemented various testing programs to meet the requirements of meeting the accountability of NCLB. Maryland has been a leader in providing accountability for student achievement in its schools.

One school where students were achieving less than others as indicated by critical academic indicators such as attendance, MSPAP, Cognitive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) scores and the Maryland State Assessment (MSA) was an elementary school in a county school district in Maryland. This school was ranked 24th out of 24 county elementary schools in terms of student success. The school was not ranked as one of the most challenging schools based on Title I status derived from FARM statistics. All teachers and administrators were involuntarily transferred providing the opportunity to select a new staff specifically for the purpose of stimulating and improving student success.

The superintendent and her staff described the process as zero-based staffing. A new staff was selected to administer and teach at the school beginning with the

2003-2004 school year. In spring 2003 a new principal was selected and a committee comprised of the new principal, returning assistant principal, new assistant principal, Title I support specialist, and the comprehensive reform model consultant conducted interviews to hire a cadre of teaching personnel who could facilitate a change in a school already under school improvement. The interview team also included a parent who was the PTA president. An incentive to apply for positions was a \$5,000 pay differential that each administrator and teacher would receive each year as part of their employment package. An additional 30 minutes per day were also added to the teaching schedule. The additional time was to provide staff development opportunities as part of the process. During the spring and summer of 2003 a staff of professionals was selected that consisted of approximately 50% teachers new to the school and 50% rehired staff. This select group of professionals was picked to raise student achievement at the school.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to provide educators with a better understanding of the process and impact of reconstituting a school within a school system as a means of reform to improve student achievement. The process referred to as *zero-based staffing* was examined as applied to this school for the purpose of hiring and rehiring teachers who were deemed effective in raising student achievement as indicated by standardized test results. The selection criteria and process for staffing this school were examined to describe the filtering process employed in choosing the best teachers for the school. This study also included teacher perceptions of the process and what factors encouraged teachers to apply and engage in the improvement process.

A case study of an elementary school in a county system in Maryland provided the setting to examine the process. The elements examined in this study included zero-based staffing, teacher selection process, performance-related pay, teacher expectations and characteristics.

### Research Questions

What impact did zero-based staffing as a reform model have on student achievement?

1. Why did a school system employ zero-based staffing to reform an elementary school?
2. What criteria used in the candidate screening and selection process yielded the best instructional staff for the school?
3. What attributes of a zero-based school attracted teachers to apply for a position?
4. What were the expectations of the teachers' role from the teachers' point of view in the school improvement effort?
5. What were the teachers' perceptions regarding role expectations in a zero-based school environment?

## Definition of Terms

### Zero-Based Staffing:

This process involves removing all existing teachers from a building for the purpose of hiring/rehiring a new teaching staff.

### Involuntary Transfer:

An involuntary transfer is a process that involves notifying a teacher that he/she will no longer be teaching in his/her current school and will have an opportunity to select an appropriate teaching position in another school in the county.

### Teacher Selection Process:

The teacher selection committee is referred to in this document as the interview team.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

“The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” F. Scott Fitzgerald

No Child Left Behind requires that teachers in the classroom be highly qualified. At the basic level this means that teachers must be licensed in the area they teach. This certification may be as broad as an elementary certification to a specific content certification in physics or chemistry. It is logical and supported in research (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002) that effective teachers must possess content knowledge and knowledge of instructional methods (pedagogical preparation). The requirement for highly qualified teachers as prescribed by Public Law 107-110 mandates the procurement of teachers who will facilitate a high level of student achievement. While putting teachers in place who have prerequisite teaching skills and appropriate certification is a critical step, it does not insure effectiveness.

#### Zero-Based Staffing

The process of using zero-based staffing as a reform model is not readily found in a review of literature. This process has been used in the state of Maryland in recent years in several school districts. The general concept, as defined by the process employed in a county school system in Maryland, involved involuntarily transferring all professional staff from an under-performing elementary school. All teachers were eligible to reapply for positions, but with no guarantee that they would be rehired to the same school. If not selected, teachers were transferred to other schools in the district.

In this reform model, the school system selectively hired new teachers or rehired teachers in the school who possessed the attributes the school system needed to foster high expectations and academic achievement. The term *zero-based* was used by the school system to identify the process.

This Maryland county school system was not the first school system in Maryland to employ this model as a reform to improve academic achievement. The Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) employed this model in January 2001. Numerous schools were identified for reconstitution because of consistently poor academic performance. A separate entity termed the *CEO's District* was created within the BCPSS. This entity was designed to internally reconstitute several low-performing schools in Baltimore City. The BCPSS Division of Research, Evaluation, Assessment, and Accountability (2003) prepared a report on the CEO's District that included the background and purpose of the program:

As a response to the identification of seven schools of the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) in January 2001 for local reconstitution as part of Maryland's accountability system, Ms. Carmen Russo, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), helped create the CEO's District initiative, a collection of at-risk schools receiving additional resources for reform. Using research-based and innovative activities focused on a small number of schools, the intent of the CEO's District initiative was to create a positive momentum of change that would bring the CEO's District schools out of reconstitution status by the end of the 2003-04 school year, and further scale up to other BCPSS schools that may be exhibiting declining student achievement (p. 1).

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) was using an accountability system called the Maryland School Performance Program (MSPP) that utilized a testing program entitled the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). This testing program along with other school performance indicators

was used to calculate the school performance index (SPI). This index was used to identify and exit schools for local and state reconstitution. Local reconstitution was the first step in the process. If schools did not improve as reflected by the SPI they would move to the second step, which was state reconstitution. State reconstitution provided the option for the state to contract with outside companies. Baltimore City Public Schools is comprised of 143 schools. In January 2000, 80 BCPSS schools of the 143 had been identified for local reconstitution and 3 for state reconstitution. In response to this the CEO's District was created to address school improvement at the local level. Seven schools were identified and some facts regarding the schools and the probable reasons for low performance identified.

The schools represented a diversity of grade levels and geographic locations in the city. Many shared common reasons for not performing well. Classroom visits by BCPSS and MSDE staff to the seven schools revealed that activities were teacher-centered, rarely emphasizing performance-based instruction. Quality of instruction was often deemed uneven. Teacher questioning strategies focused on literal responses, and an absence of activities employing higher-order thinking skills was evident. The curriculum showed little alignment between standards, instruction, and assessment. There was an incomplete incorporation of all instructional standards, instruction, and assessment. There was incomplete incorporation of all instructional materials related to BCPSS-adopted textbooks and a high incidence of lessons that focused predominantly on seatwork. Teaching staffs were often non-certified-on average only 36% at the seven schools were certified and professional development activities frequently lacked focus and long-range perspective. On-site reviews also noted a lack of a clear mission statement for each of the seven schools, which limit the instructional leadership to lead a school forward (Baltimore City Public School System, 2003, p. 13).

The primary goal was to have seven schools designated for reconstitution exit local reconstitution by the end of the 2003-04 school year. Zero-based staffing was one of the primary reforms used in this model to address the need of having highly qualified and effective teachers in these schools. The school system first needed to negotiate an

agreement with the unions to facilitate the process. The agreement was entitled, “Agreement By and Between The New Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners and The Baltimore Teachers Union, American Federation of Teachers, Local #340 Regarding the CEO’s District.” The agreement stipulated that a personnel committee consisting of the Baltimore Teacher’s Union president, a representative from the BCPSS chief executive officer (CEO), principal of the school and an Achievement First representative would select the teachers. It was also stipulated that teachers in the schools had the option to apply for positions in their current school for the next year. Teachers could apply for transfer to other schools if they desired. Teachers who reapplied but were not selected were provided with placement options. It was explicitly stated in the agreement that no teachers would lose their jobs. “No employee shall lose their position in BCPSS due to restaffing of schools in the District” (Baltimore City Public School System New Board of School Commissioners, 2001, p. 2).

Teachers selected to teach at the schools were expected to work an additional 50 minutes each day, which was compensated by an 11% increase to the teachers’ base salary. Four of the days were designated for time to work with students and one day was designated for staff development. In addition, teachers were expected to attend staff development activities seven days prior to the beginning of the school year. Teachers were paid for \$130 per day for no more than six hours per day. An incentive was applied to the agreement and was based on attainment of specified improvement on the SPI score. Attainment of this level of improvement provided teachers at the school with an additional step increase. The report to The Board of School Commissioners delineated the process:

Due to the expansive nature of the reform, implementation was planned over three years, beginning in 2001-02 and completing by 2003-04. A key first step was the hiring of the CEO's District Officer. After this key person was hired, staffing at the school began. All staff had to reapply for their positions. Staff was offered higher salaries through two means, a proportional increase for the extended day and monetary incentives of staff at schools, which met specified increases in their SPI. The attempt was to recruit the most qualified teachers (Baltimore City Public School System, 2003, p. 38).

This agreement was a three-year agreement that was signed on March 20, 2001, and would end on but not before June 2004. This aligned with the goal to have all schools out of local reconstitution by the end of the 2004 school year.

Dr. Cynthia Janssen was area superintendent with the Baltimore City Public Schools. She supervised 21 schools, including those in the CEO's District. The researcher conducted a telephone interview with Dr. Janssen (personal communication, January 15, 2005) regarding the outcomes of the reforms utilized and, specifically, zero-based staffing. Dr. Janssen indicated that while a variety of reforms such as Achievement First were part of the improvement process, the zero-based staffing model was a critical component. She reinforced that having teachers who are highly qualified, who are willing to follow research based instructional models, and who believe all students can achieve was critical to school improvement. Dr. Janssen informed the researcher that nine schools had ultimately been identified for inclusion in the CEO's District. These schools included six elementary schools and three middle schools. At the end of three years, all of the schools exited local reconstitution. Dr. Janssen is currently the chief academic officer for the Collier County School District in Florida.

## Teacher Effectiveness

Stronge (2002) synthesized research that included six domains that characterize an effective teacher. The first involves skills that are obtained or possessed by candidates prior to teaching. These may include areas such as verbal ability, coursework in pedagogy and knowledge of how to work with special needs students, teacher certification, and content knowledge. The second domain characterizes the teacher as a person. Traits such as caring, fairness, being reflective and positive about themselves and their students all enhance effectiveness. The third domain is the skill a teacher has in maintaining a safe, orderly, and productive learning environment. Teachers effective in this area are proactive in their discipline approaches, able to multitask, and have developed routines and procedures to manage their classes. The fourth domain is centered on organizing instruction based on clear goals and objectives that are deemed essential. Teachers who set priorities, establish high expectations for achievement, and differentiate instruction based on individual student learning styles create learning situations that make the most use of instructional time. The fifth domain involves implementing instruction by differentiating through the use of hands-on learning, problem solving, questioning, guided practice, and feedback. Finally, effective teachers monitor student progress and potential. Instruction is adjusted to meet the needs of all students regardless of their inclusion in a demographic or cultural subgroup.

Stronge and Hindman (2003) stress the importance of interview teams at the school level drawing from these domains to further distinguish the effectiveness of similarly certified and highly qualified candidates. A study by Sanders, Wright and Horn (1997) found that “the most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher. In

addition, the results show wide variation in effectiveness among teachers” (p. 57).

Stronge and Hindman (2003) stress, “. . . research-informed screening protocols and interview questions enable an interview team to form objective, job-relevant judgments—and not just impressions—in making difficult and important hiring decisions” (p. 51).

Stronge (2002) writes that when defining an effective teacher:

*Effectiveness* is an elusive concept when we consider the complex task of teaching. Some researchers define teacher effectiveness in terms of student achievement. Others focus on high performance ratings from supervisors. Still others rely on comments from students, administrators, and other interested stakeholders (p. vii).

What can be agreed upon is that “. . . effective teachers do make an extraordinary and lasting impact on the lives of students” (Stronge, 2002, p. viii).

In the 1970s, Ronald Edmonds (1982) popularized effective-schools research. His formula for effective schools included five factors: strong leadership by the principal, especially in instructional leadership, high expectation by teachers for student achievement, emphasis on basic skills, an orderly environment, and frequent, systematic evaluations of students. Numerous programs developed throughout the 1980s using the work of Edmonds as the basis for program development.

#### Performance-Related Pay

The idea of performance pay is not a new concept in education. It has long been a source of discussion. Chamberlin et al. (2002), in citing Bourne and MacArthur, noted that in 1861 England this concept was introduced to the House of Commons:

I cannot promise the House that this system will be an economical one and I cannot promise that it will be an efficient one, but I can promise that it shall be one or the other. If it is not cheap it shall be efficient; if it is not efficient it shall be cheap (Bourne and MacArthur, 1970; p. 20). (p. 32)

The lack of success with this system was a factor in the perception against performance-related pay for many decades in England. It is noted however, that the terms *performance-related pay* and *merit pay* are typically used synonymously, though in the United States the term typically used is *merit pay* and in England, *performance-related*.

The notorious “payment by results” system lasted for 30 years, during which time teachers taught to the test, were confined to a narrow, boring curriculum, attempted to arrange the school intake, cheated, ignored bright children and drilled and beat the slower ones until they could satisfy the all-powerful inspectors (Chamberlin et al., 2002, p. 32).

Recently, in England, a performance-related process for teachers has been introduced called the “Threshold Assessment and Performance Management” plan. In England the process of performance-related pay has been used with head teachers since 1991.

In the United States the idea of merit pay has been a part of the educational landscape since 1918 when 48% of school districts engaged in some form of merit pay. Many of these did not survive primarily because they were arbitrary and discriminatory in nature (Chamberlin et al., 2002). At the end of the 1920s less than 18% of districts had merit pay systems. A resurgence occurred in the 1960s as Sputnik fueled concern for the educational system and our international standing. Due to perceived difficulties in measuring teacher effectiveness and productivity, the number of merit pay systems had decreased once again to about 5% of school districts.

Johnson (1984) cited a survey by the Education Research Service in 1978 that indicated many merit pay systems had been abandoned.

. . . for a wide range of technical, organizational, and financial reasons: difficulties in evaluating personnel, failure to apply criteria fairly, teacher and union opposition, poor morale, staff dissension and jealousy, failure of the plans to

distinguish between merit and favoritism, failure of the plans to meet their objectives, changes in the school systems' leadership or philosophy, collective bargaining, funding shortages, overall expense of the programs, and recognition that the merit pay bonuses did not provide sufficient incentives to teacher. The problems were legion (p. 176).

The 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education generated further impetus regarding the discussion of teacher pay and the possibility of developing systems that rewarded quality and competence.

A review of various studies (Chamberlin et al., 2002) indicates that in the educational setting there are several ways to handle performance-related pay. One method is to accelerate members in an organization more quickly up an established incremental scale. In this system all members eventually reach the top of the scale but the top performers more quickly. Inevitably all members of the organization reach the top of the scale. A second variation of this would be to pay between 80% and 120% in a range based on performance. Low performers would never reach the top but exceptional performers would still reach a peak in pay. A third form involves awarding performance-related pay in addition to cost of living increases for everyone. A fourth form gives the manager discretion in awarding increases up to 20% for personal performance.

The Maryland county elementary school's performance-related pay plan would be termed a *group payment scheme* as described by Chamberlin et al. (2002). Group payment schemes are used to reduce problems associated with individual merit pay plans that may cultivate divisive behaviors or are demotivators for unrewarded professionals in the building. The idea of group payment schemes is to stimulate a collaborative culture that works toward common school and system goals. These goals become the focus of teachers' efforts as they plan and work to achieve these goals (Protsik, 1996).

The downside of this process occurs if the focus addresses very specific areas but neglects other important content areas that arguably constitute a quality education. At the Maryland elementary school, all teachers receive their standard contract pay with negotiated steps and percentage increases with an additional \$5,000 added to the salary package based on the challenge associated with academic indicators. In this scenario the bonus is paid before results are attained, though teachers must work an additional 30 minutes per day as part of the negotiated agreement. This time is designated as staff development.

Non-teaching environments indicated that motivation for workers to perform increased when clearly measurable products were used such as piecework to identify degree of production or productivity (Lazear, 1999). There is some difficulty in translating this procedure to the educational process unless student test scores are used solely to determine productivity. In addition, the use of money as a motivator for teachers is somewhat contradictory. Lortie (1975) indicated that the opportunity to work with children in a worthwhile endeavor was a more attractive incentive than the monetary reward. Jacobson (1988) found that teachers in the United States are motivated by financial reward and negotiate for payment for extra activities that in some jurisdictions were accepted as part of the job. He further postulates that this may be a conundrum in that school systems are looking for professionals motivated by more altruistic values than money.

Jacobson (1988) studied the effects of differences in starting salaries to recruit applicants of high quality to a school system. Districts in New York that had a variety of starting salaries were compared in regard to their ability to attract and hire applicants of

high quality. The outcome of this study indicated that high quality applicants were attracted and hired in systems that provided an attractive financial incentive.

Kyriacou and Coulthard (2000) surveyed undergraduates to determine what was considered important in the selection of teaching as a career. The sample was divided into three subgroups: those who already wanted to teach, those who did not want to teach, and those who might be encouraged to select teaching as a career. Only 5% of the whole sample felt they would find a good starting salary in the teaching profession. In addition, the factors identified as incentives were long holidays and a wish to share their knowledge. The media image of teachers and the belief that they would have to deal with disruptive students, perform bureaucratic tasks, and not have adequate resources were demotivators. In these studies it was evident that salary has an effect on recruitment but not necessarily on the choice of teaching as a career.

Retaining teachers in school systems has been an area of concern not only as teachers retire but in the retention of teachers in mid-career. Jacobson (1988) found that districts that maintained attractive salary schedules for teachers in mid-career had lower turnover rates than comparable districts.

According to Fenwick English, “Merit pay is not going to bring people to teaching, nor motivate talented people to remain in teaching” (1983, p. 72). English identified three different variations of merit pay: performance pay—linked to teacher achievement in the classroom; differentiated pay—linked to additional duties in a career ladder; and market-sensitive pay—governed by scarcity and the law of supply and demand. English states that teachers as a group have not been attracted by external rewards but by internal motivators. In this regard the use of monetary rewards has met

with some resistance and job differentiation within the teaching profession. Conversely, the use of a flat pay scale has been an impediment to the development of full professionalism as well as the retention of outstanding teachers.

One of the biggest issues in implementing successful performance-related or merit pay systems has been the evaluation of effective teaching. Odden (2000) indicates that these problems may be overcome with the use of a variety of assessment instruments from the following organizations: The Educational Testing Service (ETS), Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS).

#### Student Achievement

Student achievement is defined in a variety of ways in regard to the academic proficiency that is critical to assure student success. NCLB has mandated that states develop methods and means to demonstrate that all students achieve at a proficient level by the year 2014. In Maryland, the primary mechanism to demonstrate this proficiency is the Maryland State Assessment (MSA) test that was given in the spring of 2003 to Grades 3, 5, 8, and 10 to establish baseline data from which to set standards for those grade levels. There are three levels that categorize student achievement level: basic level, proficient level, and advanced level. Analysis of this data involves examining five subgroups to ensure that students are not overlooked in the attainment of at least proficiency for all. The subgroups include lower socioeconomic students, minority students, students with disabilities, limited English proficiency, as well as other identifying demographic indicators. Based on the disaggregated MSA data that has been

analyzed, gaps exist in the areas of students with disabilities, lower socioeconomic status, and minorities.

Several schools in the Maryland county received failing status in the area of students with disabilities. Larry I. Bell (2002) has visited model schools and conducted research on best practices. His assessment of the perceived complex factors that make the gap inevitable is:

Fortunately, we can point to numerous schools that have no achievement gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students or between minority and non-minority students. In hundreds of low-income, high-minority schools across the United States, most students succeed on standardized tests (p. 32).

Ron Edmonds (1982) identified student achievement as a critical component in recognizing if schools were effective: “It need not bring all students to the same level of mastery, but it must bring an equal percentage of its highest and lowest social class to minimum mastery” (p. 4).

## CHAPTER III

### METHOD

#### Introduction

“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” Albert Einstein

Researchers seek the truth in a variety of fashions. Albert Einstein recognized that not every phenomenon could be explained through quantitative study. In some cases it is more appropriate to engage in a qualitative examination of phenomena. Qualitative research was employed in this study to examine the process of zero-based staffing as an educational reform for the purpose of improving student academic achievement indicators.

Qualitative methods also reveal patterns of behavior and thought which emerge through, “close observation, careful documentation, and thoughtful analysis of the research topic” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 21). In many cases words provide the researcher with data that tell the story, explain the journey, and deepen understanding. Maykut and Morehouse (p. 18) identify the importance of words in describing and understanding phenomena.

Words are the way that most people come to understand their situations. We create our world with words. We explain ourselves with words. We defend and hide ourselves with words. The task of the qualitative researcher is to find patterns within those words (and actions) and to present those patterns for others to inspect while at the same time staying as close to the construction of the world as the participants originally experienced it.

The challenge of qualitative research lies in the ability of the researcher to work through a complex analytical process. “In this complex and multi-faceted analytical integration of disciplined science, creative artistry, and personal reflexivity, we mold interviews, observations, documents, and field notes into findings” (Patton, 2002, p. 432). According to Patton, qualitative inquiry involves three kinds of data collection: in-depth open-ended interviews, direct observation, and written documents. This information is derived from fieldwork where the researcher is immersed in the setting using one or all of the data collection processes. The researcher while navigating through the maze of complexities that sometimes surround phenomena will use the concept of grounded theory to systematize the qualitative process. According to Patton grounded theory, “. . . emphasizes steps and procedures for connecting induction and deduction through the constant comparative method, comparing research sites, doing theoretical sampling, and testing emergent concepts with additional fieldwork” (p. 125).

#### Problem

This case study examined the process of zero-based staffing as a reform model used to improve student academic performance in an underachieving elementary school in a county school system in Maryland. This study was intended to assist the school system in examining the process of zero-based staffing. The teacher selection process was studied to determine what critical factors or filters were employed to select the best teachers for this school. In addition, the perceptions of the teachers who were hired or rehired were examined in regard to what attracted them to apply to the school. The impact this had on school success indicators was examined to provide empirical

background in understanding the effectiveness of the process of improving student achievement and whether it may be worth replicating in other schools.

This qualitative approach enabled the researcher to tell the school's story by capturing and communicating the participants' stories (Patton, 2002). This entailed significant time spent in the school engaged in participant observation. The researcher became an indweller to conduct this qualitative inquiry in order to deepen understanding of this reform model. A case study was selected as the methodology to examine the research question. A case study is defined as, "A type of qualitative research in which data are gathered directly from individuals (individual cases) or social or community groups in their natural environment for the purpose of studying interactions, attitudes, or characteristics of individuals or groups" (Leedy, 1997, p. 111).

Further, the study examined the interview process and interview questions used to identify the teacher characteristics deemed high priority for teacher selection at this school. Perceptions of teachers who were hired and/or rehired were also examined as part of the study to identify prevailing attitudes related to zero-based staffing and student achievement.

### Setting

The context selected for the study of zero-based staffing was an elementary school in a county school system in Maryland. Within this context, the researcher focused on teacher selection and specifically on the applicant interview process.

The study was conducted in a pre-K-5 elementary school with a population of 558 students. The percentage of low-income students as identified by the federal FARM information was 53.8%. The demographic information indicated that there were 68%

white students, 24% African American students, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3% Hispanic, and 1% Native American attending the school.

The school is one of 25 elementary schools in a county system that also includes eight middle schools, eight high schools and several specialized schools. Approximately 20,000 students are included in this jurisdiction that is governed by a superintendent of schools and her support staff.

#### Data Collection

The superintendent of schools and the principal of the elementary school were contacted at the end of the 2004 school year to discuss the research and seek approval for the study. Upon receipt of this approval, a consent form was developed using the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board (IRB) format to explain the purpose of the study and to secure permission from the participants to conduct audiotaped interviews and for their general participation with the researcher.

#### Sample

Purposeful sampling was used to select interviewees for the study. In purposeful sampling, the process involves careful thought as “researchers and intended users involved in the study think through what cases they could learn the most from and those are the cases selected for study” (Patton, 2002, p. 233). The school was chosen for this study due to the unique restructuring model termed *zero-based staffing* employed by the county to improve student achievement. All professional staff members in the school were involuntarily transferred, which created a zero-based staffing scenario. In spring 2003 a new principal was selected to lead the school. The principal then selected two assistant principals to be part of her administrative team. Several weeks later the

interview team reviewed applications of teachers for the positions and subsequently conducted interviews for all teaching positions.

The principal, in order to provide a representative sample of teachers who were hired and rehired to the school, identified teacher participants in Grades 3, 4, and 5 as well as a resource teacher. Teachers in Grade 3 and teachers in Grade 5 were integral participants in the study and were interviewed using a semi-structured interview format. One teacher in Grade 3 was a rehire and one was a new hire. The same procedure was followed in Grade 5. These two grades were selected based on the MSA test that was given in these grade levels in February and March 2004. Results of these tests were available during the summer of 2004 for comparative analysis. One Grade 4 teacher and the reading resource teacher who were both rehires were part of the sample. A total of six teachers in the school were part of the sample. These teachers were interviewed to collect data related to the research questions for analysis. The superintendent and principal were interviewed separately to gather additional data and perspective regarding the zero-based staffing process and philosophy.

### Interviews

Four interview instruments were developed by the researcher to assist in data collection for the four subgroups that included the superintendent, principal, interview team, and teachers. Interview questions were developed to gather pertinent data and perceptions from the participants. Separate interviews with the teachers and the principal were conducted at the elementary school in October and November 2004. The teachers were interviewed in their classrooms and the principal in her office. Interviews on average lasted approximately one and one-half hours. Some of the interviews were

conducted before the school day and some at the end of the school day. The superintendent was interviewed at her central office location during the afternoon. This interview lasted approximately two hours. A focus group interview conducted with the interview team took place at a private residence and was approximately two hours in length.

A focus group was part of the study and consisted of the interview team. Focus groups are used to, “get a variety of perspectives and increase confidence in whatever patterns emerge” (Patton, 2002, p. 385). The interview team included the principal, two assistant principals, the Title I school support specialist, the comprehensive reform model consultant and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) president. The researcher interviewed the interview team as a group using a semi-structured interview process. The PTA president was unable to be part of the focus group interview.

The structure of focus groups provides a forum where participants hear each other’s responses and provide additional comments that extend their thoughts based on others responses. “The object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others.” (Patton, 2002, p. 386)

#### Observations

The researcher visited the school periodically to observe the general management and instructional functions of the school. This was accomplished by visiting classrooms, lunchtime activities and recess with students. The researcher also observed the School Improvement Team (SIT), Citizen’s Advisory Committee (CAC), and several after-school programs. In addition, school system and state data were examined to provide perspective regarding the school performance. The researcher maintained a journal

consisting of written notations of thoughts and reflections as part of the documentation process. The use of the Maryland State Assessment tests in Grades 3 and 5 served as indicators for measuring improvement from 2003 to 2004.

### Data Analysis

Nine transcripts varying in length from 8 to 30 pages were generated through the interview process for analysis. “The challenging task of making sense out of a quickly accumulating pile of field notes, audio tapes, and documents is facilitated by the quick and efficient transfer of this raw data into clearly readable form for data analysis” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 127).

A master notebook of all transcripts was compiled to use as reference throughout the analysis process. The researcher used the constant comparative method of data analysis developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in which analysis of qualitative data, “combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all units of meaning obtained” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 134). The transcripts, as well as the researcher’s notes and journal notations, were read numerous times before beginning the coding process.

The researcher employed the process of inductive category coding which began with identification and marking of recurring words in the transcripts. Patton suggests that the researcher, “Begin by looking for recurring regularities in the data. These regularities reveal patterns that can be sorted into categories” (Patton, 2002, p. 465). Notes were recorded in the transcript margins and key phrases circled. Several primary categories were identified through the refinement process as the researcher continued to read and reread the transcripts. Primary themes and secondary themes were developed through the

exploration of relationships and patterns across categories. As described in Maykut and Morehouse (1994) the goal is to, “. . . study your propositions for those that stand alone and for those that form salient relationships and patterns” (p. 144).

Several outlines were developed and refined that assisted the researcher in organizing primary and secondary themes that emerged from the data. The primary themes included zero-based staffing as a process, interview and expectations, and teacher characteristics. Secondary themes or variables included the Achievement First reform model, student achievement specialists, the Houghton-Mifflin reading series, and administrative leadership.

#### Ethical Issues

The process of interviewing and interacting with people in a research setting affects not only the interviewer but the interviewee as it, “. . . lays open thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and experience, not only to the interviewer but also to the interviewee” (Patton, 2002, p. 405). An open interview where the interviewer has developed a good rapport with the subject may yield information that could potentially place the subject at risk.

The intent of the researcher in this study was to protect the confidentiality of the subjects through an informed consent and confidentiality process. The researcher first received permission from the county public school system through the superintendent of schools to conduct the research. The principal of the school was also consulted regarding permission to conduct the research in this particular school.

The researcher submitted a detailed application regarding the study to Duquesne University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) that contained consent forms developed

specifically for the study. The IRB also approved all four questionnaires developed by the researcher to interview the four subgroups. The researcher received approval from the IRB before beginning the process of contacting specific participants.

In this case study, the use of the name of the school system and school are not used in order to maintain confidentiality of the participants in the study. The teachers interviewed as well as the focus group participants were informed that the information they supplied during the interviews would be maintained confidential through several safeguards.

Participants were all given the opportunity to verify, correct, or delete information they wished to be used for analysis. A signed or initialed copy was used for the coding process. The audiotapes and transcript were maintained in the researcher's home for security purposes and then destroyed and shredded at the conclusion of the study. In addition, the names were changed in the dissertation to protect the participants' confidentiality.

### Generalizability

It is possible that some of the results of this study may be applicable to other school systems in the state and country. School systems of sufficient size and with contractual language that can facilitate this method of reform may be able to use this method to address reconstitution deadlines that may be mandated through compliance with NCLB.

### Limitations

It is possible in any research study that limitations are identified that must be examined in light of eventual results. Limitations in observations may occur in that the

observer, “. . . may affect the situation being observed in unknown ways, program staff and participants may behave in some atypical fashion when they know they are being observed, and the selective perception of the observer may distort the data” (Patton, 2002, p. 306).

This case study involved one school in a select county as the object of the research. It involved one superintendent, one principal, six teachers, and a focus group that were part of a specific culture. While the research used a combination of interviews, observations, and data comparisons in the study, it is limited based on the selected population.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

“Outside research cannot be installed like a car part—it has to be fitted, adjusted, and refined for the school contexts we work in” (Schmoker, 1999, p. 70).

The purpose of this study was to examine the process of zero-based staffing as a reform model for the improvement of academic success in an underachieving elementary school in a county school system in Maryland. The following supporting questions guided this study:

1. Why did a school system employ zero-based staffing to reform an elementary school?
2. What criteria and process used in the candidate selection process yielded the best instructional staff for the school?
3. What attributes of a zero-based school attracted teachers to apply to a school for teaching positions?
4. What were the expectations of the teacher responsibilities for the teacher point of view in the school improvement effort?
5. What were the teacher perceptions regarding role expectations in a zero-based school environment?

This study utilized a qualitative methodology of naturalistic inquiry as the tool to address these questions. The study was conducted in a pre-K-5 elementary school with 558 students. The percentage of low-income students as identified by the federal FARM information was 53.8%. The demographic information indicated that there were 68%

white students, 24% African American students, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3% Hispanic, and 1% Native American attending the school.

The study was conducted by interviewing administrators, members of the interview team involved in staff selection, and rehired teachers; observing meetings conducted at the school; visiting classrooms to observe teachers and students; and reviewing research journals to provide additional support in identifying themes and ideas regarding the process. Four separate semistructured interview instruments were developed to gather information and perceptions from the superintendent, principal, teachers, and interview team.

Information collected from six teacher interviews, superintendent, principal, and the interview team comprised a majority of the data. All interviews were conducted separately, tape-recorded, and conducted in isolation of other research participants. The audiotapes were transcribed and then submitted to the participants for verification of information. Five members of the interview team were interviewed as a group. In addition, information was gathered from the Maryland State Department of Education website which provides specific information regarding student achievement and comparative data on all schools in Maryland.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed for the purpose of identifying themes that characterized the study. The strong themes identified included zero-based staffing as a reform process, teacher selection process, and teacher characteristics and attitudes. Several variables were identified that had impact in the improvement of student achievement. These included the implementation of a countywide, highly prescriptive reading series and a comprehensive school reform (CSR) model for school improvement.

In addition, the school system created a new instructional resource position to support school-based professional development activities that targeted student learning needs based upon the most current academic achievement data.

### The Rationale for Zero-Based Staffing

Several reform models had been implemented at the school to improve student performance. Expeditionary Learning, a comprehensive reform model, had been in place for almost three years prior to the change in staff through the zero-based reform model. This CRM did not improve student test scores at the school. In February 2003, Achievement First was introduced to the school and was met with teacher resistance. At this point the county began looking at other factors that contributed to the failure of these models to produce results.

#### *Teacher Attitude*

The principal of the school had been an assistant principal in this particular elementary school several years prior to being selected as principal of this zero-based elementary school. She commented on negative staff attitude and culture as another reason to zero-base the school due to the inability of the current staff to produce higher student achievement:

Oh there was definitely an attitude that kids could not achieve here. Even when I was here before as assistant principal, the attitude was starting right then. That was one of the first years they were in school improvement. They were on, I believe, alert status then. You know the teachers were required to do extra meetings. Teachers were required to look at data a little bit. They knew kids weren't performing and they blamed everybody, basically, for that. A lot of teachers said it was because the kids didn't have parents at home. That's what they kept saying all the time. That started the teachers' negative attitude here.

The principal also commented on the community perceptions regarding the school and students:

The teachers would talk about it. The parents would talk about it. They actually had meetings here. When the school went into the second or third year of school improvement, they had a meeting here with the parents. It was with people from the central office. The parents told them to get the city kids out and your scores will go up.

#### *Opportunity to Showcase Best Practices*

The school offered several opportunities for the county to utilize research-based strategies. Teachers who were committed to prescribed implementation practices would implement these strategies. The opportunity for teachers to implement best research practices across the school in a uniform manner was a key to improvement.

The levels for reading at the school as reported by the Maryland State Department of Education on the 2003 Maryland State Assessment indicated that 11% of the students were at the advanced level, 43% at the proficient level, and 46% at the basic level (Maryland State Department of Education, 2004). The superintendent noted this data as a primary consideration, as well as the opportunity to implement and assess research-based best practices for improving low-performing and high-poverty schools, as identified in the school improvement literature:

We also felt that it was the kind of school that had an urban mix. We had been doing some things at other schools, but . . . was a school that was a perfect test case, if you will. It was strategically located—the largest school in the city area. And certainly if we could do it with the largest school in the city area, we would be able to do it with some other schools. There was enough variety there, too, in the building and the different mix of kids that it would not only be a test case, but it would maybe generate some best practices that we could spread to some other schools where we saw some aspects of failure.

It is a radical way of reforming a school. Sometimes radical treatment is needed. You don't go for the radical treatment first. I think it has to be a build-up to that.

Just like when a doctor decides we have to cut off your leg or we have to give you this really bad bone marrow transplant. That is kind of like a last resort, but you're saying I believe that by doing this very aggressive thing it is going to have a really good outcome, so trust me. And you know, there you are, a cancer patient, you've been given three months to live. You want to really trust. So, I think we have to be cautious in how we use this radical reform method. But, again, I think in the way we've studied . . . and in looking at all the elements there, we felt it could potentially work there.

*Moral Imperative: What's Right for Children*

According to the superintendent of schools, the rationale for zero-basing the school was more than declining test scores; there was a strong moral imperative for taking such strong action:

It's very simple. The school was failing and had been failing for some years. Just as I learned in Baltimore, how long do you let a school fail the kids? How long do you allow a school to languish? How long do you allow kids to languish? I find it immoral to look the other way. I find it to be immoral to make excuses. In some sense we picked . . . out as a test case, because I think it was our school with the longest history of failure because if you look at the trend line, it went down, down, down, down, down.

The Logistics of Zero-Based Staffing

For the purposes of this study, zero-based staffing was defined as the process employed by a Maryland public school system to reform a school by using the contractual provision of involuntary transfers to hire and, in some cases, rehire instructional staff who are committed to school improvement initiatives that facilitate student learning and increase student achievement. The zero-based staffing process had been used in Baltimore City Public Schools as a reform strategy for six elementary and three middle schools.

This case study focuses on an elementary school in dire need of improvement, based upon the state assessment data. The school was in the last year of school

improvement as part of the NCLB mandates for low-performing schools. If improvement did not take place the next year then the school system would be required to pay for tutoring services for students at parent request.

The superintendent indicated that she and the system operated within the parameters of policies and procedures, and her purview as superintendent:

I had a perfect right to zero-base the school. And, you probably know, under the State of Maryland I can transfer anybody in the system, really, at will. I mean, it can't be arbitrary or capricious, but if you can demonstrate it is for the good of kids, I can transfer anybody. So if I was forced to, I was going to do it anyway—even if we weren't going to pay the teachers \$5,000 for the extended day (that extra 30 minutes) which I think has made a huge difference.

In the spring of 2003, the central office informed the principal of the elementary school, who had been in his position for one year (2002-2003), that the school was going to be zero-based. The two assistant principals were informed as well. In May 2003 a new principal was selected for the school and given the task of staffing the school. She and the director of elementary education interviewed administrative candidates for the assistant principal positions. One assistant principal was rehired for the position, and one new candidate was selected for the other assistant principal position. Selection of teachers for the then-vacant professional positions, which included all classroom teachers and professional support staff from pre-K to Grade 5, was to be completed at the end of the school year and during summer 2003.

Contract language also guided the logistics of the process:

10.2 A. Time of Notice—Except in emergencies, notice of involuntary transfers and/or assignments will be given to affected unit member not later than May 15 [and] 10.2 C. Transfer Opportunities—A list of positions or openings available to unit members so affected will be provided so a preference may be indicated (Board of Education of Washington County, 2003, p. 20).

All teachers at the school were informed in May per the county public school system contract language as cited from the Negotiated Agreement between the Board of Education and the County Teachers Association, Inc.:

Article 10.1 C. Selection Criteria—In the determination of voluntary reassignments and/or transfers, the wishes of the individual unit member will be honored to the extent that they do not conflict with the responsibility of the Superintendent as spelled out by law and the instructional requirements and best interests of the school system (Board of Education of Washington County, 2003, p. 19).

In summary, declining test scores that had placed the school on the state watch list motivated the decision. The school was required to show significant improvement in test scores for the 2003-2004 school year or the county would be required to transport students to other successful Title I schools per parent request.

This reform was enacted to stimulate school improvement. An incentive was provided by the school system in the form of an additional \$5,000 added to salaries. In return, teachers would commit to an additional 30 minutes beyond the standard workday to conduct staff development.

At the end of May 2003, more than 75 applications had been received at the central office for approximately 50 positions at the school. A majority of the original staff applied for their current positions. Less than half were selected to return to the school for the upcoming school year. To fill the remaining positions, the interview team conducted interviews at the school before the end of the school year; however, there were still unfilled positions as the academic year came to a close. Some teachers applied a second time for their positions and again were not selected. The interview team continued to

interview new candidates to the county to fill the remaining positions. A mix of new and experienced teachers was selected to complete the staffing process.

In light of NCLB, school leaders must examine many reforms and apply these reforms appropriately. The use of zero-based staffing is a reform that must be used judiciously based on close examination of the culture and needs of the learning community. The academic achievement of students and stimulation of school performance in a school where previous reform models have proven ineffective may be the impetus for such a selection. The selection of the elementary school in this system was carefully considered.

A critical component that needed to be in place after zero basing the school was the formation of an interview team that would select the appropriate staff for the school and students.

#### *The Interview Team*

An interview team composed of the principal, two assistant principals (AP), Title I school support specialist (SSS), comprehensive reform model (CRM) consultant, and the PTA president for the elementary school was assembled to conduct interviews and select the staff for the upcoming school year.

The principal and her interview team believed the makeup of the interview team was appropriate for the process:

I think it was appropriate, because it was basically fair to the people who were being interviewed. No one person could take complete control of the interview. We gave them a score of 4, 3, 2 or 1 for each question. We then added up the scores and gave each person an average, based on that score. We went totally by the points.

I think, too, that we were coming into the interviews from different areas. There was a different perspective that each of us had, and that added to a variety of kinds of thinking that was going on around the table. We would obviously give the slated questions and listen to their answers, but afterwards we had different ways to think about how we had interpreted their answers.

The interview team commented on various perspectives that were a focus as part of the team and the perception this provided to the interviewees:

I had a different set of eyes and expertise. One of the things we tried to do, realizing that we looked to be sort of an ominous group, when the teachers came in was to sort of try to put them at ease by explaining what our roles were, so they could see we weren't trying to frighten them by having five or six people around the table—which is what we had and is not something I think most of them are used to.

I just think the particular composition of the team is much more important than the number of people. We brought those different perspectives. We had some people who had been in the building and who knew people and personalities, and some other people who did not. There was always discussion about why you rated it the way you did. I think we put a lot of thought into why we did what we did and would this person make a good part of the team that we were trying to build—not just a collection of individuals, but would these people be able to work together?

Once the interview team was selected the next step was to develop questions that would assist in identifying the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that were deemed important for student success.

#### *Interview Team Expectations*

The interview team was given the task of selecting all the professional staff for the elementary school. The members of the team were given direction from the central office regarding their mission in the zero-based scenario. The principal of the school stated her understanding of what needed to be accomplished:

Basically when I was hired, they told me that this was the year that something had to be done, that we were in school improvement for too many years. I knew that taxpayers' money would be used to send these children to tutoring and other

things. I knew this was our last year. We had to do something and we pretty well made that clear to everybody who was applying, also. We had to get the scores up. There was nothing else we could do but get the scores up.

The Title I SSS commented on the superintendent's involvement in the process indicating her role in setting expectations:

I think, my sense was that she was integral in the selection of the administrative team, and then that she basically made sure that you guys understood the message—probably with the principal being the one who had the most information. And because of No Child Left Behind, I knew one of the steps eventually could be restructuring. In those meetings where those kinds of things were discussed, there was always a very vocal faction that would say, “These kids! What do you do when a kid . . .” I always remember being there for one meeting where a teacher said, “Well what do you do when a kid comes to school and they don't have shoelaces in their shoes and they don't have this and this?”

The expectations for student achievement and the need to build a collaborative learning culture determined the types of teacher characteristics being sought for the school. These characteristics and attitudes were important selection criteria for the interview team.

#### Teacher Selection

It was important for the county to select teachers for the school that would bring the skills and attitudes necessary to foster student learning and growth. The selection process would allow the team to get at the important characteristics that the administrative team felt would be critical in the quest to improve the learning culture.

The interview team used the questions that were agreed upon to determine the teacher characteristics that were desired in terms of skills and attitude that would foster a positive attitude that promoted student achievement. The superintendent identified the characteristics of teachers needed to reform the school:

That they are going to give their all and hold high expectations for the kids. That they are going to be “no excuses” people. That’s the main thing, no excuses; because I think, unfortunately, again I do not want to denigrate people, but the staff we had there before were swept up in this very bad culture of excuses, excuses, excuses. What I call “if only” teachers: If only my classroom were better; if only the windows were bigger and brighter; if only the kids came to school ready to learn; if only I had better textbooks; if only I had better colleagues; if only I had a better principal; if only I didn’t have to wait for retirement so long; if only I got paid more; if only I didn’t have this long commute to work, then I could teach the kids well. So this culture of the “if only” teachers isn’t there any more.

I think the expectations were that these teachers would give kids a fighting chance to really learn by teaching them well and by holding their feet to the fire and expecting the same of them as they would of their own children.

The superintendent expressed other characteristics that included values and vision for the school:

Hope, hope. Vision. Being able to close their eyes and envision what this school would look like. Envision an individual student, as they would become. A hope of transformation. A belief that good teaching can really make a difference. I think that is one of the strong characteristics that I see there. Plus, a lot of creativity. When you go in these classrooms, I want to sit down and listen to these teachers.

The CRM consultant expressed her thoughts on the type of teacher; in general, the team was seeking for the school:

I think we all felt like we were looking at a kind of teacher that brought academic rigor, but also a teaming attitude and to leave the chip on the shoulder at home. You know, you may have attitudes, but those attitudes weren’t conducive to the kind of team that was being built there. If that wasn’t ever said directly, it was said indirectly enough that you got what it was that the powers that be were looking for in that staff, and that they were looking for people who knew how to teach well and people who had the attitude that all kids could learn, and that . . . students weren’t “those kids,” they were “kids.”

#### *Interview Questions and Looked-For Responses*

There were five questions that the team felt would give them the information they needed to select the best teachers for the elementary school. The following responses

from the interview team members indicated that the characteristics desired in the teachers included a solid knowledge of literacy and teaching methodologies, commitment to staff development as lifelong learners, belief that all children can learn despite their circumstances, and the willingness to work as a team to change the learning culture at the school. The interview team felt that teachers who communicated these philosophies and knowledge could foster student improvement.

*Interview Question 1.*

If I walked into your classroom during your literacy block, what would I see?

The interview team members commented on the open-ended nature of the question and the knowledge base that that was expected as part of the response:

It's the kind of question that's basic and it's sort of open-ended, but if you can't come up with the right terminology, the right verbiage—I mean, people should have been familiar with those specific terms. Some people actually really did flounder. Some people just really couldn't get those. And the reform model, the Achievement First model, everybody who was there the year before actually should have done very well on this question.

Basically we wanted them to hit all the components: phonics, phonemic awareness, comprehension, and fluency. But, we also wanted them to talk about shared reading, shared writing and go through everything they would do—guided reading, independent reading, conferencing—just different aspects of the best practices that we know. We wanted them basically to talk about a balanced literacy program and what that entails.

I think, too, it gave us a window into the thinking of those people who were coming from places other than . . . . At . . . , Achievement First had been a strong push and with it being literacy-based, those people who had bought in at . . . had put in place those things that were essential. When you heard that same language coming from a teacher from another school who hadn't had the Achievement First background, but knew, because of being a strong literacy teacher, those components without having been there, then you knew real quickly on that one that this was a match.

*Interview Question 2.*

Talk about two professional books you've read recently and discuss the application for the information. What professional learning experiences have you participated in recently and how have you applied them?

The principal discussed the importance of candidates providing a response that indicated their commitment to professional development and growth:

The reason we did this question was basically because we knew every day we would have staff development and the extended day for teachers and we just wanted to know who would be positive about doing these experiences and who, on their own, did some professional development or was an active participant in their own school with professional development.

We were planning to do staff development every day. Our student achievement specialists were planning to do staff development in literacy and math. We wanted people who were willing to do it without whining. Some of them said, "I'm sorry I don't read books and I haven't read any books lately." In the elementary schools in . . . county, almost every school has participated in reading some kind of professional books. If they didn't even know the name of it or what they had learned from it, then that was probably not a person we would want here, when we know that's all we are going to be doing for the next couple years.

The interview team indicated that some of the candidates couldn't come up with one thing to discuss in this area. The Title I SSS said, "And research says lifelong learners. I mean those are the best teachers. So, when somebody said, 'Well I haven't had time to read anything,' that was a red flag." This was followed by the returning AP with, "But then when those would say, 'My school just finished this, and I've been reading this, and I have this one cued up that I'm going to do next,' then you go ding, ding, ding, ding."

*Interview Question 3.*

Describe the culture and the climate of a successful school.

The principal stated the reason for this question, “Well, it’s pretty obvious why we did that one. The climate that year was not a good climate.” The returning AP indicated that some interviewees did not understand what was meant in the question by *climate*. “When somebody said ‘the air conditioning’ because that’s what they thought climate meant, we thought, ‘Oh, I don’t think so!’” According to the new AP, “Some of them did not understand the question. I don’t think they understood what we were looking for in a learning environment and a professional learning community.”

*Interview Question 4.*

Describe your classroom management system.

The principal indicated that this was a critical question based on community perceptions regarding discipline at the school. “A lot of people, staff members and parents, at some of the meetings claimed that there were some behavior problems and this was why the kids were not getting their scores.”

The Title I SSS noted the calls she had received from the community in the area of student discipline:

There was something that had gone around in the community. I got a lot of firsthand knowledge because I was the point of contact when the letter went out that gave parents the option to transfer their child out of . . . . We were already at that level and I was the point of contact for the phone calls. For some, classroom management just became really narrow. Rather than bringing activities that are interesting and instruction that is engaging, it went right to very specific sorts of sanctions or punishments or consequences. You know, we really were looking for a broader definition of classroom management.

*Interview Question 5.*

What qualities, abilities, and attitudes make you a match for this elementary school?

The principal and interview team were looking for the motivation that the candidates had for wanting to be a part of this elementary school and the attitudes that brought them to the interview table:

And that was the one where I was really looking for their attitude. Why would you want to come here, given everything that you know and have read in the paper? This is a challenge. What is it about you that make you want to come here and makes you think you're going to be successful here?

You know, the one thing I remember the most about all this interview was on that question with people saying, "It's not about the \$5,000. I think I can do it and I want to take on this challenge. I want to learn. I want time to learn." That just sticks in my mind so much about the common thread of the people that we probable ended up hiring.

The people who were saying, "It's not about the \$5,000. I mean they were almost glib about it. Like, "I could take or leave that \$5,000. It doesn't put a dent in my life. But I want to be here because I think it's advantageous to me and I have something to offer." I mean it was very strong.

The CRM consultant said, "And it all came back, a lot of times, to the professional development that they knew was going to be there for them. They were excited about that." The Title I SSS indicated that the administrative team had an impact on the responses that were part of the process:

And you know, it came back to the principal, too. I have to say that. It came back to this administrative team. I think some people really thought, "They're building a team and I want that experience." Actually, at some point during the interviews I almost felt like jumping on the other side of the table and saying, "Sign me up!" You know, we were sort of caught up in this process. It was almost like the enthusiasm was contagious to us, to think of this team that was being built through this interview process.

The researcher asked the interview team to identify specific characteristics they were looking for in the candidates that would lead to high academic achievement at the school. The Title I SSS spoke to the attitude of the candidates:

I think teachers who had an open mind. Teachers who obviously had embraced the reform model and were implementing that in their classrooms, who took responsibility for the learning of students and didn't place blame on the students or their family or those kinds of things.

The principal noted the number of candidates who didn't have this attitude, "And look how many in the interview told us it was the families, made excuses, 'What about, what about?' " When discussing whether the attitude was more important than specific content knowledge, the CRM consultant offered this perspective:

But, we also had people who applied on both ends of the spectrum. We had people who were Reading Recovery trained, and knowing that those people were bringing that level of expertise to primary literacy, we wanted them really, really badly.

I mean they had to at least have that good basis—that good base of understanding. And you could glean pretty quickly from these questions whether or not they had that good basic set of knowledge. The grammar faux pas opened a trapdoor for some of them. They were gone!

### *Selection Scoring Process*

The interview team discussed the scoring system used to rate the candidates and how they came to a decision as a group regarding whom to select. The principal said, "We basically scored each item and came up with a number. Really, it ended up by the numbers." The new AP reinforced the use of the rating scale and tallying of the numbers to differentiate between candidates:

We went through and did the numbers and then I came out and I totaled the numbers at the top, then we looked at the top candidates. We had a couple instances that were ties. We then looked at the finer points and discussed what we knew. It was less of "Do we hire this person?" and more "Where do we put them?" We were looking at teams already at that point.

The principal reinforced the fact that the interview team was looking for the best teachers for this elementary school, "You know we interviewed 75 people, but we also

interviewed many more after that with the new hires. We didn't fill positions with mediocre people. We decided not to do that. We went to the Board at that point." In referring to going to the *Board*, the principal indicated that she revisited the applicant pool at the central office to identify new candidates for unfilled positions at the school.

The CRM consultant remarked to the principal the reason the process extended to a review of new applicant folders, "All those intermediate holes that you said you just didn't want to put just anybody in. So, that's why we waited for new hires." The returning AP indicated that the positions were readvertised to try to get more applicants for the critical positions, "First we readvertised. We didn't have enough in the intermediate. We readvertised and tried more recruitment after going through that second round." The principal indicated that some people reapplied who had not been selected on the first round, "Some of the same people reapplied the second time. And some of them who were at . . . reapplied the second time, but we just didn't feel comfortable hiring them."

The principal indicated that all decisions reached by the interview team were by consensus and there was total agreement regarding the selections. The new AP reinforced the consensus process:

Yes, there was. And there was thoughtfulness, I think, in placing people on teams and knowing what strengths they brought to the teams, so that it wasn't just the people, but it was also whom they would be working with and what we were backing on that team, like who would be a leader.

The interview team was asked if they believed they had made the right choices after the first year. The Title I SSS said, "Yes, good choices! Very excellent school improvement." The principal commented, "We celebrated a lot at the end of the year."

The Title I SSS said, “And not only did they hit their AMO [annual measurable objective] targets, they were well above the target that they needed to have to make AYP.”

The principal referenced some of the data to reinforce the opinion that the right teacher selections had been made:

We went up 35% in reading in third grade. In math we went up 76%. It was like 25 or 30 points. In fifth grade we went up to 71% in reading and we only went up 3 points in math in fifth grade. They were definitely the right choices.

The Title I SSS offered her thoughts on the need to stimulate change and perspective through the zero-based process:

I’m a veteran teacher of many years and unfortunately it seems we can become very prima donna-like as teachers—because we are kind of the ruler of our own little world. What’s so different from that and from the business world is this continual accountability that you need to have for your supervisor, for expectations that they have laid out for you. I could go almost so far to say, at some point in time maybe we should just zero-base everybody and let everybody re-evaluate.

This was the first time the process had been utilized in this Maryland school system. Ideas were generated to improve the zero-based process in future reform initiatives.

#### Interview Process Changes

As with any new process or procedure it is important to reflect on how to improve the process based on intended and unintended consequences that were a result of the process. The interview team was asked how they would change the process. The returning AP commented that conducting interviews at the school was not the best plan:

Conduct interviews at a place other than . . . . As we conducted interviews in the office that was mine at the time, which was in the building and had windows that

were open to the hallway, people would look in. And just in terms of the emotion piece to that, it was not the best.

The principal remarked that notification regarding whether they had been hired or not should have been to all candidates in a timely manner:

Another thing I think the central office should do is send letters to everyone. Somehow, let the people who did not get hired know they did not get hired. The people only knew because people were getting calls from human resources saying they were hired. The others were waiting and waiting. After a few days of not getting a phone call, they realize they were not hired.

The CRM consultant felt that sensitive language should be used to inform candidates who were not selected, “And something nice, you know, ‘Thank you for your years of service. We hope you continue to have success and here are the available postings.’ Something humane, really.”

Teachers also had some strong thoughts on the process and ideas about improving it to reduce some of the hard feelings the process engendered. There was a strong emotional component that was articulated in every interview regarding both positive and negative feelings. In the final analysis all the teachers interviewed believed that the outcome was warranted, but also believed that an emotional toll was levied in the process. The teachers also spoke to the expectations they felt as teachers in this zero-based school.

## Emotions and Expectations

### *Emotional Impact*

Margot (Grade 5) was rehired to the school through the interview process. When asked if there was an impact at the school due to the zero-based process she indicated a strong feeling that the climate was affected:

One hundred percent, I do. Because I think it was hard to pull together as a team in a lot of ways, because you just didn't know what was going to happen. There was such uneasiness. Whenever you have one thing going wrong, it's just a roller coaster—everything else goes wrong. I think that's what started happening to everybody. So, that was the negative side of it—going through the whole ordeal and finding out who was going to get positions and who was not.

The other major problem was the way it was done. I don't completely agree with the way the whole situation took place. I can't say this was a definite thing, but because there were rumors about it, it seemed as if other schools might have known it was going to happen and other schools knew that they could apply for the elementary before we, ourselves, knew that we were going to have to reapply. In fact, staff from other schools interviewed for our positions before our staff did and it happened in our building. When the interviews actually did take place, everybody was worried about them.

The other problem was that I interviewed earlier than my teammates. I was thrilled and I accepted, not realizing that my other teammates hadn't even interviewed yet. So, that caused some problems. I didn't have to go back to school and face them to say, "I did get my job back." However, when I did come back and they still didn't know a week later whether or not they had gotten their positions and some of them were told they needed to reinterview for their positions again, that caused a lot of tension. People didn't want to talk to me because I had my position and they were still unsure. I think that they felt betrayed by me in some ways, because as soon as I found out I didn't call them up. I never even got to tell my teammates myself. They somehow knew because it was told who had their jobs. I don't know how that happened, but it just wasn't right. In fact, we learned later that positions were offered to other interviewees before our elementary staff had interviewed.

For the last week of school—the last few days—it was very uneasy. A lot of tension. We didn't talk to each other. On the very last day of school the staff who still had not been told received an e-mail, while the kids were still here, saying they were not accepted back to their positions. The last day of school was awful. Kids knew that teachers weren't coming back. They had brought the kids into it, not purposefully, but because those teachers who were not hired back and found out on the last day of school couldn't help but be emotionally upset, and kids found out about it. It was not a good experience.

Anne (Grade 3) was rehired to the school through the interview process. She commented on the feelings associated with the process:

It did become very negative. I think there were some hurt feelings. I think the teachers felt a little—for lack of better words—beat up, I guess. They were

feeling like they were inadequate and, I think, a little uneasy about change. And some teachers had been here a long time, so they were used to their own teaching styles and techniques and it was not as easy to change. I think a lot of the teachers felt like they were deceived. You could not feel proud about getting your job back here because there were so many hurt feelings. But a lot of teachers had not been told yet. So, you walked around here very uneasy—not knowing who was rehired and who was not rehired. And, if not rehired, where were they going to be placed? Just a lot of hurt feelings. There was a lot of tension. But, everything worked out for the better, overall.

Lisa (Grade 4) was rehired to the school through the interview process. She commented on the process by first discussing the feelings:

That's a hard decision to make, you know, because you're dealing with people's lives. You know, you're dealing with probably years of hurt on someone that left here who really, really wanted to stay here. I don't know if they even think about it at nighttime, I don't know. I was very close to everyone in the building before—very close—and, I don't know, there's still a lot of pain—even after two years.

Lisa (Grade 4) followed up by commenting on the positive feelings that were generated in the school with the new mix of staff combined with the success they experienced with student test scores:

I had only been here for two years. I had not been here for longer than that, so I didn't get to see how much we decreased in our scores as far as what happened during those years. When it changed, it has been very successful as far as scores—very positive attitude from everyone, especially last year. People wanted to be here. You applied because you wanted to be here. Very positive, as far as we were all in this together. We are all on the same track. We are all teaching the same thing from grade level to grade level. It is very consistent.

Sarah (Grade 3) was hired new to the school through the interview process. She talked first about the positive experience of coming to the school:

I know that I can say as a first year teacher that I learned so many things last year. Independent reading, conferencing and reader's notebooks and things that really in the county all together really have not been tried a lot or have not been implemented. So, I felt like we got a head start on things that are going to be expected in the future, but we kind of started it a little early. I feel like we really got a heads up on that and we're a little bit ahead of what going to be expected. I

know for one thing there was a sense of camaraderie that everyone who started knew. It was sort of like, “We’re in this together. We’re going to either make it or break it, because a lot of people are looking.” You kind of knew that everyone was on the same page as you. So, that was nice.

Sarah also indicated that she was aware of the tension and hurt feelings that the process had engendered in the returning teachers:

It was interesting and it was awkward all at the same time because there was this sense of bitterness that kind of hung around a little bit from ones that were here and we were all new and were being brought in like we were going to change the world. It’s not saying that we are better than all the other teachers. They were just cleaning house. You know, like trying something new. At least, that’s the way I looked at it. The way I took it was not that they were saying, “You’re an awful teacher, you’re out. You’re a good teacher, you stay,” but I think that was the way that many people who were not asked back perceived it.

Theresa (Grade 5) was hired new to the school through the interview process. She began the discussion of the process of zero-based staffing with the positive aspects:

I believe that the staff that was hired here were very, very positive in the first year. Everybody was willing to do whatever it took to make sure the students would succeed. I think that it’s really a great place to work, overall, with a great staff and a great principal. Nobody looked over me or looked down at me like my ideas weren’t good or they were naïve or they were coming from a first-year teacher. I was treated—as far as my educational background and my expertise—as an equal with everyone else.

Theresa also sensed the emotion the zero-based process had engendered when she interacted with people in her community:

I think one of the cons, at least for me coming in, is in the community. I don’t feel that I could say that I work at . . . Elementary School because there are too many hard feelings from the staff that used to be here. It seems like everyone knows someone who either didn’t get hired back or chose not to come back. Usually it sparks some controversy. In the community in general, when you mention it—even in my hometown, it seems like I mention I work at . . . , somebody inevitably knows somebody that used to work here before that didn’t get their job back.

Louise (reading intervention specialist) was rehired to the school through the interview process as one of the student achievement specialists, but shifted to the reading

intervention specialist role before the school year began. She began with the positive outcomes of the process and also acknowledged the negative feelings that were produced:

I do think it that it was good for this school. I thought it was refreshing to have a new staff. Everyone seemed to be so positive, and they knew their mission when they got hired. You know, they knew that they had to be highly qualified. They knew that they had to move kids—that was the expectation to get the scores up and work as a team. I just felt that I was working with new hires that were the cream of the crop at the time.

Well, I've known the teachers, you know the ones who were not rehired and even the ones who chose not to interview again for the positions, and I think the process was painful at the time. I mean there were tears. People who got rehired felt bad for the ones who did not and it was not an easy process. But I think the results have been good.

The superintendent acknowledged the wave of feeling generated by the zero-based process. She identified this as a major issue in the process:

It came across like a lead balloon on their heads. The range of emotions was everywhere from bewildered to downright furious and vindictive, "We are going to get you back!" I have to give a lot of credit to the Board of Education. I made the recommendation, but they supported it and it was a huge, huge move. This Board was extremely brave and they endured, you know, taunting at church. Being accosted in the supermarket. You know, angry people in social environments in and around the community. It started subsiding in the fall.

It wasn't personalized to that level when you zero-base the school, but there were people who had a chance to come back to the school if they really wanted to rededicate themselves to what the school was going to be about. So, they really had some freedom of choice, and there were some teachers who voluntarily took themselves to other schools.

The process took an emotional toll, as noted by those who were hired and rehired; however, the result was that those teachers who were selected reflected the interview team's consensus on characteristics that were most likely to bring about improvements in instructional practice that were necessary to increase student achievement.

### *Performance Expectations*

Anne (Grade 3) was asked to comment on her understanding of the expectations the school system had for her performance in the zero-based staff school:

I think to be the best teacher I can be and to make sure that I am providing every opportunity for my kids to learn, and to meet all their learning styles. So, that is definitely an expectation—and should be of all teachers, whether or not you're in a zero-based school or not.

Lisa (Grade 4) indicated that she was somewhat unclear as to the exact expectations that the school system had of her in the zero-based model:

I'm not really sure. Last year we had so many visitors come to our school. I think the expectations were very high. We felt like we were watched constantly. I don't know if you've ever had that experience before. I mean we had people in our rooms all the time—all the time—and sometimes 10-12 people at a time. You felt like you were always watched. I got used to it. It was fine after awhile. But, I think that our expectations were very high. I think we met those expectations. I'm not really sure what they expected. If they expected 90% or they just expected 70%. I'm not really sure. But, I think that we met their expectations.

Sarah (Grade 3) seemed very sure of what was expected of the teachers and school in regard to performance:

Adequate yearly progress! I mean last year we constantly had people like touring the schools all the time. Last year it felt like the Board was going, "Look at these golden teachers. Everyone come and learn from them." It felt kind of weird especially for me. I was kind of going, "Hey, this is the first year I have ever done this. I'm not saying I've got all the answers—don't come watch my room." I felt like the Board wanted us all to be these role models like, "Come and watch us and see what you can pick up and maybe your school will do as well as ours." We were constantly going, "We're not saying we're doing this better than you. We didn't ask you to come watch—we really didn't. We're here and you have to come. Take from it what you want." Don't hate me because I'm zero-based! It felt like that was the expectation.

Theresa (Grade 5) had very defined thoughts on what she perceived were the expectations were for the teachers and school:

I think that we are expected to always be willing to have people come in and watch us. It just seems like there is a parade of people in and out. We always have to be ready and willing to do whatever is asked of us. I think that the school system as a whole expects us to be very positive all the time—which is difficult some days and sometimes. I think when you're teaching you try to be as positive as possible, but it's not going to happen 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You do get down sometimes.

The professional development is expected. When you are at the professional development, you are expected to participate actively—not sit there and grade papers or cut anything out or sort anything. You are to fully participate, not just be like a slug just sitting there not even really taking in the information. I think we are expected to give more than some of the other teachers. I just think knowing it's my second year and being here; I just expect more of myself. If, for example, when benchmark scores come in, if they're not as high as I would like them to be, I get down on myself more. If the students have difficulty with a lesson or are struggling, I blame myself, I think, very quickly and doubt myself more this year. I think that's just part of the pressure of being here.

The teachers who were hired or rehired to the school expressed very similar characteristics and motivations.

### Teacher Motivations and Characteristics

The teachers expressed their vision of why they wanted to be teachers, their attitudes about children, the characteristics they believed were critical for teachers to possess, and the reasons that prompted them to apply to teach at this elementary school.

#### *The Money*

Anne (Grade 3) indicated that her motivation for interviewing was not the additional money that was part of the package:

Well, I can tell you it definitely wasn't the \$5,000. You really don't notice that in your paycheck. That was not a motivation for me. I hope it was not the motivation for anybody else. I know it was supposed to be, but hopefully everyone is here because this is where they want to be. I knew what the school could do and I knew if you hung in here long enough you were going to see improvements. The potential was always there, but finding what works best—part of that, I do believe, is staffing.

Margot (Grade 5) indicated that she had both personal and professional reasons for reapplying and the money was simply a bonus:

I'll be honest, because I was a first-year teacher, I thought, "Well, of course, I'm going to reapply. I taught here before. I know the kids. I want to stay here." So, I thought that it's good for the kids to have some consistency. I needed some consistency in my personal life at that point. When I looked at the school, I knew that our scores were low, but when I looked at the population, I really didn't understand why. I thought we had a lot of good kids here. I really enjoyed working with the kids here. So, there really wasn't a question as to whether I was going to reapply or not. I knew I wanted to. Being offered the \$5,000 more was just a bonus. I really don't think that had an impact. That really wasn't a motivation for me to reapply here. I would have reapplied anyhow with the extra staff development.

Lisa (Grade 4) indicated that the money was not the reason she applied but that it might have been important for others in providing paid time for the staff development component:

You know you are expected to do a little on your own. Everybody I guess just thinks, "Oh, they make \$5,000 extra." The money didn't matter to me. I would have still been there. I would have done what I could to improve my own education. If you didn't have the money, I don't think it would have been as successful—the \$5,000—because people, I don't think, would have taken their own time to put in something extra. And I believe in staff development. Like I said, I would have done it without the money. I always tried to do it before, and I always did it without the money. I love teaching and I think that I will be successful no matter where I go as long as I have a positive attitude and I want to learn and educate myself.

Sarah (Grade 3) reiterated her main motivation to interview for a position was the encouragement she received from her mentor teachers during her student teaching experience regarding the chance to learn:

I mean, my mentor teacher that I trust and respect very much was saying I should go that route. She said that a lot of times as a first-year teacher you are left to figure things out on your own. She told me that someone is going to be telling you, "Do it this way." The \$5,000 did not really make a difference because it seemed like you were going to be earning it. It was like the thing of, you know,

well you could make \$5,000 less and have less responsibility or you can make \$5,000 more and you will have more responsibility.

Louise (reading intervention specialist) had been at the school and knew the children. She was interested in the challenge and had already been slated to receive the additional monies in her role as SAS:

I had worked with the children. I felt that I knew their abilities and I could see them making growth and progress and I just wanted to be a part of that—to continue their growth, since I'm working with intervention. I just wanted the challenge and to be a part of it. Because actually I was hired as an SAS, I could have worked anywhere. I would have gotten that \$5,000 as an SAS, so that wasn't a factor.

Theresa (Grade 5) indicated that the money, the principal, and the challenge were her primary motivators for applying for a position at the school:

The challenge appealed to me; but I would have to say mostly, it was a combination of the principal and the money. Had either of those keys not been there, I would have taken on of the other jobs offered to me.

The teachers who were hired, for the most part, communicated that the additional \$5,000 was not a primary incentive for wanting to apply and teach students in this elementary school. Other incentives were more powerful attractors for these teachers.

### *The Staff Development*

A key component that was included as part of the zero-based reform model was ongoing staff development. The teachers commented on the importance of this component.

Anne (Grade 3) emphasized how essential staff development was for her and for making instructional improvements:

Staff development has been a very essential part in this whole experience, because without the staff development, I don't think the test scores would have improved as much. The atmosphere overall is positive. Now, it's crystal clear as to where

we're going. Staff development was a major part. I really don't think we would have seen as many improvements if we didn't have the staff development—especially with such a young, new team coming into the school system.

You know, part of staff development is also talking to your peers, being able to observe what they're doing in their classrooms, walking around and seeing what the whole environment looks like. "What are you doing?" "How do you perceive this?" I think that made a huge difference, too, because I don't think there were as many opportunities before to talk to the staff on a more personal basis. Everybody just borrows and steals from each other and it's a good feeling.

Margot (Grade 5) stated that the year before she didn't know what to teach. This year expectations regarding what to teach were clearly spelled out and supported through the staff development process:

I didn't know what I was supposed to be teaching in reading. I didn't have books. I was going to a book closet for guided reading. I got used to it after a while, but I really didn't understand the whole process. I didn't have a mentor teacher. I got a fresh, new start and now I had a reading series and I knew what was expected of me to teach. I knew what to do each day. I didn't feel like I was searching and not knowing what to do. I think that, in itself, made a big change in reading.

Lisa (Grade 4) commented that learning is continuous in terms of staff development and has improved her focus and teaching skills:

The staff development piece is an important piece for people. The staff development is exhausting. It is exhausting because you learn so many different things. Like I was videotaped for math. We learned to teach math a different way, so they videotaped me. Well on Monday, we watched that videotape. We discussed it, we went over it, and then on Tuesday we did the same thing. So, it is just something new all the time. I think in a way that can become exhausting, because if you don't have time to process it and to experience it or to model it in your class or experiment with it a little bit to see if it does work—I think that is the only down side.

It has to be everyone working together. At staff meetings we converse with one another. I think everyone coming together to a focus. We had a focus. We had a new reading series, Houghton-Mifflin. Everyone in the building is reading it. You didn't have a choice. No, we're all doing the same thing. We all had the same math. It's not one teacher teaching fractions and another teacher is teaching geometry. No, we're all together. I don't think you can have staff development and have a negative atmosphere and have it work.

As far as staying, I chose to stay because I knew that I could do a better job. I could improve. I knew that this school could be successful with the right directive. You see I'm really into staff development. I knew when I started teaching that I would never stop going to school. But, I believe that to be a better educator, you need to educate yourself. It doesn't just mean that you go to college for four years and that's it, because education changes. So, I knew that that was going to be an asset of the new job—having professional development—and I wanted it. I knew the extra time was going to be there, too, so that was different.

Louise (reading intervention specialist) had originally been hired for the role of student achievement specialist and spoke to the staff development component:

I think the staff development was wonderful, I mean the extra time. When I was a reading improvement teacher, this was a late school and any staff development that was done had to be done after school. By the time the buses left, people were ready to go home. I would have about 20 minutes to do staff development. So the fact that we have staff development built into the schedule was a big factor.

Sarah (Grade 3) indicated that her mentor had advised her to apply to the school to take advantage of the staff development component:

My mentor told me when I was student teaching that if there was ever going to be an opportunity to learn, that would be a good way to learn things that you're probably not going to learn anywhere else as a first-year teacher. I know that I can say as a first-year teacher that I learned so many things last year. Independent reading, conferencing, and reader's notebooks and things that really in the county all together really have not been tried a lot or have not been implemented.

Theresa (Grade 5) indicated that the staff development combined with everyone striving for the same goal contributed to student success:

The staff development, I believe, helped a lot. We were supported in everything we were asked to do. Give the time, given the money, given the resources and the support teachers. We are really focused at SIT, and just in general in the building, on student achievement and in making sure this school was a success. If we see a problem, we address it.

The primary motivator for teachers selected to apply for this elementary school was not the additional \$5,000, but the opportunity to engage in staff development that would improve their instructional skills. This desire for staff development was congruent

with the interview team's desire to hire lifelong learners who would be active participants in the staff development initiatives at the school. The teachers also identified their attitudes and beliefs on teacher characteristics they felt were important in promoting learning potential in students.

### *All Children Can Learn*

A strong commonality among these teachers was their powerful belief that all children can learn regardless of their plight or circumstance. The teachers also believed that barriers to learning, while present, should not hinder their work in helping each child reach his or her full potential.

Louise (reading intervention specialist) stated her personal motivation to be a teacher in the context of reading, which is her primary field:

I believe that all children can learn, and particularly reading, since that is my field. I feel that all children can learn to read. I like teaching because I feel that children are like sponges. I love working with children. They just have such a good outlook on life and no matter what their circumstances are, they love learning and they love being here at school. That just motivates me.

Lisa (Grade 4) described her personal motivation as a teacher as fostering student achievement and general success for every student:

I know that I went into education because I wanted to help any student succeed, no matter what their ability level. I know that my job as a teacher is to instruct, to model, to prepare my students for the future—not just for the next grade—but teach them things that they will need to know to live in the society we live in. That is my goal with every lesson that I teach. Is it relevant? Is it something that they're going to have to know for the rest of their lives? So, I always try to keep that in mind. I want my students to become successful no matter where they go. I'm not the type of person to look and say, "Okay, I'm preparing them for fifth grade" because that is not how I look at things. I want them to become successful no matter where they go. I want them to be successful in society.

I can't control where they live. I can't control what their parents make. I can't control what their parents do with them at nighttime. I can't control if they get

food at night. I can't control if they come in with no socks or they don't have any shoestrings. I can't control if they come in with no coat. But when they get here, I can help them learn and I am going to do my best to help them learn. I don't care if they don't have socks. I can go and get them socks. Yes, we would like parents' support because I do believe it makes a child more successful when a parent is involved; but you can't control what you can't control.

Margot (Grade 5) indicated that her desire as a teacher has always been to work with disadvantaged children so they can reach their fullest potential:

My whole reason for wanting to become a teacher was to help disadvantaged students. Not specifically special-needs students, but more those students who need an extra little boost and/or more support to learn so they can achieve their fullest potential. I really think that in a classroom things need to be more child centered, not teacher directed. So, I look for ways to have the students do their own learning—discovery learning.

I know everybody gets down once in a while, but when you're with the kids, you have to have that positive attitude with them. You need to have an attitude that every one of them can achieve, no matter who they are. And that some students might be below where they're supposed to be, but that you might have to work even harder with them to bring them up to where they need to be. So, you just have to have that attitude that no matter who they are, they can achieve.

Theresa (Grade 5) expressed her belief that the entire school has the same abiding belief that all children can succeed:

I think every staff member here knows that every student can succeed. Even if we have one who may not be making the progress that we'd like for them to make, for example, a special education student who just isn't getting there, we know that there's a way to reach them. We haven't found it yet, but we keep looking.

### *Positive Attitude*

Another trait that the teachers communicated was a positive attitude about children, learning, and life in general. Their comments in these areas were passionate and enthusiastic.

Anne (Grade 3) expressed her love of children and her desire to work with needy children as her motivation to be a teacher:

I love children. I think I was attracted to this school because of the diversity and the children that have the needs that they come here with. A lot of the children, of course, come from different backgrounds at home—very needy. They need a lot of nurturing, and I feel that's my personality. I feel that I am giving a lot to them—lots of rewards for me as well. You get to watch the children grow. It's very rewarding when the kids keep coming back to you. I have children who are already in high school coming back to me. It is always very positive. It's a growing experience for me as well. You know, the children break your heart with the stories that they come here with. A lot of times they don't have all the nurturing they need at home. They don't have the skills they need at home. I feel I can give that to them here. My heart is definitely here.

Anne was asked to identify the characteristics she believed were part of being a good teacher:

Well, definitely somebody enthusiastic, motivated. Definitely has to have the caring aspect. You should not be in teaching if you're not going to have the caring trait. You definitely have to have patience, caring, and understanding. Flexibility is a big one. You have to be flexible, willing to take new chances and accept new ideas. Be a risk-taker and be willing to step up onto the leadership role especially with staff development. I think, everybody as a team and as a school system, we are responsible for each other's learning as well. Be a participator—many roles.

Lisa (Grade 4) described the importance of having a positive attitude and communicating a positive attitude and outlook:

It all leads back to one thing for me. I think it has to be positive. You have to have a positive outlook. You can't blame parents for where they live or how they act. You have to come in with a positive attitude and know that you can teach those kids no matter where they came from or how much money they make or where they live or what they wear. If you're positive about that, I think you can make anything successful. When you're positive, your attitude shows towards them. A good attitude trickles down to everything. If you're not, the kids can sense that you're not happy where you're at. If you're not happy with the curriculum, kids can sense that kind of thing. I think just being positive. That seems so lame or so basic, but I think that's the key.

Lisa talked about her passion for the school and her belief that she could make a difference in student achievement:

I love this school. First of all, I consider it my school. I truly love it. I have been to a couple of other schools. You know you always hear all these rumors about

how bad the kids are, about how bad the teachers are, about how bad the scores are. You never hear anything positive. But you have got to be here. You have really got to be here. Yes, the kids are different. Yes, they don't always have the highest scores; but doggone it; we proved them wrong last year! The kids can learn. They can!

Sarah (Grade 3) spoke of her philosophy about teaching from the viewpoint of playing sports and how coaches work with student athletes:

I've never really thought of it as a philosophy other than the fact that I know just being positive is such a big part of what I'm doing. To be a positive encourager. To have that positive learning environment. I always played sports and always had that mentality of, you know, "Nice try" or "Nice try, but try it this way next time" and that kind of thing. That is the only thing I try to be very conscious of while I'm teaching. A teacher should never say, "No, that's wrong!" but to say, "Nice try, but explain your thinking to me" or "Why did you think that?"

Sarah (Grade 3) used the same types of comments to describe the characteristics she felt teachers need to have to foster high academic achievement. She used some of her own characteristics to illustrate what she thought was important:

Positive. I mean you've got to be willing to be brave and throw it out there and make it fun, because the material is so hard so many times that you have to be creative and really try to bring it down to the kid level. "Why am I evaluating a text when I am seven?" You know? So, you've got to bring everything down to kid level all the time. Willing to try something, but able to make a personal judgment whether it is going to work or not. I don't know. That's hard. I don't feel I have the expertise to even say. I'll try whatever. I'll do whatever. I think it was not that not being set in my ways. Also, my teaching style. Like, we don't sit at our desks a lot. We sit on the floor and we kind of talk around and converse back and forth. I like the more comfortable environment. And that's a big thing with research right now is to not be sitting at your desks all the time, and to have the freeness and creativity to go around the room if you feel like going around the room.

Theresa (Grade 5) discussed her teaching philosophy that stress relationships and high expectations:

I would have to say that I really got into teaching because I thought—kind of naively—looking around that I could do a better job than most of the people who were out there. I was very cocky about it and didn't realize how difficult it really

was. The philosophy that really guides my classroom is that I expect the best from my students—the best that they can give—so I have very high expectations for my students, not only with their behavior, but also with their academic goals. At the same time, my expectations are not unreasonable. I also think it's very important to build relationships with your students. When you have a relationship with them and you create a learning environment, they are able to reach those high expectations. I think that is one of the main reasons I've been so successful with some of my more difficult students who didn't believe they were able to succeed—the relationships I've built with them.

I believe that, in general, the teacher has to enjoy children. They have to enjoy children, love children, and like children. That is part of it. You have to feel positive about children and about their futures. In general, you have to be a positive person who is upbeat. I think you have to be pretty well organized to keep the classroom running smoothly without wasting academic time. I believe that you have to be fair and you have to have that expectation in your classroom that, "This is a classroom. We are here to work." Really set that educational environment—the community of learners—with relationships. You have to be able to build that and be a warm person; but at the same time, you have to know your content very well to be able to teach it. You have to be strict with the high expectations, but still have that great balance of saying, "These are my expectations. This is a classroom and we're here to learn;" but at the same time, have those relationship with the students.

Louise (reading intervention specialist) stated her personal motivation to be a teacher in the context of reading, which is her primary field:

Well, I think you have to be patient. You have to be determined that children can learn—and have the philosophy that all children can learn. I think you have to be a lifelong learner yourself because education keeps changing. You have to keep up with that change. You have to have the intelligence to do that. You have to be a team player. You have to be part of a team and know that we all are united in our mission. You can't work alone. I guess you have to be a good public advocate as far as being positive when you speak about the school and community. I think that's important. You need to be a positive person. That's it.

The process of zero-based staffing, through a planned selection process, brought teachers together who were similar in their beliefs, characteristics and performance expectations. They communicated their belief in children, their commitment to lifelong learning, and their positive attitudes for students and themselves.

While these common characteristics produced a collaborative culture of continuous improvement, there were other factors that contributed to the success of the students and school.

#### Other Variables

Several other variables were identified that contributed to the success of the school. The student achievement specialists, Achievement First reform model, Houghton-Mifflin reading series, and the leadership of the administration were identified as contributing factors to student, teacher, and school success.

Louise (reading intervention specialist) commented on the role of the student achievement specialists and their contributions to the school:

I think our SASs were outstanding! They actually went into classrooms. We had done staff development. We had read a book by Debbie Miller on the organization of a classroom. And, of course, Achievement First laid out what good classroom practices are. Well, our SASs went in and actually physically rearranged classrooms—made an independent reading library for the student so they were comfortable. The teachers loved what they did in their classrooms. The kids loved them and wanted to read. All the extra time in reading, I think, helped the students do better.

I don't think at other schools the SASs actually went in and physically helped teachers get their rooms ready or gave them the time. Teachers don't have the time to do it themselves, really. I mean, you had to put a sticker in all the books and put them in genre baskets. The SASs went out and bought pillows and colorful bookshelves and colorful baskets and brought in lamps.

Our SASs, they went out and found us like supplemental materials. An MSA math coach book that just gave like practice problems. They kind of said, "You know what? Throw these in as a warm-up everyday because these are things that are going to be consistent with what they are going to see on the test." We kind of threw it out there. Our SASs went out and found language arts things—MSA practice. I mean last year they even made us posters. They said you could intro it like this and told us exactly how we could work it into being a 15-minute thing a day. I mean, that's why I've done nothing but say, "Good night! Our SASs have done so much." Our teaching was really instructed. "This is what they're going to see on the stats and we need to do better on those tests."

I felt like we were so informed about everything. Our SASs were informed of everything. They came to us and told us everything. And yes, it was overwhelming, but it needed to be done. For once our school needed to feel like we were on top of things.

The principal commented on the critical role the SASs played in providing quality staff development in the school. Staff development was viewed as a key contributor to the dramatic increase in student performance:

Staff development. All the staff development we had definitely was the number one factor, I feel. And, the attitude of all the new teachers. Another thing was the student achievement specialists. We have two student achievement specialists. They were the key.

The principal indicated that the Achievement First reform model was helpful in providing consistency based on research-based practices that were required to be implemented:

When we came here, we had Achievement First—that was the reform model. They had certain things that had to be implemented, based on this model. For example, 150-180 minutes of literacy every day; the principal as an instructional leader; walk-throughs all the time; walk-throughs with Achievement First people, assistant principals, and SASs weekly. So, they had certain things but the county was already doing a lot of what Achievement First does. We had a professional developer two days a week from Achievement First who would come in and work with the student achievement specialists and mentor teachers.

The teachers also indicated that the Achievement First model offered good practices and resources that contributed to student success:

Well, the biggest thing that helped us was that *Guided Readers and Writers* book. That's like my bible; but it's good practices. How do you get kids to read? You give them choices. You have a class library. You allow them to choose books and you allow them to read. You give them time to read. I love that. Then you conference with them. You ask them about the book. You ask them to summarize, to get all those strategies in there. It is one-on-one. Differentiated instruction. You meet with them during guided reading. You show them how to go through a book. You can really get into deeper questioning. I find that's how I've improved as a teacher.

Well, last year we had this Achievement First program and evidently Achievement First mandated that language arts had to be three hours. And of course Achievement First is gone this year, so we're not obligated to the 180 minutes and the board has said, "No, your language arts will be 90 minutes this year." Big difference.

The Houghton-Mifflin reading series was a positive for the teachers and provided very detailed instructions for teaching reading. Teachers liked the Houghton-Mifflin reading series because it provided a focus for reading instruction:

I like Houghton-Mifflin. I mean it's our thing—predicting and monitoring and questioning and all that. I felt like in language arts we flew by the seat of our pants a lot. I kind of looked at the curriculum and said, "Okay, this is what I'm going to choose to teach today." I felt like Houghton-Mifflin made you focus a lot more and say, like, "We're going to be focusing on summarizing for the next three weeks and we are going to get proficient at summarizing. We're going to be doing questioning for this entire story. For the next five days this is what we are doing." And then you came back and revisited it, you know. It was consistent. Like the VSC all aligns with the Houghton-Mifflin very well. Even going to, like, word work and things like that—writing skills—the skills that were to be taught in Houghton-Mifflin were all kinds of things that they were doing in the MSA. We were on the bible of Houghton-Mifflin.

Houghton-Mifflin, I think, needs to be a resource. I don't think it needs to be a bible. Now, last year I think it was our focus; but I'm the type of teacher—I go through and I pick and choose again. I don't teach everything because I think "everything" is a waste of time. I look at the things that the kids need to know. If they need to know it, I will teach it. If they don't need to know it or if they learned it since first grade or second grade, why am I teaching it? I kind of filter through and see what I know the kids need to know. If they don't, I move on beyond that. I use it as a resource more than a bible

I think there was more structure. Having a reading program introduced to us. I didn't know exactly what was expected of me to teach. I was never really shown a reading series that I was supposed to use so I worried that I wasn't doing the right thing and that I was just searching. So, I know myself, being give a little more structure and being shown, "This is what we expect of you." I felt more comfortable with that. And because of that, I knew what I was teaching with the kids and I saw my students really learning, really doing things and reading. I knew that the book I was using was definitely on their level and I felt right about using it. I felt that I really was meeting their needs with this reading series

The final variable was the leadership that the principal provided to work with the staff to reach student achievement goals. The principal identified several aspects of her leadership style:

The staff knows what you see is what you get. I say that all the time. I tell them, “I will tell you if I don’t agree with something. You don’t have to agree with me, you may politely disagree.” I let them know. I don’t beat around the bush. And I don’t talk behind people’s backs. I just tell it how it is. They either want to do it or they don’t. Everybody realizes the things I told them—I mean it’s backed up by research. “Let’s try it and see what happens. What do we have to lose?” The scores are already at the bottom. I think the principal can make or break it. Your attitude. You have to be a people person. You have to have teachers feel that you are there to support them and that you don’t mind them being risk takers. I have always considered myself more of a rebel in that I don’t always go by what people say I should do. I sort of do my own thing.

Teachers commented on the importance of having a principal who treats staff professionally:

I like the professional development and the administration. The principal treats you like a professional, and that says a lot whenever you’re in a school and you have so much going on and you have a principal who treats you like a professional. They trust everything that you do. She is just right there for the teachers and she’s there for the kids. It really does help because you feel confident as a teacher. You feel, “yes, I can do this.” And I told her when she did my observation that I feel I’m more of a risk-taker now than I ever have been and it’s because she has allowed for that. She doesn’t keep you from doing things or saying, “That’s a bad idea.” Or “I don’t think they would approve of this.” She says, “Oh yeah, try it.”

I think having administrators who are consistent and are staying here for a period of time is very beneficial. This school, background history is that we have had many principals and vice principals. Since I have been here, it has changed. I think really we only had an administrator here two years consistently and then it changed form there. Building that trust within your own administration is an asset, too. I think we have made positive improvements there. We are headed in the right direction. I think we had a lot of questions. Now, it’s crystal clear as to where we’re going.

The results are the words of the superintendent, principal, six teachers, and the interview team. While the words serve in many ways to capture the voice of the participants, the more difficult qualitative dimension for the researcher to share was the passion communicated through body language, voice inflection and demeanor that are all part of the communication process. It was evident through the voices of the individuals interviewed that a positive change had occurred in the culture of the school that translated into improved student achievement. These final quotes from several teachers, the principal, and the superintendent are indicative of the overall success of this reform model in this elementary school:

[Teacher:] There are pros. I was skeptical coming in the second year, having a whole new staff and a whole new reading series that we were being introduced to. I think of the good things that happened—just a fresh, new staff was here. I guess because of all the negative feelings that there were beforehand, now a lot of people were positive. A lot of people were first-year teachers and were excited to have a position at school here; excited to be working with young kids again and they didn't have those negative feelings like the people who were here before. Teachers now had a more positive look at the kids, and that helped to create a better atmosphere. I think it even now when I look at the school.

Our team really does work well together and I think that is because we are pretty much on the same page and we all have different strengths we bring to the team. I think that just by renewing that it has made us work better as a team, which will help kids all around.

[Teacher:] I think at least with restaffing and starting all over again, the teachers that are here want to be here. So, you know they are going to be very dedicated—not that the former staff we not; but the current teachers, I think are more flexible and are open to new ideas. You know they're here because this is where they want to be. Another benefit of pretty much having a whole new staff coming in is everyone did start fresh—learning together, lots of teamwork. I think sometimes you need to change, personally. I think a lot of the teachers who were here, their hearts weren't in it any longer. I think now, from what I hear from the teachers and where they've been relocated, they're very happy and refreshed, I guess. So, I think that was definitely a pro.

[Principal:] You know we interviewed 75 people, but we also interviewed many more after that with the new hires. We didn't fill positions with mediocre people. We decided not to do that. We went to the Board at that point.

[Superintendent:] Well, the obvious thing is that this experiment has worked. I think it was a well-considered experiment. I don't think it was an experiment where we were really out there. I had the background and I had the research literature on schools where similar things had been done and it was successful, certainly in Baltimore, where we zero-based some schools. It was successful. This was a very different environment. So it was still risky, because it was research-based on a place that's very different. And I think that has given us a certain kind of confidence in the system to know that we can do it.

I think that it has also given us the confidence to think out of the box and to take some risks. It certainly gave the Board confidence. I think it has been really positive. Again, if it hadn't worked out the Board would have probably dug a hole and tried to bury themselves—and me, too. I think knowing that you can take a risk and it would be worth it is a real plus for the whole system. It's now broken the ice, and I think in some ways it's encouraged other people because I see more innovation. I see more things going on and more people willing to try new things, and that's a good thing for the system.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

“If we hold awareness of the whole as we study the part, and understand the part in its relationship to the whole, profound new insights become available” (Wheatley, 1999, p. 143).

The process of school improvement has been a topic of educators and the public since Sputnik was launched in 1957. In light of No Child Left Behind, educators who lead schools have entered a heretofore unprecedented age of accountability for student learning. School leaders’ decisions have become data driven, and they have adopted best research practices to improve the teaching learning process.

Schools across the United States have developed standards to determine achievement and student progress as delineated in No Child Left Behind. The goal is to reach 100% proficiency in reading and math for all students by the year 2014. Each year the bar is raised in terms of the annual measurable objective (AMO). Schools and school systems must make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for all students as determined by a percentage for the overall student population and a variety of disaggregated subgroups.

Many if not all states, school systems, and schools are struggling to find ways to stimulate student success on these tests. Failure to meet AYP in any subgroup results in schools being placed on alert status initially with more stringent sanctions applied should schools not improve and meet AYP in successive years. The challenge for educators is to find ways to foster continuous and collaborative school improvement to meet the demands of No Child Left Behind.

Phil Schlechty (1997) wrote:

Change in schools is much more urgently needed than most teachers and school administrators seem to realize. Indeed, I believe that if schools are not changed in dramatic ways very soon, public schools will not be a vital component of America's system of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (p. xi).

Indeed, the current need to move quickly to higher levels of student achievement has required educators to make changes not only in instructional techniques and practices, but to also examine the professional personnel in our schools who are tasked with utilizing these strategies to make dramatic improvements. "School improvement is not a mystery. Incremental, even dramatic, improvement is not only possible but probable under the right conditions" (Schmoker, 1999, p. 1).

The challenge is creating the right conditions if the improvement needed must be dramatic. "One of the major challenges to school reform is that most schools are not looking for change. They have settled into a set of standard routines and relationships that are widely accepted by participants" (Levin, 2001, p. 3). It is difficult to break free of these constraints in an organization when relationships and philosophies, forged over a period of time, become barriers to student achievement and school improvement. The question is how to create a new order that allows a school to grow and flourish.

The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence conducted a study and produced a report of high-poverty, high-performing schools in Kentucky (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). While the schools studied did not specifically use the process of zero-based staffing to address performance issues, one of the defining characteristics of these schools was the recruitment, hiring, and assignment process. "A contributing factor to the high morale and overall success of the schools was the careful and intentional manner in

which teachers were recruited, hired, and assigned” (Kannapel & Clements, 2005, p. 3). It was noted in the report that all high-performing schools scored very high on the school culture continuum. The indicators in this area included the strong belief that all children can learn at high levels. The report reinforced the importance of on-going and embedded staff development and identified the following characteristics that contributed to high performance:

1. School-wide ethic of high expectations for faculty, staff, and students.
2. Caring, respectful relationships.
3. Strong academic, instructional focus.
4. Systems for assessing individual students on a regular basis.
5. Collaborative decision-making led by non-authoritarian principals.
6. Strong work ethic and high faculty morale.
7. Recruitment, hiring, and assignment strategy for teachers (Kannapel & Clements, 2005, p. 14).

The auditors who conducted the research indicated that, “Despite the strong work ethic and long hours, we heard virtually no stories of teacher burnout; nor did we hear many teachers complaining. These schools were happy places—focused but happy” (Kannapel & Clements, 2005, p. 19). In these schools the leadership was devoted to establishing a collaborative learning culture with shared beliefs. When opportunities arose to hire and/or inspire teachers they took advantage of the opportunity. “Likewise, they had hired and cultivated inspiring, creative teachers who believed in the school’s philosophy and in their ability—indeed their moral responsibility—to turn even the most disadvantaged children into serious learners” (Kannapel & Clements, 2005, p. 27).

Margaret Wheatley (1999) references scientific principles and quantum theory to demonstrate that disruptions, confusion, and chaos contribute to a new order. She comments on the work of chemist Ilya Prigogine who discovered a paradoxical truth

about creating new order and coined the term “dissipative structures”. In dissipative structures a disturbance in the system forces an entity to let go of its present form and reorganize in order to adapt to changes in the environment.

In this way, dissipative structures demonstrate that disorder can be a source of new order, and that growth appears from disequilibrium, not balance. The things we fear most in organizations—disruptions, confusion, chaos—need not be interpreted as signs that we are about to be destroyed. Instead, these conditions are necessary to awaken creativity (Wheatley, 1999, p. 21).

This study tells the story of a school that was transformed by first creating disorder through zero-based staffing and then re-forming to better meet the demands of the current educational landscape.

#### Statement of Problem

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the findings that were driven by the following overarching question: What impact did zero-based staffing as a reform model have on student achievement? Supporting questions used to guide the case study of this process included:

1. Why did a school system employ zero-based staffing to reform an elementary school?
2. What criteria used in the candidate screening and selection process yielded the best instructional staff for the school?
3. What attributes of a zero-based school attracted teachers to apply for a position?
4. What were the expectations of the teachers’ role from the teachers’ point of view in the school improvement effort?

5. What were the teachers' perceptions regarding role expectations in a zero-based school environment?

## Findings and Interpretations

### *Research Question 1*

Why did a school system employ zero-based staffing to reform an elementary school?

The supporting question for this inquiry is why would a school system choose to employ this method to improve academic achievement. The Maryland State Assessment (MSA) is used as the primary tool meet the accountability factor for No Child Left Behind required by the federal government. The academic indicators were not indicating improvement over the last several years at the case study elementary school. In fact, the school and system were on the verge of being required to invest significant funds to offer students and parents other educational options.

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) published the results of each school in Maryland as MSA proficiency levels for both reading and math. MSDE reported data for Grades 3 and 5 for the 2003 and 2004 school years. Percentages were reported for three proficiency levels that included advanced, proficient, and basic. The data is broken down in a variety of ways and disaggregated by subgroups as per NCLB guidelines. The 2004 Maryland Report Card (Maryland State Department of Education, 2004) compared the results and published them to the website for public review. The following comparison indicates the scores for Grades 3 and 5 before and after the zero-based staffing initiative reflected in Tables 1-4.

Table 1

Maryland State Assessment Result Comparisons–Grade 3 Reading

Year	Advanced	Proficient	Basic
2004	15.4%	64.1%	20.5%
2003	4.4%	40.0%	55.6%

Table 2

Maryland State Assessment Result Comparisons–Grade 5 Reading

Year	Advanced	Proficient	Basic
2004	30.8%	41%	28.2%
2003	11%	43%	46%

Table 3

Maryland State Assessment Result Comparisons–Grade 3 Math

Year	Advanced	Proficient	Basic
2004	29.5%	47.4%	23.1%
2003	8.9%	53.3%	37.8%

Table 4

Maryland State Assessment Result Comparisons–Grade 5 Math

Year	Advanced	Proficient	Basic
2004	7.7%	43.6%	48.7%
2003	3.0%	45%	52%

As reflected in the reading and math comparisons for 2003 before zero basing and 2004 after zero basing, significant improvement was realized in student achievement. The superintendent indicated that the school system was looking for improvement in student achievement on the order of 10% to 20%. This increase would have been viewed as being very successful, justifying the risk taken by the school board to make such a radical change in the school personnel. The superintendent's comment, "It was success beyond our wildest dreams!" indicated the dramatic increase shown by the data.

The increase in reading, which was the number one priority, was most impressive. Grade 3 improved their percentage of students performing in the proficient and above range by 35.1 percentage points. In Grade 5 reading the percentage increased by 17.8. In math the increase in Grade 3 was 14.7% and in Grade 5 was 3.3%. None of the other 24 schools in the county showed the dramatic improvement seen at the case study elementary. In answer to the overarching question regarding whether this method of reform was effective in stimulating academic achievement, the answer is yes.

There were several strong themes in regard to the characteristics that were common in all the teachers interviewed and congruent with the expectations set forth by the interview team.

The teachers communicated a commitment to being lifelong learners. They were excited about learning and opportunities to participate in ongoing staff development. These opportunities were embedded in the continuous and collaborative culture fostered at the school. This was evidenced by their commitment to utilize research-based strategies and methodologies designed for effective instruction. The teachers were all convinced that no matter what the circumstances, all children can learn. Each teacher

exhibited and communicated a positive attitude that seemed genuine and was communicated in the classroom to students. Finally, all the teachers understood the importance of working as a team to bring about the vision of a school where everyone works together toward common goals.

There was an outcome that was not expected by the researcher in regard to the emotional component linked to the process of zero basing the staff. During the interviews the participants, when asked about the process, spent a significant amount of time discussing their feelings and the feelings of their colleagues. They expressed empathy for their colleagues who were not rehired and recalled the climate this created in the school during the last several weeks of the school year. One teacher made comments that were a reflection of feelings of the other teachers:

I don't think that they really considered the staff's feelings. It was like their feelings were irrelevant. I understand that we're here to teach children. That is our first goal, to have them in mind; but also on the other hand, we have to consider that we are teachers and we have feelings. We are part of this as well. Our voices need to be heard. I don't think that they truly took into consideration the teachers who were here—their thoughts, their reasoning for doing certain things, and so forth. So, I think that was a negative. I think they did make a good decision. It was tough, though.

This emotional component came from the teachers who had been either rehired or newly hired and were currently teaching at the case study elementary school.

Teachers were not losing their jobs due to the zero-based process, but felt that they were being told via the process that they were bad teachers. Emotions ran high during the last part of May and early June 2003 as all professional staff became involuntary transfers. Interviews were conducted at the school and as information regarding who was selected came to those selected, this set up negative dynamics with

those who had not yet been interviewed, not yet notified, or not selected. Grade-level teams were torn apart near the end of the year as colleagues and friends dealt with the fallout from the emotional turmoil. Even new teachers hired to the school felt the tension when they visited the school to see their new teaching environment. The excitement that those hired felt as a result of being hired or rehired was hidden so as not to hurt feelings.

The superintendent and principal commented on the intense feelings that were generated by the process. Friends and relatives of the displaced teachers confronted the elected Board of Education members to voice their negative feelings about the situation. These confrontations occurred in places such as churches and supermarkets. Some former teachers confided that even after a year they still have negative thoughts regarding the process. On the contrary, there were cases where teachers told the superintendent that they were happier in their new schools and pleased with the move.

The intense emotions that were part of this process affected the school at the end of the school year and were difficult for the staff. This was an intense, but short, emotional time period. The new staff came together for the 2003-2004 school year and all interviewees, while expressing at length their empathy for their colleagues, indicated that the change was needed and resulted in a positive outcome.

### *Research Question 2*

What criteria used in the candidate screening and selection process yielded the best instructional staff for the school?

The teacher selection process is arguably the most important activity in which we engage in terms of improving schools and student achievement. “The capstone of any school improvement effort is the quality of teaching, which represents the single most

important aspect of any school's program for ensuring student success" (Danielson, 2002, p. 106).

The selection of teachers for this elementary school was crucial to the success of the process and improved student achievement. The interview team was composed of the people who would be most intimately involved with the school and the improvement effort. Three site-based administrators, two instructional specialists and a parent comprised the team. All had a vested interest in hiring the best teachers for this instructional setting.

Questions were developed by the interview team based on the perceived instructional needs of the school and the characteristics they wanted in the instructional staff. Several iterations were reviewed until the final set of questions was agreed upon. The questions in general addressed the following areas: knowledge of literacy and teaching strategies; engagement in professional growth opportunities; climate and culture of a good school; classroom management systems; qualities, abilities, and attitudes that would be a match for the school.

A rating form was used to score each question and generate overall score. Some of the interviewers knew some of the candidates personally and some did not know them at all. This seemed to be a positive characteristic of the interview team in that some interviewers could give ratings very objectively based on the interview. The ratings for each candidate were consistent across the interviewers. The interviewers who knew the candidates well were then able to provide information to assist with specific placement on grade-level teams. The interview team indicated that consensus was reached on every selection.

The interview team indicated that they were confident in their selections and felt that they had selected the best team of teachers for the elementary school. They concluded that the MSA comparative data confirmed the validity of their selections.

We know that a good teacher is many things, among them a caring person. But a good teacher is also a skillful practioner, meaning adept at certain specifiabe, observable actions. Being skillful means you can *do* something that can be seen; it means different levels of skill may be displayed by different individuals; and it means, above all, that you can *learn how* to do it and can continue to improve at it (Saphier & Gower, 1997, p. 3).

There was a great deal of similarity in the characteristics and attitudes sought by the interview team and the characteristics teachers believed they possessed. The characteristics and attitudes possessed by these teachers included positive attitude, belief that all children can learn, desire for professional growth as lifelong learners, and knowledge of content and teaching methodologies.

The teachers felt that you have to love children first and foremost as a vital characteristic. They also combined this love of children with the belief that all children can learn. “Effective teachers care about their students and demonstrate that they care in such a way that their students are aware of it” (Stronge, 2002, p. 14).

There were no, as the superintendent put it, “if only” teachers among the participants interviewed. All understood that when students walked in their building in the morning it was their obligation to teach them and make them successful no matter what their circumstance outside of school.

They were realistic and recognized that some children have very difficult lives and not many resources, but this did not mean they could not learn and achieve at a high level. They all articulated an optimism that students would achieve no matter what. They

exhibited the characteristics that are seen in schools that have developed professional learning communities (PLC) as described by Richard DuFour (2004):

There is no suggestion that all kids will learn if they are conscientious, responsible, attentive, developmentally ready, fluent in English, and come from homes with concerned parents who take an interest in their education. There is no hint that staff members believe they can help kids learn if class sizes are reduced, more resources are made available, new textbooks are purchased, or more support staff are hired (p. 134).

They believed that you must be well organized and business-like in the classroom and hold high expectations for students in all areas. In addition, it was important to build positive relationships with students and foster a caring attitude with students. They believed that to be an effective teacher they needed to be lifelong learners and keep abreast of current teaching strategies and methodologies. “Your organization can’t remain competitive if it doesn’t learn as fast as its competitors. And your people’s learning must somehow keep pace with the sizzling rate of change” (Pritchett, 2000, p. 9). Growth as a professional was an integral part of being a teacher.

The teachers believed that a positive attitude was essential to being successful with students. This characteristic was voiced strongly by every teacher interviewed. It was foundational for all the other characteristics identified by the teachers as critical characteristics of a good teacher. The belief that you control what you can control and make the best of your circumstances in a positive way characterized the attitude of the teachers interviewed.

The superintendent expressed the expectations she had of teachers who could and would foster student achievement. Her basic philosophy is that the staff needed to be “no excuses” people. She wanted teachers who would hold their students to the same

expectations that they would expect for and from their own children. The superintendent wanted teachers who would give hope to these children and could envision a school that would create hope. Teachers full of hope, energy, and creativity that create dynamic learning environments characterized the superintendent's vision.

The interview team expressed similar views regarding the characteristics and attitudes that they were looking for in teachers. A teacher who had a positive attitude was a critical component in the search for teachers for the school. The team believed that the teachers hired needed to be able to envision and describe their classroom and a lesson that fostered student achievement.

Teachers were sought who could articulate content knowledge, teaching strategies and methodologies, and paint a vivid verbal picture of a dynamic learning environment. The interview team wanted teachers who were lifelong learners and desired professional development, which was a critical component and would be a daily event at the school.

Teachers needed to be willing and active participants in the collaborative learning culture that would characterize the school. A desire to look at student data and use that data to adjust instruction or try new instructional techniques was critical. In regard to managing students and behaviors, the interview team was looking for teachers who talked more about creating engaging lessons with interesting activities that kept students on task rather than a narrow focus of discipline steps that would control the student through various levels of punishment. This came back to the need to have teachers with positive attitudes who would educate and inspire their students to higher levels of achievement.

### *Research Question 3*

What attributes of a zero-based school attracted teachers to apply for a position?

The prospect of teaching at a school that is perceived in trouble with a problematic future may pose some difficulties in finding willing and qualified applicants. The teachers offered several perspectives on their desire to apply and teach at this elementary school.

The primary reason for wanting to teach at this school was the staff development component. The desire to learn and grow as a professional was a benefit that they knew was part of the package. The \$5,000 that was added to the salary was not the prime motivator for the teachers but was linked to the extra time that was added to the day for staff development. Several of the teachers indicated that the staff development opportunity alone would have attracted them to apply to the school. The money was considered a bonus. The staff development opportunities and being able to expand their knowledge of teaching and learning was a stronger motivator than the additional monies.

Some teachers additionally identified the challenge associated with improving the school as their reason for applying. They believed that the students could learn and they believed that they could make a difference in raising student achievement. Those who were rehired expressed this belief in the students at the school and wanted the opportunity to prove that it could be done.

A perspective from some of the teachers new to the profession in general was the knowledge that the staff development would assist in providing specific guidelines for what to teach, how to teach, and how to improve. The newer teachers desired a very directed and consistent environment with guidelines, timelines, and clear direction regarding what concepts were critical to teach to students. They wanted modeling to

occur so they could learn quickly and effectively thus bypassing a majority of the trial and error process.

#### *Research Question 4*

What were the expectations of the teachers' role from the teachers' point of view in the school improvement effort?

The teachers understood their primary responsibilities and roles as teachers at the zero-based elementary school. The teachers were expected to participate fully in the staff development component. Participation was non-negotiable. This meant not just sitting in sessions, but also fully engaging in the process. It entailed applying strategies within the week and processing the success of the learning that occurred. "Staff not only see the value of the innovation on a theoretical level but make tangible connections between the innovation and student achievement" (Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004, p. 20).

The teachers were expected to be team players not only on their grade-level teams, but also in the school. It entailed using teaching strategies and methodologies that were research based and applied consistently across grade levels.

The teachers were expected to fully engage in the curriculum and utilize curricular materials provided by the county in the instructional process. They were expected to be consistent in the use of instructional strategies and methodologies.

The teachers were expected to improve student achievement on the Maryland State Assessment in order to make adequate yearly progress. This expectation meant that they would need to do whatever it took to stimulate academic achievement with all students and all disaggregated subgroups.

### *Research Question 5*

What were the teachers' perceptions regarding role expectations in a zero-based school environment?

The teachers understood that they would be observed and monitored throughout the year as part of the process. The observations would be not only the administration and SAS staff but also teachers from other buildings, central office personnel, parents, and other interested observers. The teachers knew that the expectations were high and felt that they were expected to model best research practices in order to stimulate student achievement. In addition, they felt it was important to always convey a positive attitude to the students, parents, community, and each other no matter what their mood on any given day.

It was also clear to the teachers that after-school programs, clubs, and school-community events were important functions and served to enhance relationships and academic achievement. This time was above and beyond the time that was devoted to staff development, but part of the expectation to improve the school and make AYP.

The teachers had clear and focused expectations regarding their responsibilities as a member of the faculty at the school and the expectations that came with the first zero-based school in the system. They understood that they needed to engage in a collaborative and continuous improvement effort with the entire school.

### Other Variables

#### *Student Achievement Specialists*

The student achievement specialists (SASs) were credited with being a very important part of the staff development initiatives. The SASs helped set up classroom

libraries, modeled exemplary lessons, gathered supplementary materials, answered questions regarding curriculum, and consulted with teachers regarding how to effectively teach various concepts. The SASs were critical in providing research regarding best practices for student learning. “Arguably, the most critical body of research for educators to incorporate into their practice is that on learning—after all, promoting student learning is the essential mission of schools” (Danielson, 2002, p. 22). SASs were also mentors to teachers who needed specific direction and knowledge regarding curriculum and instruction.

SASs were also crucial in analyzing data which was used by teachers and the school to make instructional adjustments in preparation for MSA. The importance of using data to inform instruction is vital to school improvement. “Data are to goals what signposts are to travelers; data are not end points, but are essential to reaching them—the signposts on the road to school improvement” (Schmoker, 1999, p. 36). Teachers felt that the SASs kept them informed of everything they needed to know, making them feel they were on top of things.

The principal indicated that the SASs were key to quality staff development. She said that she would conduct classroom walk-throughs with the SASs which would help them assess staff development needs. These discussions generated the agenda for the staff development program for the next month. She indicated she and the SASs would attend weekly team meetings to look at data, share ideas, and reflect on instructional processes.

#### *Administrative Leadership*

The principal was credited for treating teachers as professionals and placing trust in the teachers to do the right things for students. The principal was viewed as being

supportive of both teachers and students. “Learning and leading are deeply intertwined, and we need to regard each other as worthy of attention, caring, and involvement if we are to learn together” (Lambert, 2003, p. 2).

In addition, it was noted that the teachers felt that consistency in the administration was beneficial to a school. It takes some time to build rapport and trust with a staff. The administration was acknowledged for making positive improvements in the school and for keeping the school pointed in the right direction.

#### *Houghton-Mifflin Reading Series*

The Houghton-Mifflin reading series brought a great deal of structure to the reading program at the elementary school. Teachers indicated that it was aligned with the Voluntary State Curriculum (VSC) and mirrored the expectations for student knowledge required on the MSA. Less experienced teachers appreciated the structure and felt that they made great progress with students using the series. More experienced teachers felt that it was a good series but should be used more as resource than a bible, as described by some teachers. In general, the structure and alignment with the VSC and quality instructional strategies utilized by the series were viewed as contributors to the improvement of student scores.

#### *Achievement First Reform Model*

The Achievement First reform model was another component that brought consistency to the school in terms of instructional practices. Achievement First combined with the consistency of application fostered by the zero-based expectations created an effective instructional dynamic. Various criteria were required as part of the model and were implemented across the school. The school was required to have 150 to 180 minutes

per day of literacy instruction. The principal was critical as the instructional leader and conducted walk-throughs on a consistent basis with assistant principals, SASs, and Achievement First consultants as part of the process. This model was viewed as another contributor to student improvement.

### Conclusion

The study's overarching question asked about the impact that zero-based staffing as a reform model had on student achievement. The answer is that improvement can be significant. The results obtained using the process at the elementary school exceeded the school system's expectations and are reflected in the comparative data on the Maryland State Assessment.

The literature is not clear on this, but it appears that a school system would most likely employ the zero-based model of reform when other reform models have not been successful. A zero-based reform is used when the culture of the school prohibits positive growth and the need is great to make dramatic improvement in a short period of time.

The make-up of an interview team is important when interviewing for a zero-based school. A variety of perspectives and knowledge bases are critical elements on the interview team. Use of a rating system and consensus process assists in facilitating the selection from a pool of candidates. It is important for the interview team to reflect as a group on the candidates as part of the process. In general, the teacher characteristics that were important for the teachers to possess at the case study elementary school were positive attitude, love of children, knowledge of content and teaching methodologies, desire to be lifelong learners, belief that all children can learn, and refusal to believe that

outside factors and circumstances should be an excuse for lower expectations and performance.

Teachers' comments supported the idea that the primary reason teachers were attracted to this zero-based school was the opportunity for professional growth. This was linked to a monetary increase of \$5,000 for the extra time commitment the staff development would entail but was not the primary incentive to apply. Teachers were also attracted to the challenge that this assignment would afford in terms of testing their skills as educators.

Teachers clearly understood their responsibilities and the expectations associated with this zero-based scenario. They understood the importance of working as a team to create a collaborative and continuous learning culture.

There were several factors that, in conjunction with one another, created a synergy that fostered the student improvement results experienced at the elementary school. First, a leader was chosen with a vision and the communication skills needed to communicate that vision to the staff. Second, the leader was able to select a professional staff for the school with characteristics identified as critical to student and school success in this setting. Third, clear expectations regarding the expectations and roles of the teachers were established and communicated. Fourth, a mandatory staff development component supported by a salary increase for the additional time was integral to the process. Fifth, student achievement specialists worked with staff to support the staff development component, supported instructional initiatives, analyzed and shared data, provided constructive criticism, and moral support.

These major factors were critical to the dramatic improvement realized at this elementary school. All Title I schools in this Maryland county have SASs and many have had a variety of reform models including Achievement First. All use the Houghton-Mifflin reading series as part of the literacy curriculum. These reforms in and of themselves have not generated the degree of improvement in other schools realized by this elementary.

At this elementary all staff were committed to the same vision to some extent because they were all selected at the same time to carry out that vision. It was a vision that was communicated at the interview and those who moved forward in the process embraced it. Further, the teachers knew that the system had high hopes for their performance not only individually, but also as a total school team. These expectations promoted collaboration and collegiality throughout the school. Communication between and among grade levels was high as was articulation from grade level to grade level. This produced consistency in both academic and behavioral expectations for every student. The power of shared attitudes and mission was evident in the results obtained by the school in the Maryland State Assessment.

#### Implications and Limitations

The process of zero-based staffing has been proven successful and is a viable means to make dramatic improvement in a school. It is a way for a school system to “bend the trend” (E. M. Morgan, personal communication, June 11, 2002) by hiring professionals with the attitudes and skills necessary to foster student achievement. School systems are looking for ways to stimulate under-performing schools in their districts when standard reform models and staff development are not enough to overcome

negative cultures. Some schools are taken over by private companies when school systems cannot meet the standards set by the state.

It is important for systems to have a reform model that is proven and powerful to transform a culture from failing to flourishing. It is equally important to make sure that both the vision and mission are clear, focused, and communicated. This means implementing the process in an effective manner, providing leadership to educate and focus the staff, and continuously building a culture that embraces lifelong learning for all:

Mastery involves strong initial teacher education, and continuous staff development throughout the career, but it is more than this when we place it in the perspective of comprehensive change agency. It is a learning habit that permeates everything we do (Fullan, 1993, p. 16).

Not all school systems have the size, means, and contract language that will permit the process to occur. School systems in Maryland are relatively large and have the capacity to facilitate movement of staff to other schools through an involuntary transfer process. This Maryland county school system has 45 schools (25 of which are elementary schools) thereby providing capacity for this reform.

#### Recommendations

The outcomes of zero-based staffing are viable and can be effective. The process at this elementary school generated a great deal of emotion and impacted the school culture at the end of the school year. There are several recommendations that may alleviate some of the emotional elements that were engendered in the process:

1. Interview candidates at a neutral site if the interviews are conducted before the end of the school year.
2. Interview first all teachers who are interested in applying back to the school.

3. Notify all teachers in the building who interviewed of their status, preferably by mail, using sensitive language for those not selected.
4. Conduct interviews of applicants new to the school after candidates from the building have been interviewed.
5. Notify all interviewees of their status via a letter.
6. Conduct the interviews in a short time period to reduce process time and decrease time for rumor and speculation.

It is important for school systems to recognize the kinds of incentives that attract good teachers to zero-based schools. The characteristics desired in teachers are typically linked not to additional salary but to the satisfaction they get from working with a group of professionals who are striving as a learning community toward common goals with children.

It is additionally important to include and inform school personnel and associated groups well in advance of the need for possible zero basing. Developing an understanding with various unions or associations that can foster a collaborative approach to the reform method is a political necessity. This entails not only following the guidelines in a negotiated agreement, but also enlisting the support and assistance of the union to collaboratively facilitate the most positive implementation possible.

## Future Research

The lack of literature on zero-based staffing indicates the need for more study. Several areas of inquiry specific to this study may generate research questions to add to the body of knowledge regarding the process of zero-based staffing and long-term success:

1. Will student achievement continue to improve and/or be sustained over time at this elementary school?
2. How will teacher and administrative turnover affect the learning culture at this elementary school?
3. What is the critical size of a school system that will handle the logistics of a zero-based process?
4. What effect does zero-based staffing have on the teachers who were not rehired for this elementary school?
5. What is the impact on schools where teachers from the zero-based school are transferred?

## Summary

A central office administrator commented on the importance of studying the zero-based process in light of the mandates of NCLB:

We all know that this elementary school is probably one of the first in a long line of schools that may experience the process of zero-based staffing. As NCLB stakes get higher and higher, and we, as educators see more sticks with which to be beaten instead of carrots to improve, what we can learn from this school's experience becomes more and more important.

No Child Left Behind requires schools and school systems to meet student achievement standards that are challenging. There are a variety of reform models that

schools utilize to improve student achievement. Schools have the means to solve their problems at the school level. When schools continue to falter even when utilizing best research practices it is a symptom of the need for a more invasive process.

The solutions the system needs are usually already present in it. If a system is suffering, this indicates that it lacks sufficient access to itself. It might be lacking information, it might have lost clarity about who it is, it might have troubled relationships, it might be ignoring those who have valuable insights (Wheatley, 1999, p. 145).

School leaders must try many ways to help schools improve internally. When it is evident that these methods are not sufficient, it is critical to create a sufficient level of chaos so reordering may begin.

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APPENDIX A

Teacher Interview Questions

## Teacher Interview Questions

1. I'm interested in knowing about you and the experiences that brought you to this school.
2. Most educators have a teaching philosophy or personal vision statement that describes their reason for doing what they do. What is yours?
3. This school has the distinction of being the first zero-based school in terms of staffing in the county. What do you believe are the pros and cons of this process?
4. Approximately half of the teaching staff was rehired and half new to the building. Which half are you in and what are the perceptions and feelings from your perspective?
5. You made a decision to interview for a position at this school knowing the significant challenges as reflected in the school data. What was your motivation for wishing to be a part of this faculty?
6. Your student achievement data showed a significant improvement over the 2002-2003 school year. What factors would you attribute to this increase in student performance and how did you contribute to this success?
7. What do you believe your role has been in the school improvement process at this school?
8. What do you believe are the expectations that the school system has of you in this zero-based staff school?
9. Have your expectations changed regarding your role after a year at this school and if so how?

10. What teacher characteristics do you believe are critical in fostering a culture of high academic achievement?
11. Do you have any other thoughts or perspectives on the process of zero-based staffing, teacher selection process, and what characteristics teachers need to have or develop to be successful with all students?

APPENDIX B

Principal Interview Questions

## Principal Interview Questions

1. I'm interested in knowing about you and the experiences that brought you to this school.
2. Most educators have an educational philosophy or personal vision statement that describes their reason for doing what they do. What is yours?
3. This school has the distinction of being the first zero-based school in terms of staffing in the county. What do you believe are the pros and cons of this process?
4. Approximately half of the teaching staff was rehired and half new to the building. As the new principal of this school for the 2003-2004 school year, what characteristics were you looking for in teachers to make them a part of the instructional staff?
5. You were selected and accepted the position as principal of this school knowing the significant challenges as reflected in the school data and demographics. What was your motivation to be the instructional leader of this school?
6. Your student achievement data showed a significant improvement over the 2002-2003 school year. What factors would you attribute to this increase in student performance and how did you believe that staff selection contributed to this success?
7. What do you believe the principal role has been in the school improvement process at this school?
8. What do you believe are the expectations that the school system has of you in this zero-based staff school?
9. Have your perceptions and expectations changed after a year at this school and if so how?

10. What teacher characteristics do you believe have been critical in fostering a culture of high academic achievement?
11. Do you have any other thoughts or perspectives on the process of zero-based staffing, teacher selection process, and what attracted teachers with characteristics you believed were needed to promote academic achievement?

APPENDIX C

Superintendent Interview Questions

## Superintendent Interview Questions

1. I'm interested in knowing about you and the experience that brought you to . . . county as superintendent.
2. Most educators have a teaching philosophy or personal vision statement that describes their reason for doing what they do. What is yours?
3. . . . Elementary School has the distinction of being the first zero-based school in terms of staffing in . . . county. What were your reasons for choosing this course of action for this school?
4. What factors and obstacles did you consider and encounter before, during, and after implementation?
5. What do you believe are the pros and cons of this process from a system perspective?
6. Student achievement data showed a significant improvement over the 2002-2003 school year. What do you believe were the critical factors that contributed to . . . Elementary School's success with students?
7. What do you believe attracted administrative staff and teachers to apply for positions at . . . Elementary and what incentives did the system offer to attract candidates?
8. What are your expectations of the principal selected as instructional leader at . . . Elementary?
9. What are your expectations of the teachers selected for student instruction at . . . Elementary?
10. What characteristics do you believe are vital for the principal and teachers to possess to foster a culture of high academic achievement?

11. Do you have any other thoughts or perspectives on the process of zero-based staffing, principal and teacher selection process, or characteristics needed to foster student success?

APPENDIX D

Interview Team—Focus Group Questions

### Interview Team—Focus Group Questions

1. I'm interested in knowing about the composition of the interview team. Could you each state your role at the time you were on the interview team to select the teachers for . . . Elementary.
2. Do you believe that the size and composition of the interview team was appropriate for the interview process?
3. Did the interview team have a clear understanding of the zero-based staffing process and why it was being applied to . . . Elementary School?
4. What direction had the superintendent given in regard to the charge assigned to the teacher selection team?
5. What was the structure of the interview process and was there a screening interview conducted before the group interview?
6. Were specific questions asked of all candidates and who developed the questions?
7. What were the questions that were used to determine the characteristics of the teachers you wanted to hire for . . . Elementary?
8. Approximately half of the teaching staff was selected to return to . . . Elementary through the interview process. What teacher characteristics were you looking for as a team to select a staff of teachers who would foster a culture of high academic achievement at . . . Elementary School?
9. What do think attracted candidates to apply for a position at . . . Elementary?
10. How did the interview team make decisions as a group regarding whom to hire for the positions?

11. Based on the data that was produced by the school over the course of the 2003-2004 school year, do you believe that the interview team made the right selections? What other indicators confirm or disconfirm your choices?
12. What would you change about the process if you could go back to spring 2003?
13. Do you have any other thoughts or perspectives on the process of zero-based staffing, the teacher selection process, and the characteristics that teachers needed to improve the school?