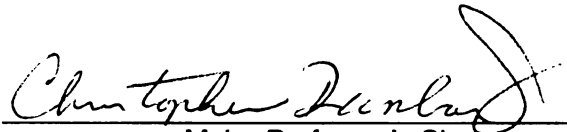This is to certify that the
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"GIVE ME THE WORST OF THEM, AND I'LL MAKE THEM
THE BEST": AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A
SUCCESSFUL ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL FOR AT-RISK
AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

presented by

Muhammad A Khalifa

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"GIVE ME THE WORST OF THEM, AND I'LL MAKE THEM THE BEST": AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A SUCCESSFUL ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL FOR AT-RISK AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

By

Muhammad A. Khalifa

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of K-12 Educational Administration

2008

ABSTRACT

"GIVE ME THE WORST OF THEM, AND I'LL MAKE THEM THE BEST": AN
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A SUCCESSFUL ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL FOR AT-
RISK AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

By

Muhammad A. Khalifa

This study examined how school leadership at Urban Alternative High School
(UAHS) adequately addresses the needs of at-risk alternative school students. The
school's principal, Joe, was different from other traditional and alternative school
principals in that most have been unable to address the educational needs of African
American at-risk children. Unlike the 'dumping-ground' depictions that characterize
many alternative schools for at-risk children, UAHS was an environment in which many
at-risk children academically and socially succeeded. Students who were previously in
academic and social distress at traditional schools came to UAHS and drastically
improved their behavior, graduated from high school, and made plans for a post-
secondary education.

The ethnographic research took place over two years (2006-2008) and involved
qualitative research methods in its data collection. Participant observation, field notes,
interviews, official school and county documentation and interpretive follow-up
questions were all instruments used in this research. Interviews were conducted with a
myriad of stakeholders: UAHS principal and other administrators in the district, 10
teachers and other UAHS staff, 5parents, 1community leader, 5 students and 5 former
students. While strongly considering theories related to the social and familial contexts

that impact education, social and cultural capital, identity formation of ghetto youth, and flexible leadership behavior, the researcher assessed how the school environment was negotiated by all people involved with UAHS. Another consideration that highlighted several parts of this research was that of race; cultural synchronization between school leader and students and communities served, differentiated racial expectations, and perceived racism were all relevant to this research.

The findings have far-reaching implications and suggest that administrators must approach leadership differently when serving at-risk, urban, African-American students. This study found that while it may be true that African American urban students come from families and neighborhoods that are incongruent with traditional schools, and that home environments contribute to them becoming at-risk students, there are still ways that principals can effectively lead similar populations. UAHS students were able to merge their pre-existent neighborhood identities with that of being 'smart.' The principal was able to earn trust and credibility, and establish rapport with communities who are traditionally hostile and distant from traditional education. And by focusing on aspects of education most important to the students and their families—namely staying out of trouble, high school graduation and college attendance—the principal was able positively impact the educational experiences of children.

"Allah grants wisdom to whom He pleases, and to whom wisdom is granted indeed receives an overflowing benefit"
-Allah

"The best of you is he who benefits humanity"
-Muhammad, Messenger of Allah

This work is dedicated to my mother, Faith Jassey, whose encouragement and direction reassured me during difficult times of this work; and to my father, Azizuddin Khalifa, who supported and guided me during impossible times of this work. They have both tolerated me at times when no one else would. They are responsible for who I am today, and to them I am eternally grateful and thankful. To my wife, Nezula, whose love, patience, and support allowed me to complete this work. And lastly to my sons Ibrahim and Adam, whose lives are tremendous blessings, and whose tolerance and understanding of 'dad going to the library again,' will never be forgotten.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All praises are due to Allah, Creator of everything that exists, without whose permission and blessing, this work would have not been accomplished.

I am honored to have this opportunity to thank the members of my doctoral dissertation committee, Dr. Reitumetse Mabokela, Dr. BetsAnn Smith, and Dr. Richard Thomas. Dr. Christopher Dunbar Jr. chaired my committee, and to him I owe very special thanks. Without his help, direction, and guidance, this work would have faltered long ago.

I especially thank Joe, principal at UAHS, who enthusiastically embraced this research from the very beginning; and to the UAHS staff who helped at every step along the way. Their honesty and hospitality allowed me to successfully conduct this research and complete this work

Several other people have provided ideological and moral support to me throughout this process, and to them I owe tremendous gratitude: Azizuddin Khalifa, Faith Jassey, Dr. Sherman Jackson, Donald Chislum, Maurice Witten, Dr. Resche Hines, and to my UCEA Jackson Scholar mentor, Dr. James Davis.

Acknowledgements are due to Badriyyah Sabree, Randolph Gear, and to countless other supporters from my Detroit Schools family. And special appreciation is due to my MANA family and the countless brothers and sisters who have supported me and my work. To my own siblings, Jerry, Khadijah, Darlene, Tamaria, Aziz and Naim, thank you. And to my wife, who has read and commented on my work, and has been patient, more than anyone else, I express my deepest appreciations to you.

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Chapter I

<u>Introduction and Problem Statement</u>

I have served as a public school teacher and district administrator in one of the largest urban and most poorly performing districts in the country. What I began to notice is that the brilliant over-achieving children are far more noticeable than those considered to be at-risk children. I believe this is the case because so many urban children—perhaps even the majority of many urban traditional education urban classrooms—have characteristics that were once only considered to be symptomatic of those at-risk. The lines of delineation amongst urban students' academic and behavioral dispositions are at times so opaque that it is increasingly difficult for urban teachers to distinguish between urban, African American, or Hispanic at-risk and traditional students. In this district, you could walk into almost any school and see a school suspension list that has 200 students listed with a population of only 500 students. If you were to ask teachers in some neighborhood schools: "*how many students did last night's homework*," you might get a response of 2 (out of 35); 'how many students are currently earning the grade of a D or F': they might respond 25 (out of 30); or, 'how many students have been disruptive or insubordinate in your class,' and they might say nearly all of them. Hence, the first problem is that 'at-riskness' is ubiquitous in many urban and predominantly Black or Hispanic areas. But the second problem is that when children are actually referred and sent to alternative school placements, they rarely fare any better (Dunbar, 2001). It is evident that urban minority children are increasingly becoming at-risk, and the United

States educational system does not know how to handle this population in either traditional or alternative schools.

Actually effective education for those most disadvantaged students has captivated the minds of Americans for the past century. In the last 50 years, two major pieces of federal legislation were passed and implemented, and both were directed toward and included substantial sums of money to fix the problems of poor performing students who had attenuated educational opportunities and diminished successes. In the early 20th century, researchers primarily focused on analyzing, describing, and explaining problems. But their rhetorical accounts of the problems facing these students rarely led to any fruitful solutions. It was not until the latter half of the 20th century that researchers and educational leaders began to focus on theories of action, best practices, and effective schools research.

In addition to any concerns for the well-being and longevity of this academically marginalized lagging population, effects of at-risk student populations had catastrophic consequences for the nation as a whole. According to national data published by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2003), dropouts had an annual income that was 40% less than the income of a person with a high school diploma. Disparities were not only income related; according to the same data set dropouts are less likely to be in the labor force, are less healthy than those who have earned a diploma or GED, and are more likely to be in prison or on death row than those people who finished high school. Bottom line: dropping out of school is costly to both the dropouts and society as a whole. The percentages are far more disparaging for Black and Hispanic students; according to the same data set for 2004, their dropout rate is two

to three times that of white students. In many urban centers, particularly former rustbelt cities with large minority populations, the dropout rates hover between 60-70% of the student populations. (NCES, 2003-2004) Researchers have relied on any number of factors to explain why students perform well or dropout, in a phrase: why they are at-risk.

This current research highlights Urban Alternative High School which is an alternative school for at-risk youth. Though the school is situated in a mid-sized fairly affluent district in Michigan, nearly all of the students attending Urban Alternative High School (UAHS) are from poor, working-class families, live in subsidized or rental housing, and are African American. The school was established over 30 years ago, and, according to the principal was created essentially to deal with some of the problem students in the district. The principal tells a story of racial tension and violence that plagued the school district. Many of the black kids, in this predominantly white district, were doing poorly in school. The city has always maintained a sizable minority of African American residents and until the civil unrest of the 60's and 70's they had all attended the traditional public schools. But when the Blacks' poor performance and violence spiraled out of control, including a couple of black-on-white stabbings, the school district established an alternative school to deal with at-risk and troubled youth. Most years, UAHS maintain a student population of about 100 students.

The school is still relevant to the district and city. About once a year, usually after the results of the state standardized test and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), results are distributed, the local newspapers run full-page stories that seem quite familiar: "Black students still lag behind White students by 30% on State test" or "Racial disparities still plaguing public schools." The worst of these students are referred to

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Urban Alternative High School. Before getting to Urban Alternative High School, many seemed destined to dropout of school. But what is noteworthy about this school—and this is indeed the reason for choosing this school for the study—is that nearly all of the students graduate from school, and a large majority go on to enroll in a college or post-secondary training program.

Overview of At-Risk Students

Foley and Pang (2006) provided a detailed description of at-risk students in alternative programs. They sited absenteeism (57%), followed by low academic performance (47%), and then suspensions/expulsions (36%), and lastly classroom behavior (27%) as the primary reasons students were in alternative school. Another major characteristic of the student population is the high incidence of emotional and behavioral disorders in the at-risk population. Foley and Pang (2006) found that a third of students had a learning disability, hyperactivity, or attention deficit disorder. (documented further in the chapter). Over 50% of the alternative schools in their study reported that they had the following problems in their student populations: physical aggression, chronic truancy and verbal disruptive behavior. It is clear that many of the students had disengaged from, or disidentified with school, and that they did not feel that they belonged in school. Also, academic persistence, aggressive behavior, economic disadvantage, and the student's concept of school are all important factors when describing African-American at-risk students. This is crucial for this study because the studies describe at-risk African American students that had long before disidentified and disengaged from school.

Purpose

This purpose of this study is to uncover leadership skills employed by the school leader at Urban Alternative High School. From this, we know two things are true; many at-risk children in traditional schools, or alternative schools, do not finish high school—they socially and academically fail; and two, that leadership in traditional and many alternative schools are not adequately addressing the needs of at-risk student populations. More specifically, I will describe how school leadership at Urban Alternative High School is different from other traditional and alternative schools that have not been able to address the educational needs of at-risk children. The implications unearthed in this description will offer useful suggestions to school and district leaders throughout the country that have similar student populations. The at-risk students in this study manage to academically succeed—an accomplishment that at-risk kids neither achieve in traditional schools nor other alternative schools. Paramount to understanding our purpose is describing what role leadership plays in the reason students are more academically successful at Urban Alternative High School than they had been at their traditional school. In describing this leadership, this study will also describe the relationship that the school leader at Urban Alternative High school has with the students, the parents and community members, teachers and district administrators. The leadership models found in this study can be used for alternative schools and in traditional schools with high populations of at-risk students; however this research investigates if this is even possible or, if the leadership is more charismatic. With regard to the student's cultural and social capital, this study asks if it plays a role in their alternative school experiences, and if this capital is perhaps valued more than in traditional school settings.

Primary and Secondary Questions

The overarching research question that is posed and examined in detail: what are characteristics of effective leadership in an alternative school for at-risk children? And therefore as I attempt to answer this question from the literature, I focus on the following questions:

What are the characteristics of the at-risk students who are typically served by alternative schools? And, why have these students failed in traditional schools?

What are the various contexts that affect the education and lives of these students?

What are other aspects of the educational environment that will likely increase the odds of educational success of at-risk, Black, alternative school students?

What is the relationship like between Black at-risk children and school leadership? And because the principal is the unit of analysis for this study, I will also investigate the relationship between the principal and the teachers and surrounding school community.

Who are At-Risk Students? Difficulty of Definitions

Before discussing an array of characteristics of at-risk and African American children, it would seem proper to outline definitions and theories around at-risk children; unfortunately, it may not be possible to give a comprehensive definition. Another problem, according to Donmoyer and Kos, (1993) is that researchers and practitioners rush toward prescriptive measures after definitions or labels are put forth. They say, "Research can never tell us what to do with particular students who are potentially at risk, and that if I research findings too prescriptively in deciding what I should do, I will inevitably make some matters worse rather than better for some" (p. 25). They argue this

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based on the non-predictable nature of at risk students: "complex, idiosyncratic individuals." (p. 25) Furthermore, they claim that even at-risk students of the same ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic group have different educational needs. Donmoyer and Kos (1993) argue that researchers should discuss at-risk students from a general vantage point, but that researches' tendencies have been to discuss 'an at-risk student' rather than 'at-risk students.' Here they describe their approach in understanding at-risk students,

> "Rather than thinking in terms of a bottom line, however, it may be more helpful to think and talk about a line that must constantly be walked. To walk this line successfully I must constantly balance between our need for structure and the need to not be blinded and overly constrained by the intellectual and organizational structures I create. Only if I balance these needs successfully do I have a chance to help rather than hurt at-risk students. Only if I maintain our balance can I even hope to catch a glimpse of who these at-risk students really are." (p. 402)

Richardson, et al. (1989) argued that far too many educational researchers used an epidemiological approach to understanding alternative and at-risk education in that they identify populations of people who are likely to have an illness. Then, they go on to prescribe the most widely-accepted solutions to an entire population of people. But in response to educational and social science research employing an epidemiological approach, they write:

> "Unfortunately, the decision to employ an epidemiological mode for the study of these problems limits educators' ways of the thinking about these phenomena. Since the problem is believed to be inherent in the student, then the search for the cause is limited to characteristics of the students themselves. Characteristics of our society and school are left unexamined. (p. 6)

They argued for a social constructivist model that recognizes the child's cultural context, including the school and home environments. Their work shows that the "*risk*" that at-

risk children have can vary from setting to setting, and even within the same classroom. In fact, different teachers could also label the same student differently.

Throughout this study, I use these terms together to describe students: at-risk, urban, African American, Black, and to a lesser extent, underserved, disenfranchised, marginalized, disruptive, and behaviorally or academically challenged youth. This was done because many of the students that are the focus of this study could be described by any of these terms. The overlap of a student being Black (former slave), urban and academically at-risk is so great, that it is difficult for me to visualize United States classrooms of *urban* children without seeing large numbers of *Blacks* (or other minorities) present, or for me to think of classes of *Black urban* kids without seeing large numbers of *at-risk* children present.

Significance of this Study

Though Americans seems to be infatuated with large-scale educational reform, none seem to have served their intended purposes, particularly with urban populations. Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESEA) and its recent reauthorization No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have both targeted the educationally underserved—urban, Black or Latino, rural, and English Language Learners. While educational achievements of some groups have been promising, urban Black and Hispanic children have in some ways gotten worse. Facing what some believe to be Utopian strategies to fix education, some researchers now seem to focus on best practices that can address issues that are either unaddressed or incurable by current reform legislation.

The findings from this study will provide leaders of African American, urban, at-risk children, whether in traditional or alternative schools, with a model of how effective

leadership has worked in a typical predominantly Black urban alternative school. But some implications may extend to children who exhibit at-risk behaviors in traditional school. Additionally, the findings from this study will offer urban district policy considerations regarding how best to support effective leadership at alternative schools in their jurisdiction. Furthermore, the findings from this study will describe how effective teacher-administrator relationships can be formed and maintained and, in this regard, how teachers can better practice with a healthy relationship with their principal. And lastly, this research could help families of at-risk children recognize and eventually demand effective school leadership for their children's educational environments.

Limitations of this Study

This study is an ethnography and it describes aspects of leadership at a predominantly African American urban alternative high school. An ethnographic approach will allow the researcher to attain in-depth descriptions and to examine several different aspects of leadership and responses to that leadership. However, also because this is an ethnography, it will be difficult to generalize the findings of this study to all alternative schools in a prescriptive manner. It may be that inasmuch as other schools have similar characteristics as Urban Alternative High School, the findings can be generalized. But what this ethnographic study can assuredly offer is a very rich description of an alternative school that can transform thought and understanding of how people view these institutions.

Conceptual Frameworks

Educating the Nation's disenfranchised population has always been a hotly contested topic for politicians and it was thought that curing education would be the cure

for society's ills (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). The reason many of our nation's poorest and darkest people perform so poorly could have historical, sociological, racial or even political reasons. For some scholars, it has been easier to attribute the failure of these children to inadequacies in their home environments. Hence, this research looks closely at some of the social and cultural capital theories that try to explain the relationship that families have with schools. The basic premise put forth is that traditional educational systems in Western societies do not value the social and cultural capital that the disenfranchised possess. Relevant to American society, African Americans, Hispanic, Native Americans and even poor whites have cultural and social capital that is not accepted or rewarded by public school systems; by contrast, upper and middle-class whites do possess social and cultural capital that is worthy of praise and are therefore promoted through school, and eventually society, to the most privileged positions in society. In some cases the school itself serves as an instrument to divert Black males into a penal system (Ferguson, 2000) or track minorities into low academic and largely menial career tracks. However, because the educational system may unfairly discriminate against some, that does not mean the deterioration of the urban/Black family and neighborhood has not also been a cause of behavior and academic problems for at-risk students. The integrity and normative structures of Black neighborhoods was lost in the 1960's (Taylor, 1990), and this has undoubtedly impacted the educational disposition of the Black community. To what extent the system rather than neighborhood/family is most responsible for urban educational underachievement may be unknown, but what is certain is the reproductive nature of educational status of at-risk students. Given that all of this is the case, I will look at the extent and type of relationship that a principal can

have with at-risk students, and how this relationship may serve as a change agent toward academic achievement for the students.

One reason that many African American, Hispanic and Latino/a, and Native American students perform poorly in school is because their schooling is not culturally relevant to their lives (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Irvine, 1990). By extension, perhaps one reason that traditional schools have failed to successfully lead at-risk minority children is because the traditional school leaders have failed to consider their students' experiences in their leadership practices (Lomotey, 1989).

Although there are some promising characteristics of at-risk children—such as the inexplicable resilience that some at-risk students develop—their primary prognosis seems bleak. With regard to the description of the nature of at-risk students, I borrow heavily from Thornberry's theory of interactional deviance. I describe at-risk students as non-static and susceptible to influence from other peers, parents, school and neighborhoods. Likewise, they can have a reciprocal impact on these influences because there is an exchange of influence and information. Psychologically, students first disidentify with school and then disengage from school altogether (Griffin, 2002; Felice, 1981)

So what happens with these children? Typically, they are referred to an in-school alternative program or sent to a separate alternative school altogether. In these schools, which exist solely to help these students, they generally do not perform well. Some even postulate that these schools actually exacerbate the problems for which the students were referred (Dunbar, 2001). Alternative schools that are ineffective have been referred to as dumping grounds for troubled teens and incubation vessels for future prisoners.

In conclusion, I discuss issues related to school leadership for alternative school students. Evidence suggests that there is a need for school leaders of at-risk urban students to be flexible (Drugger & Drugger, 1988; Wehlage et al., 1989). Because of the unpredictability of the student body and large variance within the student body; there are wide numbers of variables and influences that act on each individual student. Along with flexibility, it is important that each individual program is tightly coupled as much as possible (Irvine, 1988). Flexibility, along with effective leadership and strong relationships with the community, is an important aspect of leadership for an at-risk school serving troubled minority youth. Other 'best practices' that surfaced in the literature from successful alternative programs are high expectations for students, high degree of hands-on activity, small class sizes, on-going staff development, clear and agreeable goals of all staff, daily follow-up on absent and tardy students, and parent and community partnerships. Cultural synchronism between student and school leader is an issue of relevance. There are those who hold that a tightly-coupled system will work regardless of the cultural background of school leaders. By contrast, others argue that leaders from the same cultural background can more easily relate to the students and community, and hence can better lead. At different times in this research, I argue that both are true.

<center>**Chapter II**</center>

<center>**Literature Review**</center>

<center>**Environmental Contexts of At-Risk Urban Students**</center>

Environmental Issues

The home and neighborhood environments are arguably the most impressionable factors affecting the achievement of black, urban and at-risk youth. Many researchers stress the relationship between environmental factors and education; they point to numerous studies done that show that although many black parents value and encourage education with their children, they often do not see the pleasing and rewarding outcome of their children's academic achievement. In addressing research regarding the impact of contexts, I review the effects of neighborhoods and families, particularly as they pertain to reproduction theories and cultural/social capital theories.

Neighborhood Effects

Not many will dispute the fact that environments—and more specifically here, neighborhoods—developmentally and educationally affect children. I find plausible Duncan's and his colleagues' (1993) notion that "individuals cannot be studied without a consideration of the multiple ecological systems in which they operate." (p.354) In their study (1993), they found that White students often benefit from positive aspects of their neighborhoods, such as affluent neighbors, but that Black students are often harmed by negative aspects of Black neighborhoods. This may be directly related to the environmental forces acting on a student, and, therefore, the role of incentives in an environment can be a strong determinant of how well students perform. Rosenbaum (2001) introduced what he called a '*linkage model*,' and suggested that incentives played

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a major role in achievement, and that inequalities are created and maintained by social

structures. In his view, some groups of people had better incentives than other groups,

and therefore performed better. Rosenbaum offered an explanation to readers as he

delineated the relationship between incentives and human capital:

> "The model contends that inequalities arise, not merely from initial differences
> among individuals, but also from initial differences among incentives that society
> and schools offer to individuals. Because societal linkages tend to offer
> incentives to advantaged students but not to others, linkages often magnify
> preexisting differences in human capital. (Rosenbaum, 2001, p. 4)

As previously implied, the lack of incentives can have adverse effects on children

and environment. The role of incentives is important for this study because evidence

suggests that African American, at-risk children do not have good incentives to focus on

school.

The interest here is the extent to which students' environment can play a role in

their educational development and at-risk behaviors. As previously suggested,

neighborhood demographics can also play a role in shaping the behavior of individuals in

their environment. At-risk behavior seems to be correlated with neighborhood

demographics and isolation. Shihadeh and Flynn (1996) describe the relationship

between segregation and crime. While there is a vast discourse on segregation and

segregationist practices, this research addresses behavioral and educational outcomes of

segregated communities. If one accepts Rosenbaum's and Shihadeh and Flynn's

premises, they would likely accept the following: the more encapsulated and segregated a

predominantly Black environment, the less access to positive incentives that community

will have. In fact, historians Surgue (1998) and Wilson (1989) noted that a sharp decline

in manufacturing jobs that began in the 1930's led to the rapid expansion of the working-

poor. Consequently, Black communities not only became more insular, they became even more segregated and poorer as deindustrialization raged forth. Indeed, this all impacted the characteristics and opportunities in Black neighborhoods. The students in this study share this historical experience; they are from largely homogonous communities that are largely Black and working-class.

Historical Contexts of Black Neighborhoods

Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, and Sealand (1993) show that neighborhood influences—specifically the presence of affluent neighbors—can positively affect a host of factors in children including dropout rate and other aspects of academic achievement. Both Thomas (1992) and Taylor (1990) spoke of a period when Black urban neighborhoods had acceptable norms and rules that even the most reckless youth upheld. But after riots and drugs rocked Black neighborhoods, many of the previously held normative structures and communal behaviors in Black neighborhoods were diminished; consequently, crime and illicit behaviors increased. Soon after, middle and upper class Whites and Blacks left the poorest urban neighborhoods. This led to what Wacquant and Wilson (1989) describe as *hyperghettoization*—a process by which the poor Black neighborhoods have lost nearly all of the social structure and organization that once existed. In this process, and as industrial work disappeared, there was a sharp rise in urban social ills related to black family, urban education, blight, housing conditions, and violent crime.

In this literature review, it is important to understand why urban at-risk students act in the way in which they do, and after whom they model their behavior. Wacquant (2001) describes vividly the 'meet(ing) and mesh' between the prison and ghetto. He

argues that characteristics from prison and the ghetto overlap and are frequently interchanged. He describes, for example, that the practice of racial segregation, the meshing of the 'code of the street' and 'convict code,' and the street credibility that prisoners have, all contribute to this blurred and integrated ghetto/prison culture. So, in his view, when a student only attempts to solve problems through violence, sags his pants, walks with a uniquely ghetto swagger, or wears a certain type of doo-rag or jewelry, these proclivities may very well be related to this hybridized ghetto/prison culture.

Similarly, Kasarda's (1989) observations on why so many 'other' minorities—such as recent Asian immigrants—are successful while African Americans and Hispanics continue to lag behind, help shift from general environmental issues to issues of the family. He found that newer urban immigrants are able to find ways of becoming socially mobile through a form of developed agency that, according to Richard Thomas (1990), Black Detroiters did nearly a century ago. In Kasarda's(1989) view, newcomers' (Asians or even Black migrants to the North in the early 1920's) agency entails that they "(1) assemble capital, (2) establish internal markets, (3) circumvent discrimination, and (4) generate employment in their enclaves" (p. 43). Kasarda is not only referring to economic capital. Rather, assembling capital and addressing discrimination both affect, and can refer to, several types of capital. Forms of capital— in this discussion, that would be social, cultural and human, and not necessarily economic—are inextricably linked to the societal positioning of families and the education of children. Kasarda (1989) concludes that "strengthening the black family and reducing the exceptionally high percentage of impoverished mother-only households must be key focuses of policies

to rekindle social mobility among today's underclass" (p.45). Clearly, this summative statement of Kasarda integrally links economic, cultural, and social capital. In this discussion of family influences on students, it is necessary that issues of capital and reproduction are addressed and that contexts impacting education are better understood.

Family Effects

When addressing the issues of families and learning, several researchers have noted (Astone and McLanahan, 1991; Sheldon and Epstein, 2002; Lee and Bowen, 2006; Diamond and Gomez, 2004; Clark, 1983; Okey and Cusick, 1995), that family life has an impact on the academic life and behaviors of students. Although the family has a tremendous impact, it is not the only influential factor. It is impossible to view schools or other elements of the educational system alone as the only unit of analysis or method by which I judge student failures and successes. Nasir and Hand (2006) explored the sociocultural perspectives of learning; and their work will be revisited in some detail later. However, to borrow from them at this point, it is noteworthy to mention that there are multiple influences on the learning of at-risk children. All of the influences on a student must be considered simultaneously, hence, while environmental and familial factors are important, research also strongly suggests that schools can have a tremendous impact; they are one influence in a group of several influences on the lives of at-risk children.

Another assumption that I make is that although families, schools, and communities all impact students, these influences are neither static nor mutually exclusive. From this perspective adapted from Thornberry's (1987) theory of interactional delinquency, it is understood that all of the influences and contexts that act

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on an at-risk student are constantly changing. They can change without external tamper, and likewise the influences and contexts act on and change each other. For example, the child's social context of school changes because of educational related issues such as high staff turnover, educational reform issues or modified curriculum, but this same social context of school is also deeply informed and mitigated by other contexts, such as family type or peer group behavior. A parent's educational decisions and orientations toward education may indeed be changed by reforms at the local school district. Paramount to this discussion of family and its impact on the education of at-risk students is how cultural, social, and educational cultures are passed or influenced from one generation to the next. Astone and McLanahan (1991) found that the "willingness and ability of parents to provide the child with time and attention" (p. 319) directly affects that child's access to social capital. Said differently, a family's restrictions in society are directly related to a child's restrictions in school.

Finally, though many researchers have found how the family can negatively impact their children's educational processes, there is a tremendous amount of literature that illustrates the beneficial influences of family on student learning and behavior. Torrez (1998) found that although Latino parents may not know how to advocate for their children in school, they trust schools and do not maintain a negative orientation toward schools. Diamond and Gomez (2004) found the same positive attitude among middle-class African American parents. Randolph (1995) found that "single mothers show amazing resilience that translates into resilience for their children" (p. 138). And Saporito and Lareau (1999) found that while White parents chose schools based on the size of its Black population, Black parents chose schools because of their poverty rate—a

great choice for Black parents considering the affiliations that come along with high poverty schools in urban areas.

Capital and At-Risk Urban Students

Cultural and Social Capital

For years, theorists have attempted to describe how parents bequeath non-tangible wealth or failure to their children. For the last half-century, discussions have included conversations around capital. Human capital—which can be thought of as knowledge or experiences embodied within a person that can lead to a tangible result—was thought of as something self-imposed or learned anew with each person who tried in this vibrant meritocracy. French pop-culture icon and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and American educational sociologist James Coleman gave new life and understanding to not only notions of social and cultural capital, but also how this capital was passed from one generation to the next—or in essence reproduced. They describe a system in which possessors of highly regarded social and cultural capital ensure their family status by using institutional processes that will better situate their children; this is done within a system that appears on the surface to be a meritocracy, but in reality some aristocrats use false universal language and standards for all societal groups that operationally benefit only them. A quote from Reginald Clark (1983) would contextualize some of this discussion. He writes:

> My basic contention is that the family's main contribution to a child's success in school is made through the parents' dispositions and interpersonal relationships with the child in the household. Children receive essential "survival knowledge" for competent classroom role enactment from their positive home attitudes and communication encounters." (Clark, 1983, p. 1)

In essence, Clark is describing how skills, or as he put it "survival knowledge" is passed from one generation to the next. In reality, to offer a description of capital as being solely a function of what parents pass to their children would be incomplete. This issue of social and cultural capital actually addresses other aspects that lie within the educational system itself, as well as societies. In this regard, there are several noteworthy points; 1) social and cultural characteristics—which serve as capital—of at-risk children are not valued by teachers, schools or educational system; 2) the relationship between at-risk students and the educational institution is unlikely to yield any academic advantage for at-risk students because their culture and social capital will not be valued; and 3) educational environments that are likely to improve the educational successes of Black at-risk students are those that will value the capital that they enter schools possessing.

Cultural Capital, Social Capital and Race

Discussions regarding cultural capital and education have been explicit around race. In many cases, researchers have found a positive relationship between racial minorities and a devalued cultural capital. Levinson (2007) reported on his ethnographic research of Gypsy children and literacy in British schools. He found that racial integration and acculturation was problematic for Gypsies in educational settings, and their group boundaries and orientations were not synchronous with the dominant cultural capital. Relevant to an American racial context, Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) found that "Black and low-SES students tend to receive less educational return, probably because of micropolitical evaluative processes at the school and classroom levels." (p. 158). They further explain that cultural and educational resources and racial gaps were a

function of family background; in their view, these cultural and educational resources that many Blacks lack, "have strong and positive effects on both GPAs and standardized achievement" (p. 171). These two studies provide a view of race as it mingles with cultural capital and show quite vividly that though similar groups and traditions can exist in the same society, they can simultaneously be quite disparate in the educational advantages they receive.

Cultural Capital, Social Capital and Behavior

This current research project specifically refers to the achievement of at-risk children, many of whom do not graduate from high school. Hence, in addition to race, it is paramount to include studies that deal with families' social and cultural capital as it relates to high school completion and dropouts. Okey and Cusick (1995) interviewed the dropouts and their families to determine why they actually dropout of school. They found that the negative, hostile view of school held by dropouts was reflexive of how their parents also viewed school. In other words, a negative orientation toward school had been reproduced in a new generation of children, and that led to dropout. Dropouts' behavior in school was directly a function of their families' orientations. In other words, the culture and norms in the family life of dropouts, or the lack thereof, caused problems for them when they entered school because they had a hard time adjusting to a new authority and a new set of rules. The parents had no involvement in the school and maintained a negative outlook toward education. Though this sample was entirely of White students from a lower Social Economic Status (SES), it is not dissimilar to what Diamond and Gomez (2004) found in their study of African American parents' perceptions of schools. Diamond and Gomez (2004) found that these African American

parents had perceptions that were negative toward school if they were from a lower SES. Sheldon and Epstein (2002) argued that there are essentially three spheres of influence on a student—school, family, and community—and suggested that learning is improved when there is an effective and positive overlap of these spheres. Diamond and Gomez (2004) emphasize that there is not only overlap of the various contexts, but that there is also interplay amongst them; they conclude that the "social class differences in how these parents approach educational participation result from the interplay between the educational environments they face, their resources for negotiating these environments, and prior race and social class-rooted family and schooling experiences." (p. 385)

Biddle, Bank and Marlin (1980) discussed both parental and peer influence as it pertains to peer influences. According to these researchers, peers are influenced through the expression of normative standards or through the modeling of behaviors. In their research, they found that while parents influence adolescents more through the expression of normative standards, their peers have significantly more influence in the realm of modeling behaviors. That is, the adolescents they studied were more likely to follow what their peers were actually doing, but they tried to do what they felt their parents expected of them. Not surprisingly, there is a strong link between peer influence and social deviance.

Capital, Peer influence and Social Deviance

The cultural deviance theories are important in understanding adolescent behavior particularly as it relates to peer relationships. This lends a further understanding of the contexts that impacts student learning. The Social Learning theory—as described by Akers (1977) and similar to Biddle et al. (1980) as described above—describes a process

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by which deviant behavior amongst peers must be learned. Proponents of this theory argue that peer influences, including both modeling and peer pressure, have the strongest influence on decisions of adolescents to exhibit deviant behavior. However Thornberry's (1987) Interactional Theory of Delinquency is most useful for understanding peer influence. He posited that prior theories of delinquency were incomplete in their description of deviance, and thus were limited in three ways:

> they tend to rely on unidirectional causal structures that represent delinquency in a static rather than dynamic fashion, they do not examine developmental progressions, and they do not adequately link processual concepts to the person's position in the social structure (p. 863).

Thornberry's model affords more opportunity to explain the plight of African American at-risk youth. For one, it provides a reciprocal causal path between variables. In other words, peers can cause deviance in each other and may affect other people that in turn affect them. This will be important in our view of alternative schools, and the impact that the schools may have on the youth, and that the youth have on schools. Secondly, this interactional model views delinquency as an integral part of the social process, and not only as an outcome of the social process. In other words, instead of looking at adolescents as only being affected by deviant peers, Thornberry (1987) maintains that it does not matter where the starting point is for deviant youth:

> Regardless of where the individual enters the loop, the following obtains: delinquency increases associations with delinquent peers and delinquent values; delinquent values increase delinquent behavior and association with delinquent peers, and associations with delinquent peers increases delinquent values (p. 873).

When describing at-risk youth, it is relevant that Thornberry found when adolescents are closely linked and attached to 'conventional' values and institutions, they are less likely

to be delinquent. For him, those conventional values are attachment to parents and commitment to school.

Reproduction Theory

Reproduction theory is closely related to many of the cultural and social capital theories referenced above. This is true because capital, or the lack thereof, works as a tool to either secure people in a similar high status of their affluent educated parents, or to render them into the low status of their poor working-class parents. Schools are instrumental in this process. Bolwes and Gintis (1976) in their work *Schooling in Capitalist America* are perhaps best known for articulating clearly how schools are quite explicit in their role of reproducing segments of the society. They write, "At the top there is a highly selective aristocratic tradition, the elite training for future leaders. At the base is mass education for all, dedicated to uplift and control" (p. 45). Thus, here schools are used by elites to reinforce and reproduce their class positions. Throughout their work, they give example of how schools track children toward educational trajectories and professions that closely match the socioeconomic and educational orientations of their parents. In their view of education, hierarchical schools are the societal structures that maintain class boundaries, and these schools have these class structures within and between their structures and curriculums. Ferguson (2000) also found that schools systematically reproduce an underclass of young adolescent Black men. Bowles and Gintis(1976) and Grioux (1981) all maintain that the schools play a crucial role—perhaps even the most important role—in validating and reproducing the dominant culture. In the next section, one of the concepts addressed is the social construction of learning disability. Therefore, it is important to mention an underlying assumption regarding a

connection between the two former issues: a number of these Black at-risk children are at-risk and *labeled* learning disabled not because they actually are; rather, it is because of the absence of culturally relevant pedagogy and leadership. That is, these kids themselves are not understood and because the dominant culture does not pedagogically respond to their needs, they are disproportionately classified at learning disabled and have actually become a group at-risk.

Tracking and the Social Construction of Disability

One way that schools have contributed to disparate reproduction has been through the system of tracking and labeling. Theoretically speaking, if kids have substantial social or cultural capital, they will be not placed into the lower tracks of education. However, Black at-risk students are consistently placed in the lowest tracks and ability groups (Irvine, 1990; Harry & Anderson, 1999) even when they do exhibit higher levels of aptitude. This can divert the educational trajectory of young Black students away from academia in an era where manufacturing and skilled trade professions are declining. This is done while not justifying the reason that some students are pushed toward academically-oriented goals or tracks, at the same time that others are pushed away from it. This is especially relevant for Black students because many scholars have argued that college education has been one of the primary doors of the working poor to become upwardly mobile and ascend into the middle class. Not only that, but Chunn (1989) suggested that tracking students into the lowest educational tracks is the equivalent of having low expectations for students, and essentially retards the educational success of students: "academic sorting practices and their selective determinants, teachers expectations, and race and socioeconomic status influence black students' scholastic

success or failure." (p. 104) In this study, the question asked is whether low expectations may have been placed on at-risk students in traditional schools and, as Ferguson suggested, whether they were discriminatorily sanctioned. But why a school would track a group of kids onto one track is all irrelevant without a vivid description of the students.

<u>**Describing the Students**</u>

In this section, at-risk students are described in tandem with African American students not only because the school being studied has a 100% at-risk and high percentage of African American student population, nor solely because of the high incidence of African American children who are also at-risk students; rather, it is because the two groups share many of the same characteristics. In this section, characteristics of these students as described in the literature.

This research is about at-risk students, mostly African American, who attend an alternative school where most of the students are doing well academically and behaviorally, and plan for college. In this context, *'well academically'* shall mean that the students are expected to graduate from high school, and the majority of them will attend college in the fall semester following their graduation. Thus far, details describing some of the contexts that affect students have been given. Now characteristics that give meanings of at-risk students themselves are described.

At-Risk Students: Unpredictable and Non-static

Donmoyer and Kos (1993) made it clear that at-risk students are a diverse population. Their *at-risktedness* (or condition of being at-risk) is not static; their status is ever-changing (Thornberry, 1987). It is, in other words, possible for a student to be at-risk one year and not considered at-risk the following year. Likewise, a 'straight A'

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student may suddenly become at-risk, as is often the case with young Black boys who are transitioning from fourth to fifth grade. There is also a strong link between an at-risk student and his or her environment, family, peer group, and school. Nevertheless, there are some retarding characteristics that many at-risk students exhibit. Not surprisingly, African American students in both urban and rural environments share many of the same characteristics.

Dunbar's (2001) ethnography of black alternative school students is one of the most descriptive accounts of the behavioral, linguistic, educational, and cultural characteristics in recent years. In his setting, he noted that these students are predominantly African American and mainly male. He found that these African American at-risk students made poor decisions and conformed to delinquent behaviors that were at odds with the accepted norms in a school environment. In his study, students were frequently expelled from traditional schools and were often truant in their attendance. Many had committed felonious crimes. Most have close encounters with the justice system; nearly all have had a close relative who had been incarcerated. Many reached the pre-teen years unable to read and therefore had difficulty completing any in-class lessons or homework. It was commonplace to see one student trying to fight with another in the classroom, to hear profanity and threats rolling off the tongue of students, and violence seemed ubiquitous. It is clear that many of the students had disengaged from, or disidentified with school, that they did not feel that they belonged in school. Also, academic persistence, aggressive behavior, economic disadvantage, and the student's concept of school are all important factors when describing Black at-risk students. Consequently, many at-risk students disengaged and disidentified from school.

At-Risk Students: Between Disengagement and Disidentification

Researchers have found that high school dropouts tend to disidentify then disengage from school. Students first mentally, then physically withdraw from school. But as several researchers have noted (Hilliard, 2003; Ginwright, 2004) academic achievement is often not included as viable modality when Black at-risk youngsters are choosing which identities to assume for themselves. There is no such thing as a high achieving tough guy, a gangster debate team member, or a smart slut. Students have a hard time breaking the mode and completely inventing a new identity. They usually choose from what is already present in their school environment. Many students cannot see the benefit of school, and, in fact, Griffin (2002) found that academic disidentification is a psychological response that youth exhibit as they navigate their tumultuous living contexts. Griffin found that Blacks have more academic disidentification than Asian and White students; this research investigates if further disidentification holds true when students decide to withdraw from school. Griffin's (2002) findings were consistent with past disidentification hypotheses, specifically that "both Black and Hispanic students appear to place less importance on academic achievement than do either Asian or White students when considering school withdrawal" (p. 71). Prior research has stated that there is a positive relationship between academic identification and self-perception. He also argued that self-concept and self-perception of students often supported a pathway to academic disidentification because students were concerned about the stereotype of performing poorly in school. This 'stereotype threat,' as earlier coined by Steele (2003), is when Black at-risk students assume, or more poignantly choose, negative characteristics to incorporate into their behavior because they are worried about

actualizing the stereotype of performing poorly. A predictable consequence is that students become disengaged in school.

Frequently, students have a difficult time seeing the short-term or long-term benefits of school and so they become less interested and more disengaged. Felice (1981) found that the institutions themselves led to the decision that dropouts make to become disengaged from school. Felice looked at the institutional role that schools and society play in the dropout process of Black students. He found that Black students tend to "view American society as a closed system within which they will be denied participation, regardless of their educational background. This leads to Black students rejecting school altogether" (p. 416). He found that Black students who dropout are often intelligent and motivated, but begin to view school as a burdensome 'waste of time' that has no meaningful results. Because of this, they develop a negative attitude toward school, which leads to poor grades and attendance. For them, education does not equal educational opportunity. School leadership, however, can be a factor that addresses this withdrawal from school that young students experiences.

School Leadership

This section details scholars who encourage models of shared leadership. However, it is important to first consider a mixed approach between top-down leadership and shared leadership models. Youngs and King (2002) argue that through good leadership, principals can build school capacity, which leads to greater student achievement. That is, principals do not directly affect student achievement; rather, by principals establishing an atmosphere of trust, structures that promote teacher learning, and avenues for reform either from teachers themselves or from external educational

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consultants, school capacity is built for improved instructional practice; this then leads to improved student achievement. Included in this framework of professional development that Youngs and King (2002) describe is 1) that newer principals must learn about the school cultures (shared norms and values) in which they plan to lead, and 2) that principals must then build a shared commitment to school goals. Although the principal is at the center of this leadership model, there are indications present in this model that describe to a shared vision of leadership that include teachers and other staff members.

Traditional School Leadership

The relationship between Black at-risk students and school leadership in traditional schools is often strained. The models of educational leadership in American schools are most suited for white males and are consistent with cultural paradigms that mirror the dominant hegemonic culture. This is not surprising, for Tillman (2002) shows that the research models used to study educational leadership and other disciplines have not been culturally sensitive. Rather, she argues that they have been exclusive of minorities' needs, particularly African Americans. That is, the very research methods of the leadership frameworks, from the relationships in the system to the very methods and best practices of research, have not considered the needs of African Americans or other minorities. She calls for a theoretical framework that is inclusive of culturally sensitive research practices. Although the recommendations of many of the critical thinkers seem to have room for growth, these scholars raise important issues that must be addressed when considering reforms in urban school leadership.

Regardless of race or location, however, I believe that school leaders can affect student achievement. The Youngs and King (2002) findings suggest that principals can

actually make a difference by being sensitive to their environment, by learning about

school cultures, and by building a shared commitment to school values and goals.

DeMoss (2002) studied eight urban schools and found that test performances of students

were strongly related to the way in which principals framed their schools responses to

testing environments. He described the same school environment that Youngs and King

(2002) seem to endorse. There are several other studies that suggest that principals can

have either a direct or an indirect impact on school achievement.

Researchers such as Brown, Anfara, Roney, and DeMoss all seem to suggest a

direct relationship between leadership and student achievement whereas scholars such as

Youngs & King (2002) and Marks and Louis (1997) suggest a more indirect relationship.

While research supports both direct and indirect relationships between leadership and

student achievement in urban environments, less is known about which type of leadership

may be most effective in urban environments or with underrepresented populations.

Witziers et al. (2003) distinguished between the direct effect and indirect effects of

administrators' school leadership. With regard to direct effects, the authors found that

there is a small direct effect that principals have on student achievement. However, the

authors do acknowledge that this small direct effect may be very relevant. Of the effects

present, 'defining and communicating mission' had the largest effect.

Collaborative, team-led leadership has taken root into many of the modern

discussions of educational leadership. The popularized Local School Councils (LSC's) in

Chicago is perhaps the most relevant example because it is a widely documented urban

model. It is a model of leadership that stresses the inclusion of all stakeholders—parents

and community members, educational staff, and administrative staff—in an egalitarian

platform of leadership. What must be further explored is whether or not this leadership is suitable for communities with high incidences of at-risk and Black students.

Alternative School Theory and Program Characteristics

Alternative school programs were initially developed to help educate students who had trouble succeeding in traditional school programs. There is little evidence that they were successful. Instead, they became places that traditional schools would send their most disruptive and unwanted students. (Dunbar, 2001; Arnove, 1978) As several scholars have noted (Noguera, 2003; Dunbar, 2001; Montecel et al, 2004), alternative school programs can be quite ineffective. In other words, not only are these schools frequently used as a dumping ground for students, many alternative schools were not able to do the very thing they were designed to—educate at-risk and marginalized students. It is no wonder that King et al. (1998) found that *'last-chance type'* schools would not likely reduce problematic behavior, truancy, and academic failure. In fact, according to Comer et al. (1991), alternative discipline programs, such as in-school-suspension and lunch detentions, can actually be more successful than traditional disciplinary programs such as out-of-school-suspensions, expulsions and confinement to an alternative school environment. As mentioned earlier, alternative school students are highly idiosyncratic and unique, and therefore as Donmoyer and Kos (1993) put it, "No matter how effective a policy or program, or practice may be, it will not be effective for everyone." (p. 402) In fact, this review necessitates discussion of alternative programs that address the needs of a specific type of student.

Foley and Pang (2006) found that several effective alternative schools have similar characteristics: they are largely site-based, often operate in physical facilities with

limited access to academic supports, have general education curricula with a supplement of vocational education, have several school and community support activities, are often small with less than 200 students, and often have individualized instruction for an educationally diverse student body. However it is Wehlage et al. (1989) that introduces many of the characteristics of successful alternative programs. Their findings indicate that schools must be adaptive according to the need of the at-risk students. As is clear in writings such as Hare (1980) the needs of African American at-risk students will likely be different from that of teen mothers, low self-esteem students, alienated students, or rural students. Wehlage et al. also show that school membership is essential in stemming the disengagement and subsequent dropout of at-risk students. According to Wehlage et al. (1989), this notion of school membership—or, social bonding, attachment, involvement, commitment and belief in the school—is especially important for those types of students who are prone to failure and who lack the support of strong homes and communities.

Systems failing Students: Educational Neglect

There is an expansive body of research that describes how both alternative and traditional school structures are systematically failing Black at-risk students. Black and Latino students are most likely to be suspended, expelled, and removed from the classroom (Noguera, 2003). Black, students are also several times more likely to dropout of school than Whites and are therefore far more at-risk. For years, researchers have attributed the failure of students to socio-economic background, educational attainment and aspirations of families and students, lack of incentives and positive role models in neighborhood, students' disillusionment, disidentification and disengagement from education, negative peer groups and a host of other factors attributable to the students,

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their families, or environments. However in last quarter century, there has been a sharp increase in the number of studies that (1), recognize the minimal influence they can have on families, peer groups, neighborhoods, SES statuses and the like, and (2), look to the educational system as the unit of analysis. In other words, they accept the students as they come and look at how the schools can address the needs of the students in the best way possible. Included in this discussion is the fact that schools themselves are partially responsible for the underachievement or failure of students. A discussion of research on the failure of school systems to properly accommodate and educate Black at-risk students in the traditional and alternative school systems follows.

William Reid (2000) wrote that "curriculums are cultural artifacts in the same way that national songs, stories, and festivals are cultural artifacts" (p. 113). In his article, he goes on to argue that it is impossible to use a single curriculum to meet the needs of a people who come from such different socio-historical and political backgrounds. In American school systems, the unfortunate practice of schools trying to educate diverse students in exactly the same way is pervasive. Presseisen (1988) commented that "the effective instruction of minority children seems to be a key concern in addressing the cognitive development of at-risk students in American schools (p. 34). He went on to criticize the typical education of at-risk students because, according to him, these students are not trained to be critical thinkers and independent learners. This is perhaps a skill that at-risk minority students need even more than traditional students because of their disadvantage. In Ferguson's (2000) account of the system's treatment of Black students, she found that schools were responsible for shaping the educational and future opportunities of young Black males. In her research, Ferguson (2000) found that

there was a direct relationship between punitive actions that schools take and the penal system: "A systematic racial bias is exercised in the regulation, control, and discipline of children in the United States today. African American males are apprehended and punished for misbehavior and delinquent acts that are overlooked in other children" (p. 223). In her view, systems neither validate nor affirm the identity of these young Black children. Acceptance of Black English, for example, is something that schools could do to facilitate this process. Polite (1999) described a social distancing between teachers and African American students, that was visible in an environment that had become one of *'high formality,'* as opposed to the *'caring informality'* of the 1960's and 1970's. Educational exclusion is also a systemic challenge that African Americans face (Dunbar, 1999). Dunbar (1999) reported that African American males are routinely placed in alternative school and special education programs, and are therefore excluded from the benefits of traditional education.

Successful Alternative Programs

There are no clear definitions of at-risk students, alternative education, or alternative school students (Chalker and Brown; 1999). However, there are some studies that highlight effective leadership and achievements at alternative schools. Cox (1999) found in the alternative school he was studying that although better research was needed on program implementation, there were several measurable improvements in the students' grade point average, attendance, and self-esteem. Drugger and Drugger (1998) found the following characteristics in the successful alternative schools that they studied: staff maintained high expectations for students

- high degree of hands-on activity

- small class sizes

- on-going staff development

- clear and agreeable goals of all staff

- daily follow-up on absent and tardy students

- parent and community partnerships

- alternative schools that are both tightly and loosely coupled (program was both

  highly structured yet extremely flexible).

In essence, they argued that successful alternative schools have strong site-based

leadership and are independently run (Giltin, Margonis and Brunjes, 1993). Giltin,

Margonis and Brunjes (1993) contend that mixed messages exist regarding site-based

reform because school faculty are on the one hand responsible for what happens locally,

but on the other hand are still constrained because of lacking resources or decision-

making power that will significantly affect education at a school. With regard to

instructional leadership, Mirman, Swartz and Barell (1988) argued that leaders must

empower teachers toward curricular infusion—methods of "integrating the teaching of

thinking into standard subject-area instruction" (p. 143) This, along with Duran's (1988)

suggestion of 'cooperative learning methods,' in which students are educated in small

focused groups, are both best practices that instructional leaders can implement at their

schools. Indeed, what is clear is that some alternative programs can help students.

Catterall and Stern (1986) studied alternative school programs in California and found

that in many of the good programs students were less likely to drop out and more likely

to become a viable force in the workforce. As part of this discussion, it is important to

consider literature that addresses effective education in urban and predominantly black environment.

Flexibility in Alternative School Education

There is a need for both flexibility and structure in alternative school environments. Drugger and Drugger (1988) found that alternative schools are most successful when alternative schools are both tightly and loosely coupled; that is, programs that were both highly structured yet extremely flexible. This structure gives faculty the structure of having clear goals, a predictable educational program for students, and regulation with regard to student behavior, but also the freedom to adjust these features to address student needs. Wehlage et al. (1989) found that schools that were unwilling to adapt their programs to common characteristics of students only contribute to their students' failure. Their most important finding was that unique cultural and structural features in a school have a tremendous impact on at-risk students; not only are small schools, classsize, and autonomy essential to any successful alternative program, but also collaborative leadership, a faculty's willingness to invest time and belief into students, a shared set of values, satisfaction of teachers with their work, and a transparent system that responded to students' needs were all notable aspects of success. Wehlage and his colleagues (1989) state that "the most successful programs for at-risk youth appear to link school more closely to the experiences and values of the students they serve" (p. 174). This will allow schools to actually educationally engage their students. In fact, their research mirrors what Ladson-Billings (1995) and Irvine (1988) found regarding the relevance of education to the lives of Black students.

Effective Education with Urban Students

Irvine (1988) found that despite poor and negative home environments, poor black urban kids still learn in some, what she and other have called *effective schools*. According to Irvine, her research called into question the prominent views of the likes of Coleman and Jencks that the home environment of the student had a far greater impact than quality of school materials, equipment, and staff. Irvine found that there were several characteristics that were common in successful urban schools:

- visionary leadership (clearly stated and measurable goals understood and accepted by all stakeholders)

- Instructional leadership (careful & systematic monitoring, frequent staff development, implementing a system of rewards and achievements)

- Having a tightly coupled system (tightly-coupled systems ensured the adherence to disciplinary procedures and strict codes of conduct)

- Partnerships with parents and communities (tutored students, observed teachers, formally evaluated principals, involved with policy development, instruction and curriculum development open-door policy to parents, and several community partnerships with universities, other schools, and businesses).

Ilg and Massucci (2003) argued that students in smaller schools felt more connected with the school and were also more likely to be engaged in their studies. Brown, Anfara and Roney (2004) found that lower performing urban schools routinely lowered academic expectations in order to give students a sense of success and that there was a lack of confidence in the ability of students to succeed. She also found that low performing

urban schools had low levels of parental involvement, limited school resources, high

resistance to involvement of leadership, and limited instructional leadership.

Excellence in Dealing with Black Students

Pressley et al. (2004) found in their research that schools that successfully educate

African American students have many of the same traits of the schools studied in the

effective schools literature. For example, they found that "strong leadership,

accountability, academic focus, and orderliness" were all traits present in successful

predominantly Black schools. Comer et al. (1989) examined school development

programs and found a model that builds human capital "through its emphasis on staff

development training, which equips teachers and staff to deal with instructional and

socio-cultural issues with competence and flexibility" (p. 199). Comer and his colleagues

argued that social capital can be developed through the program's emphasis on "school

management philosophy in which administrators, teachers, and parents work together to

determine the climate, priorities, and objectives within their schools." (p. 199) Foster and

Peele (1999) also found similarities with the literature of effective schools when they

noticed that effective teachers of African American males are persistent and able to solve

complex problems when teaching Africans. And lastly, Jones-Watson (1991) found that

successful educational programs for Blacks made an effort to make a strong connection

between the curriculum and real-life situations and problems.

<u>**Social Context of Education**</u>

This section addresses aspects of the social contexts of education, the notion of

race, and the role of race in the educational process of Black at-risk students. Further,

this section discusses what Ladson-Billings (1995) popularized, a notion that is now

widely known as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Following this, school leadership theory

and successful leadership of alternative schools is discussed. Learning is not constant or

static for individuals or communities. There are several forces that impact the

educational experiences of students. Lee (2005) illustrated this fact in the models that

she presented regarding education and its social contexts. According to her, there are

several ways to understand learning, and all of these understandings interact with each

other: culturally inherited patterns of a group, social interactions within a group, or

individual efforts. Lee's (2005) premise is important for this study because essentially

her work suggests that the social and cultural capital are further explained by more

immediate environments:

> That is, what a culture or group inherits is changed by the participation in activity,
> the norms of an activity are constrained by the artifacts, tools, and ideas that
> inform the work, and individuals change groups and cultural ways of knowing
> while individuals themselves are changed (p. 70).

In other words, she is arguing that learning only happens in a social context, and that

social context is very interactive:

> Our levers for understanding and analyzing learning now cannot be simply
> situated on one plane: culturally inherited patterns of a group, social interactions
> within a group, or individual efforts. What is emerging is a dynamic and
> interactional model in which each of these planes contributes to learning and each
> is influenced by the other. (p. 70)

Nasir and Hand (2006) have also argued for an interactive approach when trying

to understand learning. They say, "While research exists on race, culture, and learning

has illuminated important links between social and cultural processes, racial identity, and

academic achievement, it has failed to conjoin these links into a multidimensional,

multilayered portrait of human activity" (p. 470). They have attempted to understand

learning and students experiences through a multilayered sociocultural approach. According to them, you cannot understand cultural learning solely through culture, society, community, schools, and other factors, but rather, you must take all of these factors together. They further explain that critical theories involving race, culture, and learning must be included in the process. They summarize what they mean:

> Racial and social processes play a critical role in shaping everyday cultural activity by affording particular practices, trajectories, artifacts, ideas and identities for individuals to negotiate, reject, and transform toward their goal of positive social and intellectual development (p. 468).

The students in this study have been shaped by an inexhaustible number of influences and experiences, and their cultural and racial context, or the legacy of these contexts, continues to impact them in ways that are crucial to understanding the research questioning this study.

Social Context and Race in Education

When considering the high correlation between African American and at-risk youth, a look at the social context of education as it pertains to race is important. To be sure, the racial context of education has played a significant role in the lives of African American at-risk children. Davis and Jordan (1994) argued that race can indeed affect the various social contexts that overlay our students. In their study, they found that academic achievement for black males in middle school was much worse in urban than in suburban environments. They found that an emphasis on discipline for black male adolescent students leads to difficulty in motivating students and, consequently, Black males perform poorly. Their findings suggest that when teachers have higher expectations, they demand more of effort and performance from students and, therefore,

believe that the students are capable of performing at a higher level. Their research suggests that the varying contexts in which the students live affect their decisions about life and school.

At times, schools can be the mitigating force in prodding children toward success. Schools are social institutions, and therefore interact with other social institutions that surround and engulf the lives of at-risk students. Of course, certain ingredients are needed at schools if they are going to be a positive learning context for students. It will allow students to track their social contexts more successfully. Rather than have students ignore all of their other social contexts when they come into their socioeducational context, researchers have argued that the educator must make the educational process more meaningful for culturally diverse students. The next section contains information on culturally relevant pedagogy, and by extension, culturally relevant leadership.

Cultural Relevant Schooling

It is widely accepted that schooling must be relevant for children; where the differences lie is exactly how educators should make it relevant. Ladson-Billings offers a culturally relevant theory of education. She offers insight on the current research that has found the need for culturally relevant pedagogy. She states: "Thus, the goal of education becomes how to 'fit' students constructed as 'other' by virtue of their race/ethnicity, language, or social class into hierarchical structure that is defined as a *meritocracy*" (p. 467). Ladson-Billings argues that this pedagogy will be one in which students can achieve academically while at the same time maintain their cultural 'integrity.' Finally, she argues that teachers must be able to "systematically include culture into the classroom as authorized or official knowledge." (p. 483)

One of the characteristics of effective school leadership is to have culturally relevant leadership. Irvine (1990) is also a proponent of cultural relevancy. When looking at the achievement gaps, she attributes two factors to the black underachievement: "Lack of cultural synchronization and negative expectations result in hidden, often unintended, conflict between teachers and their students" (p. xvii). In her view, this would explain the positive relationship between low teacher expectations and low student achievement in African American children.

Irvine (1990) explains the issue of cultural synchronization while using Asante's notions of Afrocentricity. She describes the cultural distinctiveness of African-American life, which is often misunderstood, ignored, discounted and denigrated in majority—read: Eurocentric—schools. She writes, "This lack of cultural sync (between African American and dominant cultures) becomes evident in instructional situations in which teachers misinterpret, denigrate, and dismiss black students' language, nonverbal cues, physical movements, learning styles, cognitive approaches, and worldview" (p. xvii). This missing cultural synchronization, she argues, leads to confrontational experiences between African American students and White teachers. What Ladson-Billings and Irvine are arguing is that students need to be culturally affirmed in schools. Sachs (2004) found that effective and ineffective urban teachers have many of the same attributes. She concludes: "Instead of focusing on attributes of effective urban teachers, it may be more productive for researchers to focus on how to affirm, support, and develop culturally relevant pedagogy to increase the effectiveness of all urban teachers" (p. 185). In explaining this, she suggested that it would be good to investigate how teachers' beliefs and perceptions are reflected in their practice. According to Ladson-Billings (2000),

having a culturally relevant view of education is important because African Americans have a unique historical experience that cannot be explained through a generalized understanding of oppression because of their unique cultural and social experiences.

Not much has been published about culturally relevant school leadership, but some perspective is realized by discussion more specifically related to African American school leadership, or more practically, Black school principals. Recently, there has been a vast amount of scholarship that looked at school leadership from the perspective of urban administrators (Alston, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001), Black administrators (Lomotey, 1989; Brown, 2005) and even administrators of children who are at risk (Raywid, 1983). However, because of the lack of research on culturally relevant leadership in general, this focus is on Black principalship for African American at-risk students.

Culturally Relevant Leadership: Leadership of Black Students

Traditional pedagogical paradigms have not usually served Black students well. Brown (2005) states: "The notion that school administration is neutral in application for educating children of all races and ethnicities fails to consider disparities in political power between racial groups" (p. 587). Actually, the main point illustrated in Brown's research is that school leadership requires diverse leadership perspectives that would suit all students. He further argues that educators must "broaden our theory of leadership to include the views of African American scholars and practitioners and improve leadership preparation programs" (p. 585). According to him, the contextual nature of leadership has been neglected from the dialogue but is so crucial to understanding leadership and Black students. This is apparent even in the training programs that prepare educational

leaders because as Brown (2005) points out, the programs frequently ignore race and racialized contexts. From this, his position is more clearly understood that organizational context may have a different meaning for each racial, cultural and ethnic group.

Lomotey (1989) has delivered one the most descriptive analysis to date of African American principals. He based his research on the framework that "the leadership of the principal affects the behavior of the teachers which subsequently affects the achievement of students. "Focus on the impact that the leadership of the principal has on aspects of the school environment." (pp. 145-146) In his research of African American principals, he found support for the notion that African American principals lead differently from white principals. He explored the relationship between African American principals and African American students. And in the following quote, he suggests how students may respond to this changed leadership: "The way a person relates to others and to circumstances that he or she encounters is shaped by the culture of that individual; African-American people respond differently to situations than do people from other cultures in America" (p. 3). In this context, culturally relevant leadership becomes a reality for black students and the similar cultural background that students have with the principal can be beneficial to their experience at school.

Unfortunately, not everything about black principals seems good. Questions about Black leaders' treatment of Black students presented itself after the researcher's initial contact with faculty and students at the alternative school site for this study. In the initial visits to the school, Black students and faculty at the alternative school site for this research complained that several Black principals at the traditional high schools reacted more punitively toward Black students than they did toward whites with similar

behavioral offenses; and furthermore, that these Black principals, even more so than White principals, more aggressively sought to punish Black students. In this context, this study considers harsher treatment of Black students by Black administrators, as a function Blacks principals' attempt to affirm their commitment to dominant white culture, and against what Ginwirght (2004) refers to as Hip Hop culture. As mentioned, there is not much scholarship on this issue, but there is fluency with what Mazrui (1999) termed, and Jackson (2005) expounded, as Black Orientalism.

Black Orientalism: Black-on-Black Repudiation

From much of the literature presented in this review, one can see how traditional schools and White school leaders may fail black students; but what also stands out is how some black administrators fare no better. In fact, at this juncture, it would be appropriate to borrow from what Ali Mazrui (1999) termed as *Black Orientalism* because it will allow a direct inquiry into the suspicion that some Black parents have of Black principals' tendency to, while validating themselves, culturally discriminate against Black students. Mazrui was himself responding to a Henry Louis Gates film documentary entitled "Wonders of the African World" when he coined the term. Mazuri was bothered by what he saw as Gates' exclusion and attack of aspects of East African culture and religion that were not suited to his taste. According to Jackson (2005) and Mazuri (1999), Gates negatively portrayed the cultural and religious aspects that did not fit into his own Afrocentric views. Jackson (2005) gave academic theological, academic and Black nationalistic examples of Black Orientalism—the tendency of some Black leaders to marginalize or even attack aspects of Blackness with which they are not agreeable. In this case, Jackson explains that Gates' documentary film portrays Islam

and Muslims as antithetical to true Blackness. Similarly with regard to education, it seems that a rejectionary posture is taken with young black students who show the markings of urban, hip hop-oriented students, but who attend school in racially-mixed, often suburban, environments with Black administrators. The purported actions of these African American administrators may be a blatant action of rejection of these at-risk urban children's cultural and social capital, even though they may be from the same cultural and social backgrounds.

Indeed, culturally relevant pedagogy and leadership as well as African American school leadership are both pressing issues. It seems that that Black principals may certainly offer an edge because they are more synchronized with the cultural proclivities of young black at-risk students. However, cultural and racial similarities are not merely enough for solid leadership. For one, even though some scholars describe mutual culture as a positive factor, others have led to a consideration that the youth hip hop culture is problematic for Black administrators. On the one hand, of relevance are the similarities that exist between Black students and Black teachers and administrators—a cultural synchronization as Levinson (2007) and Irvine (1990) have described, but on the other hand it is relevant to look at characteristics that all teachers develop that is suited for Black At-risk children—a culturally relevant pedagogy and leadership. In the latter of the two instances, the race of the administrator is less relevant than their responses to the cultural proclivities and inclinations of Black youth.

Conclusion

This chapter reviews the relevant literature issues related to at-risk children and the leadership provided to them. Concepts explored the students' ecological decadence

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(of neighborhood and family) and a system that has continuously failed a group of students that are most reliant on them. As for the latter, the system could have failed the students in any number of ways: failing to recognize their cultural and social capital, socializing them for the penal system, failing to make learning and leadership relevant to the students' realities, or tracking them into marginal educational and career trajectories. And as for the former, their ecological decadence is the loss of any positive neighborhood benefits or incentives.

The problem of deviance in at-risk students was viewed through the lenses of interactional delinquency. This theory illuminates just how difficult it is to lead at-risk students; their behavior and impressionability is highly variable. Since the influences in their lives are indeed boundless, the leadership offered must be flexible yet tightly-coupled, egalitarian yet culturally relevant, and not only charismatic but also bureaucratic with both visionary and instructional leadership.

The research reviewed for this study was certainly expansive, but there are clear gaps that have not been addressed extensively by current literature. Firstly, while Ladson-Billings, Irvine, Lomotey and other scholars elaborate on culturally relevant pedagogy, there appears to be much less data and research on culturally relevant leadership. This is one area that this research will exploit. Secondly, I know that traditional schools generally do not service at-risk students well. With this, it has been suggested that principals who are culturally synchronous with their students may have an edge in the leadership of their students. Why then—and this is interrogated this in this research—have many suggested that African American principals are harder on African American students than they are White students who commit similar offenses? And, that

they are harder on African American student, than are other administrators? Thirdly, and most importantly, there is a gap in the literature regarding alternative schools—which are characteristically 'dumping grounds'—that have been successful with at-risk marginalized students. The few studies that do exist do not provide a comprehensive view and provide minimal data.

Chapter III

Research Design and Methods

Methodological Presuppositions

Qualitative research is described through the eyes of the researcher. Qualitative researchers attempt to tell an objective story, but because it is based on their own realities and how they perceive the world, the research is necessarily subjective. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) stated in their understanding of 'qualitative research':

> Qualitative research is many things to many people. Its essence is twofold: a commitment to some version of the naturalistic, interpretive approach to its subject matter and an ongoing critique of the politics and methods of postpositivism" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 8).

What is most useful in their definition is the first sentence: "Qualitative research is many things to many people," though this sentence legitimizes and affirms the diversity and flexibility needed in qualitative research, it also has implications about the subjective nature of qualitative research. Later, the arguement that this subjectivity is one, though frequently discredited, nonetheless a reality of all research, and two, that there are some benefits to this subjectivity.

In many ways, the understanding of qualitative research is constantly redefined. For Denzin and Lincoln (2000), this development can be described in what they call 'The Seven Moments of Qualitative Research.' They show that early qualitative research, in what is known as the 'Traditional Period,' emphasized objectivity nestled in a "scientific positivist paradigm." But subsequent stages or 'moments' of qualitative research were characterized by a shift away from positivism and in many cases toward post-modernist, subjectivist, feminist and critical race theories; the more recent theories placed less value

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in terms like *reliability*, *validity*, *objectivity*, and *generalizability*. Indeed, they embraced the inherent subjectivity that ultimately all researchers have. Scientific positivism can only describe the metaphysical and salient phenomena when used as a qualitative research tool; but as a person affiliated with several underrepresented groups that have traditionally had their views quantitatively and qualitatively distorted—Black, Union Member, Muslim, Slave Descendant, Teacher, Critical Thinker, Urbanite—this researcher could endorse only a form of qualitative research that gives every subject(s) an opportunity to tell their own story in a way that is accurate and consistent with their own ontological positions.

For this study, there is a need to understand how a former urban educator and researcher of at-risk kids describes and explains the teaching and leadership of at-risk urban students and the people involved in their lives. Here, epistemological perspectives refer to the understanding of the relationship between the knower and the known. Early in the framing of epistemological perspectives of qualitative research, it was assumed that there was a truth, and that these truths about human behavior could be interpreted and understood by researchers. This differed from the hermeneutical perspective that viewed understanding of human behavior as something negotiated between the one telling the story and the one about whom the story is told. Implicit in this perspective is that if the understanding, even to the extent of including a common language and a common line-of-reasoning, is not one of sharing, then it will transversely be one of control.

Qualitative Research

The traditional relationship between theory and research has been challenged and modified by some researchers. This relationship was historically seen as a one-size-fits-

all, science based approach that placed research in the parameters of already established theories and norms of research. The problem has been that this method does not allow growth and development in the research process. In other words, the researcher will not be receptive to new occurrences and findings throughout the research process. And in this way, the researcher imperviously forces all of his data to fit into his previously existing notions. Burgess (1982) offers an alternative to this rigidity. He writes that a change in this traditional way of looking at the relationship between theory and research "challenges social scientists to shift away from set procedures and points towards integrating theory and method." (Burgess, p. 209)

The role of subjectivity is perhaps the most compelling issue that affects this integrative approach to understanding the relationship between theory and research. A suggestion is that one aspect that elevates the role of subjectivity is the role of reflexivity in research. That is, the researchers learn so much about themselves while doing research that often their own backgrounds and, even newer experiences, change their theoretical frameworks. This has personally happened to me on every research project on which I have worked. One of my research experiences during my first year in the doctoral program at Michigan State University involved a case-study which investigated the meaning, purpose and expectations of an Afrocentric curriculum. Before starting the research process, I had notions about Afrocentric education based on prior readings and experiences as an educator in an African-centered school. Because of the nonconforming nature and variety in the responses that I received in the first couple of interviews, I subsequently changed some of my interview questions and parts of my theory.

This intricate relationship between theory and research, as viewed through the lenses of subjectivity, forces the investigator to consider other issues such as race, gender, class, and other aspects of the researcher's background. When Burgess (1982) wrote, "theory is not merely used in terms of verification" (p. 210), he was referring to the active role that the research takes in shaping the theory throughout the entire research process. But in the research process, other socially constructed factors, such as race or gender, will undoubtedly affect the research and consequently the theoretical framework of the researcher. To take the example of race, Dunbar, Rodriguez and Parker (2000) argue that "race . . . mediate(s) both the meanings of questions that are asked and how those questions are answered" (p. 280). In this context, I can see how people with similar racial backgrounds will have a better rapport, and will therefore understand each other in ways that others could not. It is difficult to even suggest 'objectivity' in these research occasions.

Schwandt (2000) discusses differences between these two aforementioned epistemological perspectives and one other—social construction. Schwandt describes social construction as humans constructing their own understandings based on their knowledge, language, and social histories, among other things. This is not far from Ladson-Billings' (2000) statement that "Epistemology is linked intimately to world-view" (p. 258). In the former statement, Ladson-Billings is attempting to contextualize the nature and origins of epistemologies; but in the following statement, she shows the dangers of not doing so, and by extension not challenging preexistent perspectives: "Enlightenment notions of science (and later, law) did not work independent of

prevailing discourses of Enlightenment science allowed the dominant culture to define, distance, and objectify the other (p. 259).

Ultimately, each group and individual must decide what epistemological perspective is most appropriate for his or her research; this cannot be done using a standard scientific approach to qualitative research. Furthermore, Pallas (2001) discusses a framework of epistemology as it relates to our own field of study and set of perspectives:

> The danger in discussing epistemology as ahistorical is that novices may not understand how epistemological perspectives in a field (or in the study of a particular subject) have evolved over time, sometimes in relation to, or even in opposition to, one another (Pallas, 2001, p. 10).

This quote from Pallas positions the researcher such that they cannot merely accept the most prevalent epistemological perspectives; rather, the researcher must critically approach their research while considering the differences in context and origin of the epistemological frameworks; in this research, the epistemological perspective is viewed in this context. Though researchers' epistemological perspectives often continuously develop, there are also characteristics that incessantly remain. First, the accurate epistemological view is hermeneutical; it must be crafted by both the knower and the known. Similarly, the goal is for research reporting to be shaped completely by the known, but in reality that will not always be a possibility. And although there is truthfulness in the arguments supporting notions of social constructs, it does not change the research process per se because, practically speaking, it does not change the fact that one must still collect data and conduct research. Second, epistemology is not constant, except that it will constantly be influenced by changes in the researcher's ontological realities. Third, it is too late in the development of world history to now preclude race,

gender, religion, culture, and positional status from the discourse of epistemological perspectives.

Rationale for Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research will allow this study to explore the culture and cultural contexts in and around the school as it relates to educational leadership and at-risk students. Chilcott (1987) asserted that ethnographic research must be more than a reporting process; rather, he argues that "ethnographers must provide readers with a sense of cultural theory and problem orientation that dictated the focus of research." (p. 212) Ethnographies are studies of groups in their natural settings but allows for a flexible research processes that is responsive to the realistic events that occur in that natural field setting. (Creswell, 1994) There are theories that school leaders with urban or high percentage at-risk student populations should have charismatic leadership, while others argue for positivist highly-structured leadership. In any case, this study must have the flexibility to closely observe the cultural processes and systems at play. Ethnography should focus more on cultural process rather than cultural practice (Chilcott, 1987). This flexibility and in-depth cultural knowledge requires the research methodology that ethnographies lend. Spradley (1979) succinctly said: "Ethnography is the work of describing culture." (p. 3)

The school culture at Urban Alternative High School, the culture of the teachers juxtaposed to the culture of students, the fact the school leader frequently refers to culture are all relevant and point to the fact that an ethnographic study is the best way to study this school. Spradley (1979) argued that people act based on their perceptions and on the meanings that they have for things that they act on. And ethnographic study would allow

me to achieve a level of validity by getting very dense and rich descriptions during the study. An ethnographic study may be the only way to answer these specific research questions.

Operationalization of Theory and Terminology

Theories, terminology, and data can sometime have a spurious relationship in research. Reliability issues surface because researchers provide a theory and generalized concepts that they plan to study, but they sometimes do not illustrate to their readers how these concepts will be operationalized and realized in their research. The driving research question is as follows: what are characteristics of effective leadership in alternative schools for at-risk children? In this research, effective leadership is measured by: a.) the number of students who earn a high school diploma, b.) the number of students who enter post-secondary education or trade school, c.) the amount of parental involvement, and d.) the size in reduction of behavioral (and criminal) offenses with disruptive students.

The term *alternative school* also exists in our research question. Alternative schools have had number of meanings to different people over various time periods. Here, alternative schools are schools that are designed to address the educational needs of at-risk children that would have most likely failed or dropped of traditional schools.

This literature review already offers a comprehensive vivid description of at-*risk youth*—which is the third major term in this primary research question. For the sake of clarity and brevity, a summative statement about what is meant by at-risk students is appropriate. As an operational concept, at-risk student means a student who is so academically or behaviorally problematic that they are either in danger of school dropout

or expulsion, or are referred by an administrator, counselor, teacher or parent at a traditional school to attend Urban Alternative High School.

The term *urban* has never been clearly defined. One might question whether or not the school site in this would be regarded as urban, and if it serves urban youth? For this research, urban schools are schools that have students with characteristics of inner-city minority youth. Though the city in which the study takes place is affluent and generally has low crime, the school (Urban Alternative High School) and the neighborhoods that house this specific groups of student is not very distinguishable from Detroit, Pittsburgh, Flint, Saginaw, Cleveland, Benton Harbor, Gary, or other deindustrialized cities. Likewise, the social and education problems that plague these students' families in this study are very characteristic of any of the cities mentioned. All of the students are bussed to school, a number are living in homes that house more than a single family. Finally, the term *characteristic(s)*, means a deep in-depth description that involves cultural aspects, customs, behaviors, sayings, philosophies or beliefs, skills, patterns or habits, or even dispositions, personality and image.

Research Population

In this study, the research population will consist of students, parents/caregivers or other family members, teaching and support staff, the principal and community members.

Students

Urban Alternative High School served students in grades 8 through 12. According to the most recent data provided by Standard and Poor's *School Matters'* data, approximately 65% of the student population is African American and the remainder is primarily white,

with 10% of that being Hispanic or multi-racial. However, for the two years of this study, the Black population was between 80-90%. Roughly 60% of the students are economically disadvantaged and eligible for free or reduced lunch. The faculty at the school believes that the percentage of economically disadvantaged students is much higher than 60%. All of the students have had academic or behavioral problems in traditional public schools and were referred or recommended to Urban Alternative High School(UAHS). Roughly 10 current and former students will be interviewed for this study.

Family

Many of the parents are working-class and lack a college education. Many families maintain homes in one of the city's subsidized housing units. It is typical to find single-parent female-headed household families or extended families (usually aunts or grandmothers) that are caregivers for students at UAHS. Generally speaking, the parents were not very involved with their child's education prior to coming to this school. Members from at least 5 different families will be interviewed in this study.

Faculty

The teaching staff is relatively experienced with most teachers having more than 5 years teaching experiences. Most of the teaching staff is White. The principal is Black and was the founder and first administrator of this alternative public school. At the time of this study, he was in his 33rd year as the leader of the school and had taught many of the parents, and even some grandparents, of the current student population. The principal and roughly seven of the teachers and support staff will be interviewed for this study.

<u>Community Members</u>

The two community members that will be interviewed for this study have been active in the community and have had children as students in Urban Alternative High School or one of the other schools in the district. They, in addition to information received from the students can offer a context about how the school compares to the traditional schools in the district. They can also provide a context of how the students, the school, the principal and teachers, are viewed in the community.

Sources of Data

Field Notes

Field notes of domains of the school leader—all areas of the school, community organizations and meetings, school board and other district meetings, and students' homes—will be an essential part of the data collection procedure and will allow this investigator to describe and document observations at the school site. Glesne (1999) suggests that field notes should be both analytic and descriptive, but nonjudgmental. Babbie (1992) calls the field journal (notes) the basic tool of field research. Field notes should include both "empirical observations and your interpretations. You should record what you 'know' has happened and what you 'think' has happened." (Babbie, 1992, p. 296) But Babbie adds that the researcher should identify what type of note (observation vs. interpretation) they are taking.

After several researcher-observations of the school site, the conclusion is that short hand will be useful when writing descriptions of the setting. But as the data collection of this ethnography begins, notes will be both descriptive and analytical. Notes will either be re-written or typed after each entry. If exchanges become revealing

and all of the persons in the exchanges have consented to my participation, I may record the observation and later transcribe the exchange. But in most cases, recorded data will be taken only in interviews.

Participant Observation

In initial observations of Urban Alternative High School, many of the school's activities will be observed. The purpose of the visits was for the researcher to become familiar with the school and to allow the students and staff to become comfortable with the research's presence; in the first year of this ethnography, data was not collected. The researcher was invited to all types of activities that occurred in the school; this included classes, rap sessions, Saturday Morning Breakfasts, conferences between the principal and parents, home visits, and staff meeting. The *participant-as-observer* is one who would "participate fully with the group under study, but you would make it clear that you were also undertaking research." (Babbie, 289) The researcher found that in initial observations, all subjects felt *more* comfortable when researcher participation occurred. Participant observations will occur for approximately 200 hours. This extended length of time will lead to a more natural setting and to less researcher-interference. Regarding this, Glesne (1999) says:

> The participant observer's role entails a way of being present in everyday settings that enhances your awareness and curiosity about the interactions taking place around you. You become immersed in the setting, its people, and the research questions. One way to test if you are being there appropriately is whether or not you are seeing things you have never noticed before. (p. 60)

This source of data will likely be most pervasive, will probably be the first that I will engage, and will likely yield the most data. The researcher will become immersed in and become a normal part of the school setting. The researcher's role as a participant

observer will play perhaps the most crucial role for this ethnography, and a lesser amount of researcher interference will surface than any other data collection method; put simply, the participants and subjects will begin to feel more comfortable with the researcher and will therefore more easily and readily share their story.

Interviews & Researcher Role and Relationship

The many advantages of doing face-to-face interviews shaped the design of this study. The experiences interviewing urban students concluded that focus group interviewing facilitated the interviews better; students seemed to talk more freely and comfortable in groups. Glesne (1999) explained the advantages of group interviewing similarly: "(respondents are) emboldened to talk and some topics are better discussed by a small group of people" (p. 68). Some of the other advantages that gained through interviewing will be flexibility in questions and responses during the interviewing process. This will lead to new understandings, and rapport and trust will be established between the interviewer and interviewee, which will draw more truthful detailed responses. The disadvantage of group interviewing is that it is possible that respondents may be influenced by their classmate (or group peer); this may be mitigated by asking relevant follow-up questions to individuals outside of a group interview setting.

In interviews conducted in prior studies involving at-risk students, the interview responses were in part so descriptive because of the flexibility in the questions and the entire process. Glesne stated "The questions you bring to your interview are not set within a binding contract; they are your best effort before you have had a chance to use them with a number of respondents" (p. 68). In past interviewing experiences, the interviewer asked for clarity or simply conversed with students about topics not directly

related to the topic. New understandings were frequently unearthed during these flexible periods.

This flexibility is more easily attained during the interview process because of some of the interviewer attributes, most notably the trust and rapport are established with the students. Glesne commented "rapport is tantamount to trust, and trust is the foundation for facilitating full and detailed answers to your questions" (p. 83). One of the ways that this happened through here was through language and disposition. Here are a few examples of language usage from past interviews with at-risk students that helped establish trust and rapport:

- *"what's up wit ya partner?"*
- *"ya'lls parents be hoopin' too?"*
- *"So if you were to say to 'er: "dang, you don't care about cho mom?"*

But the trust and rapport is not only bolstered by a similar vernacular, rather the very disposition of the researcher can help strengthen the relationship. Concerning this, Dunbar, Rodriguez and Parker (2000) offer this assessment about how some have neglected the importance of language and compatibility in the interview process: "They (other researchers referenced in their work) assert that white researchers often neglect diverse discourse styles in their interview protocols and fail to deal with the plethora of power struggles that can take place between the researchers and" subjects" of color" (p. 283). I plan to interview roughly 10 students, 5-7 teachers and support staff, 2 community members, and the principal. Each interview will be approximately 1 hour. Interviews will be taped, transcribed and coded in search for emerging themes. Though the interviews will initially be in question and answer format, they will be presented in narrative form in later chapters. The interview questions can be seen in Appendix I.

Official and School Documentation

Much of the documentation used to describe the context will be official

documentation that has been published by news articles or other publications; the local

newspaper, national magazine articles, the schools' own historical accounts, and

documentation, and other official district documentation will all be used. Bodgan and

Biklen (1982) found that schools and districts produce a significant amount of

documentation that may be useful to research. On several occasions, Urban Alternative

High School (UAHS) received national and local recognition for its accomplishments.

The principal has been featured in publications and toured with one of the former

presidential candidates during his campaign. These writings will be invaluable for the

description and contextualization of the school. Lastly, data produced by the county ISD

(intermediate school district) is used; the county administers a High School Graduate

'Exit Survey' and a 'Follow-up Survey' for all graduates at the time of graduation, after

one year, and after five years for all graduates. The most recent results are from 2005

and contain data from the previous 5-7 years.

Member checking

One way to safeguard the validity and trustworthiness of data is by member

checking. In fact, Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit that member checking is "the most

crucial technique for establishing credibility" (as quoted in Creswell and Miller, 2000, p.

127). Member checking is a process by which the interviewer confirms both data and

interpretations with the subjects in order to check the consistency and accuracy of the

data with the source of data. In this study, member checking is used at two junctures

throughout the data collection; the first juncture is a consistent member check throughout

the interviews and conversations. If a participant says something that could be interpreted in multiple ways or something in a slang lexicon, they will immediately be asked if they meant what was actually recorded. This could happen by reading back what was written by the researcher and then asking: "Is this what you meant to say?" The second juncture, the researcher would ask the participant on the day following the conversation or interview and check for proper understanding. A similar question would be posed to participants, such as "Yesterday, did you mean . . . ?" But the difference is that in the latter of these two instances, the researcher would have had a chance to form interpretations of the recorded data. Respondents can be asked about interpretations of what they said or did, as opposed to raw data alone. Lastly, Dr. Betsann Smith suggested that a significant amount of time should be spent following and observing the principal, and to then discuss his behavior with him. This tactic will add clarity to my findings, and will strengthen the results from member checking. In fact, Shulman (1994) suggested that realities and behaviors that a subject may not want to have public can be discovered through this process.

Prolonged engagement in the field with thick and rich description

Visits to Urban Alternative High School (UAHS) were on-going for the first year of this research. As time passed, visits increased and observations intensified. During the last 6months of the data collection process, the researcher visited the school several times a week for the entire school day. The prolonged presence in the field over the course of two school years will increase the trust and rapport that the researcher has with participants (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Glesne, 1999; Babbie, 1992). The prolonged fieldwork allows more rich and dense descriptions of the school culture and structure, as

well as the cultures and language in the school. Both the prolonged engagement and the rich descriptions will increase the credibility of the research (Creswell and Miller, 2000). The rich descriptions will allow the readers to visualize and experience the culture of a school without actually being there. The prolonged engagement will allow a check of data for consistency over long periods of time, and this will lead to a reexamination of interpretations that did not match those found throughout the duration of the project.

In the setting of this research, both prolonged engagement and thick, rich descriptions are important to the integrity of the research. There can be a mistrust of authority figures and any associated with the authoritative structure. (Giroux, 1981; Polite, 1992) This resistance can be lowered, and trust and rapport can be built among African American students when Black English is used authentically, when researchers take a nonjudgmental tone when speaking, and with increased visibility—something that comes with prolonged presence at the research site. The thick, rich description is useful in this urban and largely African American environment because it will allow the researcher to get past the apparent stereotypes that typically come with a school holding these characteristics.

Researcher reflexivity

Glesne (1999) argued that what you know about yourself will undoubtedly influence what you know about your research. For this reason, she argues researchers must be reflexive about their selves—including their mood, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, prejudices, or any other phenomenon that may affect their lenses. Non-biased research is not possible in either qualitative or quantitative research, though it may sometimes be an implied or stated objective. Contrarily, ethnographic research does not even suggest that

the research should be nonbiased by the researcher's own position. Creswell and Miller (2000) suggested that it is "important for researchers to describe their beliefs and biases early in the research process to allow readers to understand their positions, and then to bracket or suspend those researcher biases as the study proceeds. (p.127)

In an attempt to develop and reach reflexivity in this research, the plan is to disclose everything that that could affect or interpret my research. I am African American and so are most of the students in this study. I was formerly a teacher in an urban district, and the students in this study are urban kids. My experience is that most of the students in alternative educational environments did not perform well academically. My own assumptions about how urban, alternative and African American students learn have been shaped by my own upbringing and career experiences as an urban educator. In my own experiences and observations, educational institutions provided neither an adequate education nor a conducive learning environment for urban, at-risk students regardless of the educational environment (i.e., alternative or traditional). The reasons for their failure are variable and are not static as some researchers would suggest; my senses tell me that it could be a problem with the teachers (i.e., low expectations, lack of cultural relevance, not able to relate to urban youth, etc.), or a problem with students (lacking school readiness or knowledge or appropriate behavior for their level, low motivation, distracted by youth or other life influences such as cultural familial influences). The reflexive exercise of declaring my own biases takes time and thought, and often my own biases go unnoticed until they are evoked by incidents or statements in a research setting. What this means for this research is that as the research process goes

on, I will continue to reflect on my own positions and I will add them throughout the analysis of my data and into my concluding remarks.

Ethical considerations

The Human Subject Review Board at Michigan State University has high standards for maintaining an ethical study. Abiding by all of the ethical standards that are imposed by this board includes offering informed consent, withdrawal without penalty, and informing respondents that with their approval they may be taped. This ethical process requires parental consent for the involvement of children under the age of 18. The names of all persons and the school in the study will be changed to protect the identity of all involved.

One ethical concern is the balance between establishing a positive rapport with students and managing a friendship that may develop between the students and the investigator. My experience is that urban, African American students can become attached very quickly to their teachers or other school personnel because of voids that they may have in their home environment. However, if too wide of a social distance is maintained between the researcher and the students, rapport and openness from the students may not develop. Therefore, the goal is to seek closeness among students but at the same time, to remind them that this is a project in which the researcher will learn from them, and that at the project's end, the investigator will leave the school.

Approaches to Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is diverse and continues to happen throughout the duration of the project. Denzin (1971) suggested that analysis takes place after data collection in qualitative research processes, and Spradley (1979) acknowledges that ethnographic research differs from most other qualitative research in that it "requires constant feedback from one stage to another" (p. 93). A constant look is kept to interpret cultural occurrences and to describe the 'cultural meanings' that exist in the school and among the participants. Spradley also notes that the collection of data, the analysis of data, the constant reforming of ethnographic hypotheses, and the writing of the ethnography must all simultaneously happen.

Ethnographers must employ a system data collection and analysis that allow them to successfully organize their research. One tactic used is to distinguish observation notes from analytical notes, while at the same time connecting analytical notes with specific observations. Glesne (1999) refers to the process as 'analytic files' and says that it will allow the researcher to "keep track of useful information and thoughts . . . create relevant specific files on the social processes under investigation." (p.131) In addition to the use of analytic files in data analysis, memo writing, coding schemes, and a system of frequent reporting that summarizes progress in the research process will be used.

Detail and the language of the respondents will allow for a more cogent analysis of the data. Spradley (1979) noted the strong importance that language has to culture, and in describing culture. Providing in-depth details will enable an accurate analysis of the data, and will allow the readers to more clearly follow the analysis. Attention given to language in this analysis will be particularly important to this research because many

of the cultural expressions that the students and staff use are directly related to the cultural meanings that they assign to beliefs, understandings and actions. For example, Smitherman's (1997) analysis of what she calls 'African American Language' or 'Black English' has a strong relationship what can be observed in the Hip-Hop culture ubiquitous amongst students at UAHS. In other words, one cannot understand aspects of a school culture that is dominated by African Americans without understanding Black English.

In initial observations of the UAHS, many of the cultural indicators were noted that suggest the strong presence of Hip-Hop culture amongst the largely African American student body. To describe the thick rich description that this study needs, and to understand the cultural meanings and interpret actions of the participants, an appropriate position to the use of language in the analysis of school data is given. The African American language and culture are sometimes so interwoven that it is difficult to tell them apart.

Validity

Creswell (1994) speaks of the issue of internal validity (the accuracy of information and whether it matches reality) and external validity (the limited generalizability of findings) in qualitative research. With regard to external validity, Creswell points out that the true intent of qualitative research is not to generalize findings, but rather to "form a unique interpretation of events" (p. 159). The school leader and researcher have much in common; both are African American males, as are many of the students. A plethora of other similarities are shared with the school's principal, teachers, and other staff. The researcher recognizes that his unique

interpretation of events will be different from that of another person who may study the same set of events. Even if one is an African American, male, an urban educator, or one who has taught large numbers of at-risk students, one would likely be using a different set of lenses to observe the context. Babbie (1992) acknowledges that generalizability is a problem in field research because of three factors. The first issue is the personal nature and influence of the researcher. The second inhibition to generalizing is related to the in-depth comprehensive view that researchers will get. In this case, because the view is comprehensive and in-depth, it necessarily makes the view less understood by others. Babbie's third point is that generalizability is difficult to attain "within the specific subject matter being observed." (p.308) In other words, the research here primarily involves at-risk, African American students who have problems in traditional Midwestern schools and who will likely be different from students with the same demographics in a Southeastern school.

Internal validity will be realized through triangulation and cross-referencing several data sources. Specifically, examination of participant observations notes and other field notes, school and media documentation, and interviews will be used to ensure that observations are consistent, and "match reality." This convergence of data sources will ensure accuracy in description and analysis of events. Another strategy that is used to ensure the internal validity of this data is by asking members themselves what they meant by their actions and words. This process, known as member checking, will allow the sharing of notes, interviews, transcripts and even interpretation and analysis with subjects in an attempt to verify data. These methods of validity, along with researcher reflexivity, prolonged engagement in the field and thick rich description, are all

appropriate for this ethnographic research. Creswell and Miller (2000) suggested that researchers can ensure validity, and that specific validity procedures are governed by two issues: "The lens researchers choose to validate their studies and researchers' paradigm assumptions" (p. 124). The lens used by the researcher is a "viewpoint for establishing validity in a study" (p. 125). This lens may be, for example, a constant returning to the data to see if the results make sense, or it could be checking accuracy of data with the interviewees. In the case of paradigm assumptions, Creswell and Miller (2000) argue that the "researchers' paradigm assumptions or worldviews also shape their selection of procedures" (p. 125). Based on the work of Creswell and Miller (2000), this study relies on paradigm assumptions and lenses that they mentioned: postpositivist and constructivist. They suggest that, in this case, the following validity procedures would be most useful and appropriate: triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement in the field, thick and rich description, and disconfirming evidence.

Reliability

LeCompte and Goetz (1982) point out that while validity is concerned with the accuracy of scientific findings, reliability is primarily concerned with the "replicability of scientific findings" (p. 32). And as many ethnographers 'ignore' criticisms of unreliable studies, LeCompte and Goetz (1982) argue that doing so will lessen the credibility of the study. They, in turn, argue that data is not a mere dichotomous choice of being either subjective or objective, or being either generalizable or unique. Rather, as they point out, "research studies include the collection of both objective and subjective data . . . replicability often viewed as merely a function of standardization of instruments and procedures, is a complex issue that must be addressed by various strategies" (p. 54). For

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this ethnography, reliability will be situated in the unique and specific. Inasmuch as other alternative schools are similar to the one studied here, the findings will be replicable. In other words, the extent to which other alternative schools have conditions and characteristics that are similar to the one in this ethnographic study will largely mediate the replicability of this scientific study. This is reverberated by Creswell (1994) statement that "the uniqueness of a study within a specific context mitigates against replicating it exactly in another context" (159).

Rationale, Instruments and Procedure

Cannell and Kahn (1953) elucidate one of limitations in the interview process. They wrote "one of the limitations of the interview is the involvement of the individual in the data he is reporting and the consequent likelihood of bias." (p. 330) Some of the possible bias in this interview was that the interviewer was, at the time of the interview, an urban educator and likely-held preexisting notions about students who perform well. Another possible bias may be related to gender; the interviewer was male and many respondents female. This may be similar to generational bias since the interview is several generations removed from the primary respondent (principal of UAHS). Again, Cannell and Kahn (1953) offer advice about how the effect of any bias may be minimized: "first, he must be provided with a questionnaire which is adequate to the research objectives. Secondly, he must ask the questions and record the responses in a standard way" (p. 332). This researcher embraced preexistent biases and attempt to represent subjects' perceptions in the context in which they were shared.

A final a final aim was to protect the feelings of our subjects; therefore, the researcher avoided asking questions about family or circumstances directly and

acknowledged that our respondents are people with feelings, and not merely research subjects. This approach to the interviewing process did not seem to cause any stress, embarrassment or anger and it appeared that the students were comfortable throughout the process. By the interview's end, the respondents did voluntarily share information about their views, experiences, and background. Lastly, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed for closer examination.

Presentation of Data

The data will be presented in narrative form. Narrative form will allow the arrangement of data according to emerging themes found in the responses of participants. This format also gives the flexibility to place the data in a form that is consistent with other sections of this writing. Furthermore, narrative writings are more accustomed to what readers expect. In exceptional cases, when themes seem not to emerge or when a conversion to a narrative format would detract from the overall meaning, the interviews are left in their original question answer/ note-taking format.

Chapter IV. Presentation and Analysis of Data:

<u>Background and School Climate</u>

Introduction

This chapter describes the student, the background and context of the UAHS and the community it serves. Also, this chapter describes the school culture that shaped and heavily informed the educational experiences and aspirations of students in this study. Both this chapter, and chapter V include data from interviews with seven teachers, five current students, five former students, four parents, two school staff members, other administrators in the district, and one community advocate—president of the district's African American parent support group. These interviews shed light on the some of the relationships that exist between Joe (principal at Urban Alternative High School and unit of analysis for this study) and the community. After discussing the history, context, and culture of the school, a description of how students at UAHS are validated and valued, as viewed through key concepts of cultural and social capital and culturally relevant leadership (cultural synchronization). Finally, the chapter describes how the behaviors, attitudes and aspirations, successes and failures, and achievement of students have changed after being exposed to the leadership and school culture at UAHS.

Despite the exposure that many at-risk African American students have to the drug and sex culture, deviant, disruptive and ghettoized behaviors, the school failure that these students often face in traditional schools was successfully overcome because of effective leadership at UAHS. The findings of this research suggest that the expressions of social and cultural capital in this student population were often validated, but at least tolerated, by the school leader and staff. The school leader, for example, designed a

school environment and schedule that included occasions during which parents could discuss the education of their children. In this instance, the fact that the social capital of these African American and poor families was typically marginalized, or perhaps even altogether ignored, was of minimal consequence when considering the newfound UAHS-fostered social relationships. Similarly, described are UAHS invited speakers, how students are rewarded (or even how they are *not* punished), the acceptance of their language, behaviors, and pre-existent student identities as evidence that the students' cultural capital was accepted at UAHS. Likewise, the school culture—which was most heavily influenced by the school leader—accommodated the cultural and ecologically-informed behaviors and proclivities of the student population. I demonstrate this with descriptions of a UAHS family-type atmosphere of comfort and security, as well of the school leader who demands that teachers keep students in their classes and deal with unwanted student behaviors. This culturally relevant leadership—which is school leadership that is sensitive to the needs of the cultures present in their student populations—led all of the students featured in this study to refer to their experiences at UAHS as that of being "part of a family," and the students reported that their success and school completion were a direct result of the school leader—Joe—and their experiences at UAHS.

The successes of the students at the school were remarkable. Black students who disproportionately dropout of traditional schools stay in school at UAHS; in fact, the retention rate for the 2005-2006 school year was 98%; this was approximately the same rate for the district as a whole. This virtually eliminates the achievement gaps of school completion and dropout that plague the district's traditional schools. It should be noted

that students return to one of the district's high schools for actual graduation, even if they complete all of their coursework at UAHS, and so in absence of a graduation rate, the retention rate is the most reliable rate for students returning to finish school. The attendance rate was 97.6% and it is worth mentioning that this rate describes current attendance rates for the same students many of whom said they had stopped attending classes and had already begun dropping out. Between 2006 and 2008, the student body was between 80% and 90% African American and 100% at-risk, yet the students had improved social behavior, finished school, and made plans for post-graduate education. The county in which the school sits has a one-year and five-year follow-up study of high school seniors that graduated (Title: High School Graduates Follow-up Surveys); the study is conducted and presented by the county ISD (Intermediate School District). Data showed that in 1998 and 1999 that seniors that attended UAHS during their last year (but graduated from one of the district's local high schools) had a 100% college attendance rate at the community college or 4-year university level (of the 60% of students who responded to the survey). This was for seniors who had finished 5 years prior to 1998-1999. The one-year survey taken in 2003 (of seniors who attended UAHS and graduated in 2002) showed a trend away from community colleges and toward four-year universities with at least 50% of the UAHS students attending a 4-year institution (and 50% attending community college). All together, the post-graduate college attendance rate for UAHS students were comparable to, or higher than, the largely all-white high income county (with less of a response rate to the survey), and were moderately higher than Blacks in the district's traditional schools and than Blacks in large urban areas. Lastly, the disproportionate suspensions of Black students in traditional schools (both in

the county and school district, which is between 30-40%) does not exist at UAHS (which has a suspension rate of typically 15% or less).

History of UAHS and district climate

In the current school climates with all its extensive mandates and requirements, it is highly unlikely for a person to remain the principal of any school for over a few years especially in schools that have high urban or at-risk populations. Joe Smith has served as principal of UAHS for the past 33 years. In fact, he was recruited from a Catholic high school in the Midwest, where he served as the first African American principal of any Catholic high school in the Nation, and was very successful in leading African American students to a high level of academic achievement. After racial and nontraditional behavioral problems erupted with some of the district's Black and White students, the district opened UAHS. The original name of the school—Alternative School for Disorderly and Troublesome Youth—is suggestive of its original purpose and image that the community held of the school. In short, the entire student population was composed of Black students who experienced tremendous school failure in the district's traditional schools. According to district data, the school district has had an achievement and suspension gap for as long as the district has kept data. The African American population in the city has always felt marginalized, and has a history of showing civil disobedience and public anger. Joe harnessed this energy in the Black community to garner support for causes as it pertains to Black students in the district.

Many of the problems that the school has experienced with its Black population still exist. According to NCES (2000 census data) the Black student population in the district is 12.3% and White students make up 65.8% of the student population. However

at UAHS, during both years of this study, Black students made up between 80% and 90% of the total student body. This fact, along with other district data, and parents' and students' statements, suggest that there is a lack of academic and social success of African American students in the traditional schools and district. It is perhaps here that one can most clearly see the strong linkage—as discussed in the literature review contained in chapter II—between African Americans and at-risk students. From the student population at UAHS alone, it seems as though the overwhelming majority of at-risk students are also Black. The local newspaper has chronicled the history of educational racial disparities in the district. Quite frequently, articles in the local newspaper describe some of the community forums, district data, student and parent-led protests, board meetings, and administrative district plans; what comes through very clearly is the general acknowledgement of and responses to the racial disparities that exist amongst the district's students. The newspaper articles show that UAHS is still a relevant school, and that the primary reasons for establishing UAHS 34 years ago still plague the district. **Table 1** summarizes articles from the last five years from one of the local newspapers about the district's racial disparities in education.

Table 1. Summary of Relevant Newspaper Articles

Year of Article	Title	Summary
2008	Plan advises action on gap – Students target racial disparities	• A school-based student group works with school staff to fight disparities in achievement, graduation and suspension gaps
2007	School success key, activist says— Black students without it are headed for 'serfdom,' he says	•Conference held on how schools may overcome an achievement gap that has been around in the area for decades

Table 1. Summary of Relevant Newspaper Articles (continued)

Year of Article	Title	Summary
2007	Schools 'racial gap' shrinks—Reading, math scores improve, but not grad rate	• Black students are doing better on standardized test scores, but the racial gap of graduation rate between Black and White students grew by 5% between 04-05 and 05-06.
2006	Students must believe they belong; suspension hurts efforts	•Several local (and national) advocacy groups say that the increased suspensions of Black children, and the suspension gaps (White and Black students), make them feel unwelcome; And this leads to dropout.
2006	Old problems, new strategies—Clear expectations, no nonsense	•Highlights several strategies that principals are trying in order to address the suspension and achievement gap. •Principals attempt to build stronger relationships with students •At one of the district's middle schools: 30% of Blacks students suspended at least once while 9% of White students were. (Student body was 34% Black and 33% White)
2006	Teens talk about attitude—African American youths challenged to break the status quo	•Local teens responded to/ commented on the suspension and achievement gaps in the local schools. •Local NAACP leader hosted the 'think-tank discussion and forum. •54% of the kids in the local juvenile detention are Black. •Average GPA for Black students is 1.6
2006	Black parents see obstacles—Closing achievement gap requires changing school system, they say	•Black parent support group gathered at local high school and express outrage and despair about progress of Black students. •Black parents respond to the achievement and suspension gaps, and describe their personal stories of their children's academic and social failure in the local school system •Superintendent attends, responds that they are struggling to change the trend

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Table 1. Summary of Relevant Newspaper Articles (continued)

Year of Article	Title	Summary
2006	A school disparity that has defied solution	▪According to district data and community testimony, the racial disparity in suspension rates stretches back more than 30 years. This is true despite a Black deputy superintendent, (and former Black superintendents) more than 40% black school board, district administrators and principals ▪ 22% of the district's Black middle school students, and 13% of high school students were barred from school for at least 1 day during the 2005-2006 school year. For white students, only 3 and 4%, respectively. ▪The district has not been able to adequately address the problem. ▪The suspension gap is widening ▪ Why racial: Black middle school students received 258 out of school suspensions for "disruptive conditions", while only 110 White middle school students received it for the same infraction during 04-05 school year.
2005	Complex reasons behind transfers—(the superintendent) had issues with 2 principals	▪One of the district's black principals was removed by the superintendent because—according to both district data and parental complaints—minority students were failing and suspended disproportionately under his leadership
2005	Achievement gap discussed—(the city) school officials tell board what's being done about it	▪Each principal is being individually scrutinized about how they will eliminate the achievement and suspension gaps by the school board

Table 1. Summary of Relevant Newspaper Articles (continued)

Year of Article	Title	Summary
2005	Board crafts gap statement—School trustees respond to black-white disparity	•Article reports that the local community responds skeptically to the announcement that the school board and trustees have a plan to close the achievement gaps. <u>Trustees agreed to focus on</u>: •Personalized relationships •Equitable practices •Aligned, standardized curriculum •Minimal suspensions and expulsions •Continuation of successful programs and initiatives.
2005	Puzzled by the gap—(the city) school officials aren't sure why their push to narrow the achievement gap between black and white students hasn't worked	•The gap persists, growing in more than half of the categories the district measured in the 04-05 school year. (19 out of 31) •Measures: test scores, failure rates, graduation rates, suspension rates and participation in both remedial and advanced classes •The district has been promising to close the gap in recent years and made it a top priority •All of the reforms have minimally worked, or failed altogether •Example: in 04-05, 58% of all Black students had a GPA lower than 2.0, but only 15% of whites (this is a gap increase from the previous year).
2005	Success barriers targeted—(the city) student groups to seek answers to achievement gap	The city's Youth Senate and youth Empowerment Project talk about the sustained suspension and achievement gap. And about ways to address the gap, include others in the discussion, and bring it to the forefront of issues discussed in the school
2005	Subject: Why is there an achievement gap?	•District hosted a mandatory staff development, including all teaching and support staff (over 2,000 attended) •School employees are told that race must be discussed, and that they must change their tactics to address the gaps

Table 1. Summary of Relevant Newspaper Articles (continued)

Year of Article	Title	Summary
2004	To cut graduation gap, cash and action needed- Schools can't afford to fail minority students	▪53.2 % graduation rate for the Black students in the district, whereas the overall graduation rate was 79.5%. ▪Federal and state initiatives require the district to close this gap
2003	(The city) sets goals for school achievement	▪District administrators unveil a plan that will reduce the existing gaps between whites and black in at least 5 areas: ▪credits earned toward graduation ▪absenteeism ▪out-of-school suspensions ▪graduation rates ▪drop-out rates

Circumstances that led to opening of the school

The circumstances that led to the opening of this school are enduring, and continue to plague the city and its schools until today. At the time that UAHS started in 1974, the district had trouble teaching and normalizing Black students into a traditional school culture. Many were seen as confrontational with staff, as having poor study habits, and as provocateurs of racial strife between Black and White students; this was similar to what gripped the entire country at that time. The district had until then tolerated several racial fights between white and black students, but when a couple of White students were stabbed by Black student perpetrators, the district needed to act. This led to the creation of a separate school for troubled—and at the time, completely African American—students.

As described above in the newspaper articles, many of the achievement, suspension, and discipline gaps between Black and White students still exist in the

district. The district has in recent years hired a sizable number of Black administrators. Though the hirings seems to have been a deliberate response to the district's inability to educate or reach Black students, it has not led to any tangible results. If the hirings were meant to appease the Black community, it also has not worked. Many of the Black students, parents, and community members think that many of the Black administrators in the district are no help either, and in fact, that Joe is vastly different from the other Black administrators in the district. What is clear is that the students at UAHS have socially and academically failed in the traditional schools, even when Black principals were present. Joe was hired to address the problems of this socially and academically failing student population.

Design and location of school

The building was designed specifically to accommodate Joe's vision of a school-community atmosphere. Initially, the school location was held in a group of older portable double-wide trailers. But in 1994, the newer structure was built. The building of a newer structure was actually a cause that Joe successfully encouraged the Black community to rally around. "I'm an organizer; I organize the families to get it all done" Joe says of himself. As described in detail later, one of the practices that facilitated Joe's credibility and entry into the community—and the trust that they exhibited toward him—was a result of their view of him as community leader, organizer, activist and opponent of injustice. Undoubtedly, Joe and the Black community saw the original meager school and insufficient supplies as a form of discrimination and racism that was enacted on the Black UAHS students, for they did not have the same resources as the predominantly White traditional schools in the city. After many protests in the city council and school-

board meetings, Joe and the parents won this battle and got their new facility and newer resources. The data here suggests that protests and confrontational events like this are frequently welcomed by Joe, and lead to his having a tremendous amount of respect and credibility in the communities that he serves.

Since it was evident that district administrators could not handle African American at-risk student populations, and that an academic achievement gap had always existed at every period in the district's 150-year history, the district officials gave free reign to Joe in how he chose to run and eventually build the school. For example, Joe had a lot to do with how the school was actually shaped. Joe mentioned that he told the builders that he wanted a spot in the middle of the school from which he could peer down each of the three hallways that the school has. The office was constructed in that exact spot. And just to the left of the office is Joe's favorite spot in the school because he can see down all three hallways, and greet anyone who comes into the front door.

The location of the school is also Joe's choosing. Joe says that he chose the location "to be away from it all (i.e., the people and school officials who are in the city)." The location of the school, as acknowledged by participants in this study, has played a critical role in ensuring that students end up at school and stay for the duration of the school day. Parents and caregivers have further to go in dropping the kids off when they miss the morning school bus; this has meant that usually parents are angrier at their child for missing the bus, and, according to Joe and the teachers, this has led to a reduction in the truancy rate. The other high schools in the city are all on the local bus line and are also close enough to neighborhoods, so students could walk back and forth between school and their home, or at least a friend's house. But UAHS is actually in the southern

area of a neighboring city. It is at least 15 miles from any of the housing projects or neighborhoods in which many of the students live. And it is at least 4 miles from the closest city bus stop. The surrounding neighborhood is a mix between strips of land that could be either compared as rural or newly-developed, middle-upper class subdivisions. According to updated census data, the median income in the of the area surrounding the school is approximately $70,000—a number more than three times the poverty rate in which most UAHS parents fall (according to the Federal Register, Vol. 72, No. 15, Jan. 24, 2007, pp 3147-3148). With the structure and location of the school, this means that it is difficult to skip class inside or around the school.

As mentioned above, the floor plan of the school is very open and all parts are readily visible from the office and front of the school. Students, staff and parents who have been interviewed all make note of the difficulty that students have when trying to skip. There are no empty classrooms, every classroom is locked, occupied, or open for all (and therefore not a likely hiding place). If a teacher's room becomes a place of refuge for likely skipping students, Joe will immediately put an end to it—usually by confronting both teachers (i.e., the one both sending and receiving the student). Also, because of the shape of the school, it is unlikely that a teacher would *not* have seen their student within the first hour of school even if, for example, that student might not be scheduled for that teacher's class until 6th hour. Another relevant feature of the school is that it is possible to look into every room when walking by; this is true because part of every classroom door, and portions of the walls between the hallway and classrooms, are made of glass. Because of that, the teaching staff usually keeps their classroom doors open anyway. Lastly, another difference between the traditional school and UAHS is that

at the traditional schools, students can leave campus for lunch. For the current UAHS students who participated in this study, this had been a major problem at their traditional school because students fail to return to campus after lunch. In most cases, student and parent participants interviewed for this study said that school officials at the traditional schools did not notice students' truancy until weeks had already passed. UAHS was starkly different from the students' prior school experiences because, once at school, it is very difficult to skip classes; if a student does not make it to school, a person-to-person phone call is placed—and a trip to the students home if needed—in order to get the student into the school.

School ambiance

When you enter the school, it is remarkably clean, orderly, and comfortable for students, particularly when compared to other urban and alternative schools that serve at-risk students. When asked in the 2003 local ISD 'High School Exit Survey' how frequently they experienced a school environment safe from physical violence, UAHS students reported feeling safe 67% of the time whereas traditional school students across the county only reported feeling safe 44% of the time. The safety students feel seems to be related to the ambiance of the school. The walls are brightly-colored white paint and appear to be freshly painted. The lockers are maroon and are without scratches. With the exception of the gym, the entire school is freshly carpeted. Graffiti, trash, structural disrepair, poor lighting, and other characteristics that are typically observed at urban and alternative schools are not found at UAHS. The student bathrooms are clean and completely functional.

The first busses get to the school at around 7:05 am; first hour does not start until 7:40; in between that time students lounge around on the floor, socialize, and eat breakfast. Friends congregate, and during this period, every single kid speaks to Joe. Joe talks and jokes with most of the students during this time. Students seem to be very comfortable, and when they enter in the mornings, they generally rest in the center of the school. Some students sit on the carpeted floor at the school's center, some with their back against the wall. Others lie on the floor and appear to be slowly waking up from last night's sleep. This is in stark contrast to other urban schools in which researchers found that a significant amount of absenteeism can be attributed to student concerns about their own safety. It is clear that the principal has worked hard over the last 30 years—and continues to work—to maintain an atmosphere of comfort.

Student comfort may also stem from the fact that the visuals and fixtures around the school are relevant to Black students. For example, there is a picture of the Million Man March up in the center section of the school. The Million Man March was a 1995 gathering and march on Washington organized by Louis Farrakhan—long time leader of the Nation of Islam. This would seem to be controversial in a predominantly white district, and in a school that provides service to white and other non-black minorities. However, Joe makes it clear that he does whatever it is that he wants to do with UAHS, provided that it is in the best interest of the students. In this instance, he felt that a Black 'self-help' doctrine would be good for the kids at UAHS. Joe felt that the students could "learn something from the peacefulness and co-existence and unity of blacks who came out with something positive." This portrait is an indication of Joe and the UAHS family's openness to discussing issues of race. It also suggests that they are supportive of

solutions for the children regardless of the sensibilities of central administration or others in the district. The walls are also scattered with newspaper clippings of Joe and his accomplishments at UAHS, or for example his photos with people like Al Gore as they campaigned together in 2000. Joe very regularly uses his own life example as a way to motivate and encourage UAHS students. Most notable and visible throughout the school was the constant showcase of students' work. In general, there seemed to be a well recognized order and culture to the school.

Lastly, school lunches are very orderly, particularly when compared with most urban school lunches. Here is an entry from my field notes that describes the school lunches:

> Lunches at UAHS are packed with students and staff. On this particular day, Joe was floating in and out of the lunch room interacting with students and staff. Students are not allowed to leave the school during their lunch time, but they are allowed to go to the school's library/media center. They are also allowed to pass to and from the student bathrooms whenever needed. Throughout the day, at no time are the students at UAHS unsupervised and lunch is no exception. In fact, staff is required to spend at least 15 minutes of their lunch in the lunchroom with the UAHS students; most come in and stay much longer than the required 15 minutes. It is really a symbolic time of the day because the teachers are not supervising the students per se; there are no classroom rules that must be followed; no sanctions that students place on the students, and the students and teachers sit at the same table 30-foot long foldable tables as they eat. On this particular day, the staff mixed in well with the students—eating, talking and playing—as if they were one group without a student-staff distinction.

Key: classroom management

The primary objectives of the school under Joe's leadership are for teachers to have good classroom management, and for students to have social and academic behavior that conforms to the UAHS school culture. It can be no doubt that Joe deeply cares for the kids that he serves. However, Joe does not seem to care much about the mandates of NCLB or other standard based reforms, or even district reforms that require school

administrators to respond to newer standards. To Joe, success is positive behavior and thinking, positive aspirations after high school, high school graduation, and college (or trade school) attendance after graduation. Based on the interviews of parents and students, they also seem to be unconcerned about NCLB and other legislative reform and, like Joe, are far more concerned about maintaining good behavior, graduation and attending college after graduation.

One white female teacher was incensed that Joe did not offer any instructional leadership. She kept saying, "He doesn't even know what I'm doing in my class." But other teachers felt empowered, and were quite happy with the fact that Joe allowed them to independently develop their classroom expertise. They also recognized what Joe's goals were for the school:

> Joe empowers the staff to use whatever strategies you need to do within certain guidelines to keep order in your class and um classroom management is key. We focus a lot on classroom management here because if you, if you never get control of your class then you can never teach your class, and so what I'll say to new teachers a lot of times when they come here, a new teacher could be teaching for ten years someplace else, but they're new to (UAHS) it's like they're a new teacher again and, I'll tell 'em, you know, 'sacrifice your curriculum for a while until you get your classroom management down.
>
> <div align="right">-Harold</div>

State mandates: not first priority

This approach to focusing on good behavior in school, and students staying positive about their education was not Joe's alone. Actually, Harold's statement above is representative of many of the staff. The following entry in my field notes suggests that several teachers were resistant to the national reforms:

> Staff meetings were held on Friday afternoons. One Friday afternoon, Joe walked into the staff meeting and gave a brief overview to the staff. He reminded the staff that there are a new set of State-mandated standards that the school had to

respond to. The State of Michigan was now requiring that a certain number of hours be reached in each of the core academic areas. At the time, the schedules were arranged in a 90 minute blocks, and that gave teachers a bit more time during their prep-hour (which was also 90 minutes as opposed to 60 minutes). In interviews, teachers described Joe as "ruling with a heavy hand," and of being 'dictatorial.' But this was neither a behavioral issue, nor did it deal with race or school culture, so Joe was more open to staff suggestions. He said: "I've got an appointment, but it's up to us what we do."

Joe reiterated that "as it is, they (district administration) don't get in to what we do or tell us what to do, I'd like to keep it that way. So we will decide what we do with the schedule and when I get back, I'd like to hear what you said."
The discussion quickly changed toward meeting the demands of NCLB, the new curriculum and educational benchmarks by subject area, and Joe stayed out of that discussion. Essentially, the teachers were discussing if they had the same standards, teaching timeline and to teach the kids in the same way that traditional schools teach. One teacher mentioned that the demands were the same as they were for the other high schools in the state.

One English teacher, Macy, said "I don't give a damn about state standards. I am not going to get involved in all the rhetoric that the state hands down."
Her colleague, a reading teacher, agreed: "They give us all theses rule with no way to meet these rules and parents are going to begin to cry out."
Harold, the technology teacher also agreed: "I'm not worried about meeting the State's standards either."

The social studies teacher then inquired: "I don't understand how you guys can say you're not concerned with state standards . . . our students are required to meet them."

John, UAHS math teacher chimed in: "Teachers may be held accountable for not covering the benchmarks that the State has given. To me it doesn't matter because I'm not going to be around much longer, but for you, it could mean your jobs."

As the conversation started to focus on school authority and management, Joe asserted his authority, "I decide who comes (which teachers) to the school and who leaves. Its up to me. They leave me alone." Joe continued: "Now, lets go around the table and see where you all are on this." In this exchange, teacher's saw a direct conflict with the State Standards and what they do at UAHS, as one teacher captured the sentiment: "The switch from being "student driven" to "curriculum driven" is new for us."

Specialized student expectations

For student expectations, Joe is primarily concerned with whether or not they have a good work ethic (i.e., at least attempting to do their assigned workload), if they have good behavior (i.e., if they follow not only classroom and school rules, but also parental and community rules), and if they have reasonable plans after graduation (either college/university or post-secondary trade school, and most certainly not the military). Joe's concerns here seemed to be in cultural synchronization with the community, for the parents also seem to be most concerned about these three student expectations.

Joe routinely stops students in the hallway and makes statements to male students very similar to this statement that was made as he greeted and passed Joe after arriving at school: "We talked about you in staff meeting, and I hear you're not participating and you're not pulling your own weight . . . some of the teachers think you may be lazy." To female students, the remark is usually more similar to this quote: "Several teachers are reporting to me that your attitude is coming out again; now if something is bothering you come talk to me, but I've been telling you how good you've been doing, and I want you to continue without a bad attitude." Initially this student wanted to know which teachers had said that, but soon acknowledged that it was indeed true, and then said she was going to improve her attitude.

From the hallway interactions to his imparting wisdom to students in the Rap Sessions (school wide sessions/ presentations that Joe has with the entire school in the middle section of the school to talk about issues pertaining to school and life and other speeches to the student body), Joe makes it clear that he expects students to try their best at doing well in school. The mechanism of holding Rap Sessions are discussed in detail

later, but this statement made in one of the Rap Sessions makes it clear that students must get an education and go to college:

> Now I wanna hear from you, and I know that several of you have something to say because we've talked about it. Jason, I know you already have something to say to one of your teachers. But first I wanna say that many of your grades are slipping below expectations. What are you gonna do without an education? Heck! A high school education isn't even enough these days. But the way some of you are acting, you wont even get that. Now, Sara has been doing well and keeping her grades up. You (looking at student—Dianne) have done a great job and me and all of your teachers are proud of you. But if you're (addressing all of the students in the school) not planning to go to college, what are you gonna do?

A significant amount of Joe's reform efforts and behavioral modification with the children has focused on the students going to a community college, a four-year university, or a trade school after high school. Joe has always linked this with a student participating in risky behaviors. In most rap sessions, before involving students and giving them a chance to respond, Joe talks about risky or unproductive behaviors that the students may be involved in. Frequently, he speaks about unprotected sex, smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol, dropout and skipping class, and having a bad (confrontational) attitude with others. Aside from Rap Sessions, Joe uses close, carefully defined relationships to engage students and help them improve their academic and social status.

Student placement: mandatory interviews

Joe interviews every single student and their parent(s) before they are allowed to gain entry to the school. Though it is a requirement for entry into the school, he has not turned a beginning student away; he has, however, turned former UAHS students away who for some reason left, and then tried to return and regain entry to the school. Students are recommended to UAHS by their counselors and teachers, or the student's parent had

already knew of UAHS and individually acted to bring their troubled child in. Joe uses the opportunity to discuss how the school is run, his experience and longevity in the community, and how he "doesn't take no shit from nobody." On the surface, statements like this seem terse, but by the end of each interview Joe has the new UAHS student hugging his parent and Joe hugging them both. Joe shows this toughness almost immediately. It seems to serve a role of allowing the students to know that unlike their previous administrators, he is not afraid of students. But in the same interview, he tells them how much he wants to help them and how much he cares. The African American parent community activist (and UAHS parent) said "Some of the Black principals in the district are very tough, but they are not nurturing at the same time. So many of the Black families are confused about whether they truly care about Black students. Joe is both tough and nurturing." When Shawn came to the school, Joe told him to go into his office and sit down. Shawn and his mother went into Joe's office and sat down. Joe then came in and said to Shawn, "Get up, that's my seat!" From this very first encounter, Joe instills in the kids and parents that he is boss. These initial interviews are undoubtedly most useful to Joe in two ways: one, in gaining that essential parental (or guardian) support, and two, in learning about the student—the strengths, weaknesses, challenges and social/familial background. Interviews, however, also play a crucial role in establishing a community relationship between Joe and the community members. Joe is able to reaffirm his credibility in the community through the interviews, by appearing to stick up for the parents against their out-of-control children.

In one interview, Joe asked an African American male summer school student, Daron, and his mother a series of questions about themselves and why he was there. The

student had been failing most of his classes at the traditional school, was skipping class, and was very disrespectful and sarcastic toward his teachers. The principal and teachers of the other school recommended Daron to UAHS. In the interview, Joe asked Daron if he was disrespectful toward his mother. When Daron answered in the affirmative, Joe forcefully said that he would personally come and get Daron if it ever happened again. As is always the case, by the end of the interview, Joe was telling Daron to stand up, hug his mother, and tell her that he loves him. Joe was like that with all of his parents and students. For the majority of parents, they first seem astounded, or even offended, by Joe's raspy behavior, but it often becomes the beginning to an unwavering supportive relationship that parents have for Joe. For this parent, she was initially incensed by Joe's forceful speech, but she said she understood that it was sometime necessary to get the point across to the students who were unresponsive to traditional school leadership. This description was taken from a conversational interview I had with her about her initial conversation with Joe:

> She was a single-parent and was at wits' end about what to do about her son who would consistently lie to her about his dealings in school. Like most parents at the school, she was the sole caregiver and provider for her four children. And although she was living with her own mother, the technical definition according to the State of Michigan and the McKinney-Vento Law would classify her as homeless. She simply did not have time to go to schools and check on her children's progress. She said she was too tired when she got home from work, and that she was tired of the teachers picking on her children anyway. She did allow her son to stay in UAHS during that summer, because if she didn't, he would have failed the 7th grade. But in that following fall, she took him back to the traditional school. I re-interviewed this parent at the end of that fall semester, and discussed the progress of her son. It turned out that she had just discovered that he had been skipping school for weeks at his traditional school. The school never notified her. At the traditional school, he was once again slipping through the cracks. He wasn't doing anything bad, she said. He would just merely stay home when she went to work. By January, and after an entire semester of failure, he is back at UAHS. Though he occasionally comes to school late, he has not skipped since returning to UAHS, and he is currently passing all of his classes.

This parent, much like many of the parents of children at UAHS, did not know what to do with her children regarding their home and school life.

School Culture

The school culture at UAHS was heavily informed by the school leader and was an explanatory factor for the success of students at UAHS. This culture was influenced by the resources available to the school staff and students, particularly the support staff and smaller classes. But most influential factors of school culture go far beyond any tangible resource. The social relationships that merged the school and community, the presences of the school leader, the accessibility of the school and its leader, the school presence in the community, and the validation of the social and cultural capital of students and their families all produced a school culture that led to student success at UAHS.

Resourcefulness of School

Frequently, administrators and legislators who have experienced or witnessed school success argue that additional money is not needed for effective schooling. The data here suggest that the additional resources afforded to UAHS are necessary for its success. The smaller class size, the additional support staff, and the abundance of materials and equipment—which were made possible by increased funding per pupil—all contributed to the school's effectiveness. The school district spent roughly $10,000 per student every year, but at UAHS, the district spent just over $17,000 per student per year.

Small School and Class Size

The official student-teacher ratio is 7:1 at UAHS, whereas statewide and in other district high schools it is 18:1. Though many of the nation's legislators merely promised smaller class sizes, at UAHS it was a deeply-appreciated reality. Classes flowed more smoothly, teachers could handle potential problems more readily, and students were not unnoticed and could not remain anonymous as most had previously done. Students and staff alike are pleased with the smaller school setting. Denise, an African American female student noted how she had changed with the smaller class sizes and more structure:

> I was having problems at the bigger schools . . . uh, I wasn't really going to class, and my grades were really slipping really bad and I needed more structure, I needed a smaller school, somewhere that I could like be like, not really watched, but just small enough that I couldn't get into much trouble, I guess.

Darnell, who said that at the larger school he slipped through the cracks and started avoiding class, also took note of the increased structure and smaller classes:

> Here, its small class sizes and everything, everybody can look out for everybody 'cause at Harrison (one of the other large traditional high schools) you can skip anywhere. If you fall behind here, you can ask the teacher, and they will help. Over there, you can just walk off the property and nobody know it, but here it's secluded, you can't go anywhere, no busses or anything.

Equipment and Supplies

The school is well supplied. Most rooms have several working computers. There are working copiers throughout the building. The non-core subject area teachers have an abundance of materials and equipment. The storage room attached to the recently-renovated gymnasium is replete with any type of athletic equipment that a PE teacher would need. The same is true with the science teacher. On a recent visit to one of the

science rooms, the teacher had several plants growing. The physical education and music

teacher just recently had their own wings of the school built, so they are able to play

music as loudly as they want without disturbing students in other classes.

For instructional content, the school was designed to rely heavily on the

instructional expertise of the teaching staff. Therefore, each school classroom was well

supplied. The supplies seemed to be crucial to the learning processes to students at the

school. The following is an entry in the research field notes regarding the

resourcefulness of UAHS:

> Harold, the technology teacher, was involved in a project in where students were designing their own commercials. The students worked together in teams to film commercials and to create musical sound bites to complement their visual imagery or video tapes they recorded. Harold allowed me to participate in a group with two African American females so I could see their project and to showcase their work. They had taken several photos of themselves and of a Kwanza program that had occurred at the school earlier in the week. The teachers explained how proud he was because the two African American female students had lined the subjects of the photos perfectly and had positioned the subjects of the photos in the correct alignment (not centered, but to the right or left) as do professional photographers. The students then showed how they worked the Photoshop application to add (or modify) color, lighting and even the images themselves. One student said he knew how to use all of the 'software' on the newer Apple computers. All students in the class were involved in a similar project and were actively engaged in the lesson. The classroom had several computers, cameras, types of software and countless other supplies. The materials, gadgets, computers and software must have cost more than $200,000 for this one classroom. On a day earlier in the week in this class, students were manipulating computer controlled motion robots they had just programmed with some specialized software that was on the classroom computers."

Every class has TV/VCR/DVD/LCD players, several computers, and at least 1 laser

printer. Every resource that the teachers seem to need, or want, they appear to have.

Staff lounge has two working copy machines and boxes of copy paper, a refrigerator, and

a nice mix of furniture that lent a homely feel to the room.

Support Staff

Strategically-hired support staff is perhaps one of the most effective tools that Joe uses to provide leadership to the school, particularly as it relates to school culture and community relationships. Joe relies on the support staff to assist in maintaining order at the school, for advice and counsel regarding specific students, to foster a family atmosphere, as attendance personnel, and most importantly, to maintain contact and a strong connection with the community:

- **Khadija, Community Liaison.**

Khadija serves as the community liaison and maintains an intimate relationship with each student and their family. According to Joe, "She is great for that position because she grew up in the community." Joe was referring to the poorer African American communities in the city. Khadija has strong rapport with the students, and will correct the negative behavior of a student just as quickly as Joe will. One morning, she came into the school and was discussing with Joe an event that happened at the local shopping mall that involved some of the students at UAHS. On another occasion, she was informing Joe of some fights that one group of neighborhood kids had with another group of kids—away from the school. Daily, she is responsible for calling the house of every single student who is absent from school.

- **Maggie, Social Worker.**

Maggie has been at the school longer than any other staff member aside from Joe. Much like Joe and Khadija, Maggie is one of the persons most connected with the community. She knows the history and social challenges of each student. She often finds resources for student such as coats, food, or even counseling services. Students who are experiencing conflict with a parent or step-parent, or who may have become homeless, are frequently referred to Maggie. Much like Khadija, Maggie has tremendous connections within the community because of her long tenure. She has also raised her children in the district and has been a political activist for decades.

- **Dwane and Mike, Educational Technician.**

Dwane left the school and was recently replaced by Mike. Their role at the school is one of crowd control and to break up any fights if they occur. They were both towering men and had a noticeable presence at the school. Dwane had a close rapport with the students because he was a college athlete, tall, light-skinned and a handsome African American male. Many of the male students could relate to his athletic background; many of the male students at UAHS aspired to play professional sports. He would pretty much tell a student to do something, and usually, they would comply. Mike, on the other hand, is a newcomer, and students were still testing his authority at the time of this study.

- **Sara and Becky, Teacher Consultants.**

Sara and Becky are certified experienced teachers who help with instructional support when needed. They often sit and work with students individually as it pertains to their academic needs. They are both full-time employees at UAHS.

- **Grandpa, Assistant.**

Grandpa is a retired military person and is well loved by everyone in the school. He is actually the father of Khadija, the community liaison. Ironically, though it is only a nickname used by staff and students, he really does remind you of a grandfatherly figure. He is in his mid-to-late sixties; he has a grey receding hairline and a broad and welcoming smile on his face. Sometime if you come into the school, he'll be sitting at the front desk answering calls and taking the students' cell phones as they come in (the students must check their phones into school every morning and get them back at the end of the day, if they fail to do so, phones are permanently confiscated), and other times, he may be in the kitchen helping to prepare food for some of the other staff members. His presence adds to the overall friendly ambiance of the school.

Acceptance of social and cultural capital

Undoubtedly, the school culture at UAHS is accommodating of the cultural capital and aspirations of the predominant culture of the student body. This is evident in the type of behaviors tolerated by teachers. The acceptance and fluidity of the UAHS families' social capital is facilitated by Joe and UAHS. Teachers respond to the verbal

cultural expressions, and the Black English language that the students speak; some even speak to students in a similar manner. The types of music, the styles and fashion, the relationships the students and their families have are all recognized at the school. What is perhaps the biggest indication of the acceptance of this capital is, in fact, what the students are *not* penalized for. In other words, these students do not have the typical cultural experiences that traditional White American have, and even so, they are still valued by the staff and school leader. For example, in an interview with one of the traditional high school principals, he talked about a 'White Jewish girl' who was heavily immersed in volunteerism and civic student activities. He praised the girl and said that she had a 4.0 Grade Point Average, but that Black students "don't know how to play the game," and they never participated in any activities like these (the school and district were in an area that had three major hospitals and several large universities, and hence had a great number of volunteer and civic activities; volunteerism was socially rewarded in this locale). From this principal's statement, it seemed that he socially rewarded this white student for her volunteer and extra-curricula activities. It also seemed he blamed Black students for not being involved. However at UAHS, the principal did not seem to socially reward students who lacked certain experiences. Harold, one of the White teachers interviewed for this study, recognizes the cultural accommodations of UAHS:

> I think that our culture at (UAHS) mirrors more of the African American culture in the community than it does the Caucasian, you know society in the community here or culture in the community and the other, the big schools, it's the opposite, and I think that that it just helps the kids feel comfortable when they come here 'cause that's what they're used to, and they go to the big schools, they don't have anybody, they don't feel like they have anybody they can relate to or is relating with them in the larger schools, and they just want them to assimilate to dominant culture and ignore their own, the kids' culture that they, that just helps them feel disconnected and, our kids, kids in general, adults in general aren't gonna admit

that they don't know something to someone they don't trust and so if they've never made a connection in the larger schools.

They come here and say, "Wow, you know, I feel comfortable here. I don't feel like an outsider, I feel like, you know, my thoughts and my home life is valued the way I, you know, do my hair or dress is valued you know, it's not, it's not odd, it's not different you know. We relate to the kids, um, you know, relate to the community, we're, we're always trying to figure out how to do that better we're trying to figure out how to meet their needs, take them from where they are to where they need to be, and it's the best way that we know how.

Indeed, the school-facilitated social relationship among parents resembles what Lareau found in middle-class white families. Relationships among parents—and their connection to school personnel—are sometime an over-flow of community relations that Joe and the teachers work so hard to maintain. For example, Joe repeatedly asks parents to inform him of what's going on in the community so that he can take it to the board of education meetings.

Morgan and Sorensen's (1999) premise that social capital is contextualized, is highly relevant here; they illustrate different types of social capital may be present in different situations and may be positive in some cases, yet negative or exclusionary in others. For example, parents passing on information about opportunities is highly prevalent at UAHS. Better communication is something that the African American-Parent Community Activist said parents often complained to her about regarding traditional schools. She said that the inside privileged information never reached her or other Black parents in the district, even though she was an extremely active parent. She gave the example of how she discovered that college courses were being offered at her daughter's middle school, but that no notice had been given to her, and how many of her close White associates—whose children were current enrollees of the program—never

mentioned it to her. Since no formal notice went to the homes of parents, she felt that she and her daughter had been both socially and academically excluded from this opportunity. Study of populations reveal that each group may posses its own forms of social capital; examples include Zhou and Bankston's (1998) study that describes the important role of Chinatown and how it serves to ensure success of Chinese immigrant youth; and Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) and how students in the Spanish bilingual community were able to successfully secure the institutional services needed for their school and life advancement.

In the UAHS context, there was frequently a 100% family representation in attendance at the Saturday Morning breakfasts; there is also a high turnout for other events that facilitate a meeting place for an exchange of ideas among parents and teachers. As for the cultural capital, the Rap Sessions invited speakers, the language used, and the tolerance of the student's cultural nuances and behaviors indicate that the cultural capital of students is locally accepted. At the traditional schools, the students featured in this study felt that it led to fear among the teachers and administrators and led to them being targeted and suspended more often than any other groups of people at the school.

Culturally relevant leadership: The UAHS 'family'

"He's like a grandfather, he's like a grandfather. Um, he, when they're down he wants to figure out, "Why you got a attitude today? What's going on?" If something ever happens he tells 'em, "You come to me," no matter what it is. "If you," he tells 'em, "If you done shitted on yourself, you better come tell me. You know, why, why you didn't take a bath this morning?"

<div align="right">Darnell, former UAHS student</div>

"Um, because the administrators over there um, I don't really think they care about the students that much. Like Joe, it's like here is like a family type of atmosphere, so they like try and help you more, talk to you more if you got problems, but at (my other high school) is so big that it's hard to do that."

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Joe consistently reaffirms to students that UAHS is a family. Students and teachers at UAHS seem to accept this premise. People in this study have very frequently described UAHS as a family, and Joe as a family member. In fact, every student and parent interviewed for this study likened Joe to either a father or a grandfather. Many never knew their biological fathers, and they seemed to identify that void with Joe. However, some did come from two-parent households, as in the case of Ahmed; he became "a second father" to him. Joe has worked hard at fostering rapport and trust with the students:

> You got to talk the language of the kids too. And I try to talk the language of the kids. They teach me, they look out for me. Like I tell them, I am safe here as I am at home. I can sit up here and go to sleep and these kids will take care of me. Because in their mind I'm the best thing they got. And I want to be the best thing they got. And I owe part of what I do to them. I couldn't have this order in the school if it was not for them. And if I was unfair or unjust and treating them as such then they would be responding negatively about me and some of them still do, but shit it's so minor.
>
> -Joe

Sheila's grandmother, one of the parents interviewed for this study, explained that she would come to school with Sheila's mother, and she would sometimes drop the child off in the office and go to class. Or perhaps the child would be in class crying, and she would tell the baby to go down to see 'Grandpa Joe.' Could one imagine this in a traditional school? A former student said he came in one day, and said: "Dang Joe, you got two babies today." Joe responded, "Shut up! I'm a grandpa at school today." Though Joe's response was culturally acceptable for the questioner in this exchange, his responses may at times seem harsh to those not familiar to this culture. Ironically, this is true at the same time that he is taking care of young dependent children—an act that is

perhaps one of the strongest expressions of compassion and love. Indeed, Joe's

fatherly/grandfatherly role has both its compassionate and tough moments as well. In

another exchange captured in field notes, it is obvious that Joe is more than an

administrator; he is a personal culturally relevant disciplinarian to these students:

> A student came in with a doo-rag and deeply sagging pants—two minor offenses which are both against school policy. Joe said: "What are you wearing?" The student mumbled something under his breath and kept walking. Joe then grabbed the student's head(by the cheeks) and put his face directly in front of the student's face (as people would do when kissing) less than an inch away, and simultaneously put his hands on each side of the students face and head, and said, "You got something to say to me?" He then took the doo-rag and said, "You cannot get it back." And pulled the students pants up for him. The student's pants stayed up for the remainder of the day.

If a person was briefly passing through the school, they would perhaps view Joe as being

overly tough on the students. But according to student responses in this research, they

viewed his 'toughness' on them as evidence that he cared. The parents and students

continued to echo the fact that "Joe, he's hard on us, but (it's okay because) he cares."

This nurturing side of Joe is evident, as he says: "When you break them (i.e., confront

students on their behaviors) down, you gotta build them back up."

Description of students

The kids who attend UAHS experience life challenges that are characteristic of any low socioeconomic class neighborhood, and of large urban areas. Joe, Khadija, and Maggie (the social worker) are the most well-aware about the children's lives. Here Maggie gives a very detailed and real-life description of what some of the students at UAHS face:

> I basically see kids who are having problems or have issues and things like that. Like when they need help especially like you know, they grandmamma or they mamma or somebody came in, broke in they house, stole all their Christmas gifts or somebody, the mamma's boyfriend went out and smoked all the money up, stole the mamma's money, smoked it all up in crack. I get a lot of kids who's mammas got boyfriends, boyfriends and, and, and you have to think about the kids that come to (UAHS), they're mostly the low, they're the most low income and their parents are many of the lowest educated in (this city). Many of, we're seeing a big flux of them coming from the (large urban area) and other areas, moving to (this area) because they heard of the schools and the crime and stuff.

> So you, you see 'em moving up this way and struggling, trying to do good and so um, the kids, and so, I, this year, I've had to tell uh, one male who got a mamma who uh, got back with a old boyfriend who just got out of prison who having problems with um, um, the, some kids she had by another man after he went to prison, and, no before he went to prison and then I had a girl who um, the stepfather, the mother kept telling her to come talk to the social worker, come talk to, they were about to get into it and little, bitty thirteen year old and stepfather told her, she, he gonna get, she gonna get the MF out of his house and he was gonna kick her so and so out in the streets. I told her, I said, 'You go home and you get your mother and your stepfather together or her boyfriend, whoever he is and say if you ever come back in there and tell me that he said that, tell him I'm calling protective services and put them on him.' I said, 'It's against the law for a parent or the parent's boyfriend or anybody to be saying that or tell you that and if he says that to you again um,' you know, 'cause there's a lot of conflict in the house, he wanna tell her, he got a daughter living there, they 'round the same age and he trying to run, like it ain't working now, he running stuff.

> "The mamma out working, so he gonna tell the girl, 'You do this and it don't look good and stuff.' I said, 'You tell your mother that I think it'd be best if she tell you, if, if she leave you your instructions about what you supposed to do that day, the housework, your chores and then if uh, he doesn't like how you did it, he needs to talk to your mother about it and he shouldn't be, really be saying

anything until your family situation calm down.' She went home and told him what I said, told her mother and she uh, she said, I asked her, 'What'd your mother say?' She said, 'She listened,' and she said, 'And they went in the bedroom and talked,' and then so a couple days later, I said, 'Well how's things going?' 'It's been going good at the house,' they know I know the laws.

"But I'm gonna tell you, this group of students I've seen this year is about the worst group of kids I've ever saw coming through (UAHS) in a long time, very aggressive, got lots of emotional and socialization, psychological problems and I said, what we're seeing here in the school is representative of what you see out in the community. Lots of parents on drugs, grandparents got stuck with taking over.

"Low-income, mamma's, you know, you know, their parents, you know, with a minimum wage jobs, two and three minimum wage jobs, not there for 'em, you know because they working so much they, you know, they can't be there to monitor their behavior. Lot of them have to take care of younger siblings, you know, doing the cooking, babysitting, watching after school you know, not, not, not closely supervised, no supervision, and um, one of the girls told me, they were complaining about the food here at lunch time and I, and Joe told 'em, "Well that's the, well bring, if you don't like what we're serving, it's not us, it's the (district's) Schools, that's the meals they're sending over."

"And then this one girl said, "Bring food from home?" Most people in this school they don't have no food at home and I have met so many kids, even here at this school and at my other school, the last meal that they get a day is the meal they eat here, and I have heard of parents, kids talk and I was, I was out there, I, I was probably doing something in the community 'cause I do a lot of work in the community. . . I heard the mother come up, getting kids, "I'm hungry or something, I want something too," the mother said, "Didn't you lunch today at school?" and the child, and it's about, it's about five o'clock or something and the kid, and the kid, 'Yeah,' 'So then hey, you just gonna have to wait.' I'll never forget that and I, that's normal"

Khadija is the Community Liason, and she works closely with the students and their families and the school, and visits them more often than anyone else in the school. Most are African American, but many are poor white or first and second generation immigrants. She described the students as coming from families who live in poverty, most not having a male figure in the home. In her daily experience, she said that she noticed that the students had very low self-esteem as evidenced by "them not believing in

themselves, and tending to give up easily, which is why they end up here." She added that most are sexually active and nearly all have experimented with alcohol or drugs. I asked Khadija about their academic work habits, and she said that in general they do not have low skills, but rather, are just lazy, not involved in any extracurricular activities, and are in need of extra encouragement. As for the families, many of the households are not only single-parent and female-head, but also young (mostly in their 30's) with the exception of some students being raised by their grandmother. Although most of these students are disrespectful toward their parents, none are disrespectful toward Joe. I asked Joe what was the reasoning behind so many of the social and behavioral problems that the students had. He said that it was a result of "dealing with a high transient population and frequent moves to a neighboring poorer city." Joe said that if the kids cannot make it at UAHS, they usually dropout because every accommodation has been made for them.

Plight of their parents

With the exception of one former student, all of the student participants for this study were from single-parent female-headed households. Most could also be classified as the working poor. One of the females was currently unemployed and on welfare. In the homes that I visited, most worked 40 or more hours per week, and were just too tired to do much of anything at home. Helping their children with their homework was understandably not common, but any semblance to having any structured environment also seemed rare. When I visited Daron and his mother, I arrived to the house around the same time that she did. There was not much structure, as demonstrated by the field notes recorded during my visit.

> "Ma, dey here," the youngest sibling yelled upstairs. Daron a student at UAHS in
> the eight grade had just returned there after attending summer school. The kids

were either watching TV or were laying on the couch or floor playing portable video games. I stayed at the house for two hours. From about 4:00- 6:00 p.m., no child read or did homework. Toys, books, video games, food, bottles, and paper was scattered across the floors, countertops and tables.

The grandmother entered thirty minutes after I did; Daron and his elder brother began arguing about whose turn it was to take the trash out to the dumpster, and who was responsible for "making grandma take the trash out." The issue had come up because there was an unbearable stench in the house.

Daron's mom told me she had been depressed because she was so stressed out. She had been evicted four months earlier from a neighboring unit and was now living with her mother (Daron's grandmother). She said that she was so depressed that the kids were not listening that she had just given up:

> "When I get home, I am just too tired, I don't have the energy. I just go to my room and close the door. Then, I notice that nothing is done, and I just get mad and start yelling. They don't understand; it really hurts me with they mess up in school. They don't know but I dropped out. I just stopped going in the 11th grade, and my mother let me. She didn't make me go 'cause I told her I didn't want to go."

There is no structure in the home and Daron and his siblings do not take responsibility for duties at home or their homework. Now that Daron has entered UAHS—an environment where there are strict rules and an orderly environment, he has had problems adjusting. For example, he has been late every day since returning to UAHS about a month ago. On his second and third day of school, teachers have held him after school because he had not completed homework. And already, Joe has said that he is lazy, late, and had a bad attitude in front of his peers, and in Rap Session in front of the entire school.

My findings suggest that most of the parents have serious personal and familial issues, and are responsible for why their children became academically and socially distressed and consequently ended up at UAHS. Yet, Joe and his staff are aware of this and try to address it in how they structure school activity and parental and educational outreach.

Student culture: respect for the street/prison code

The students, particularly African American males, at UAHS heavily identified with the street culture ubiquitous in their neighborhoods. The sagging pants, doo-rags, clothing, swagger and even the lingo they used was similar to youth who identify with

street culture. The culture, which is reinforced with hip-hop artists like 50 Cents, Snoop Dog, The Game, Jeezy, Rick Ross and others is self-destructive and in many ways stands against everything that Joe and UAHS stand for. Actually, because this school was in the suburb of a large Midwestern city, the students interviewed for this study seemed to carry complexes around in which they have to aim for toughness even more so than Detroiters. In other words, even though the students are socioeconomically as bad off as Detroiters, and their neighborhoods are as bad, indeed are demographically identical, the students perhaps do not recognize that. Whereas many of my former urban students from very tough neighborhoods were trying to find a way out of living gangster lifestyles, many of these students were trying to find their way into gangster lifestyles. Students wanted to prove they were tough. This is the case in the district's traditional schools, but at UAHS, students, regardless of how they may see themselves, are able to mentally conflate their existing identities with one of *being smart* and valuing their education and lives. The disposition of the students—from their exudation of toughness to their non-snitch policy and their propagation of typical street-ghetto behavior—was deeply in sync with a typical urban ghetto street culture.

Prior negative school experiences

All of the current and former students interviewed for this study reported that they experienced negative school experiences. Joe says that it is something that all of the students at the school have in common. But this study reveals that not only the children have had these negative school experiences, but so have their parents. In fact, the comfort and the academic and social successes of African American students in this district have always been marginal. Former students from UAHS spanning the last four

decades have spoken of their awkward fit into the district's many schools. Many were kicked out frequently. The constant conflict and tension that students had in their prior school experiences helped lead to poor academic achievement and social failure.

Prior invisibility in traditional schools

Perhaps because of the size of the traditional schools, or because of the insensibility to the plight of at-risk, African American students, traditional schools did not address the needs of these children. All current and former students said traditional high schools in the district did not notice any signs of academic or social distress. Parents said they were uninformed of, for example, their child's academic failure. The students reported they skipped for days or even weeks, and were unnoticed. Two students interviewed said that when they fell into a pattern of skipping class, there was an automated phone call from the traditional school that left a message on the home phone answering machine some weeks later, but both students arrived home before their parents and erased the messages.

The prior non-existent relationship with school leadership is evident. I asked the students how their relationship with Joe differed from their relationship with their principals at the traditional schools; they all clarified for me that there was no relationship with other principals unless they were in serious trouble. By contrast, Joe greeted them every morning, called each of them on the holiday, came to most student homes at least once a year, was on a first name basis with their parents, knew intimately how they were doing in school, and would specifically call them out in front of everyone if they erred in behavior or attitude (not necessarily academics). In some models of education, scholars posit that the school leader affects the curriculum, the teachers and staff, and the school

culture, which collectively in turn affect student achievement. However, in the UAHS model of education, Joe has such a strong relationship with each student in his school that it cannot be characterized as an indirect relationship. Joe has an impact on teachers and school culture as well, but he also has a strong relationship directly with the student body. According to the students, parents, and teachers, this has a tremendous impact on their education.

Don formerly taught at two other traditional schools in the district. He noted some differences between UAHS and those traditional schools that had already failed the UAHS students:

> Black kids in particular are just, they're invisible over there. I've heard wonderful things, but from when I was there, Black kids were allowed to be in the hallways, be late (to class and school), dress any type of way, talk any type of way. And Joe is not going for that. Kids come in and pull their pants up, They behave themselves in a certain way."

Principal as family and community broker

"It wasn't just an education at (UAHS). It was an upbringing."

-Ahmed, former UAHS student

The educational model at UAHS had a very deliberate presence of the community (parents, former students, and community members) in the school as well as a strong presence of the school in the community (teachers and Joe going to students' homes). Since UAHS's inception, Joe has described it as the UAHS family; it stuck with the students and community. At every opportunity, Joe is describing the school environment as a family environment, and this is even referenced in some official school literature. Students would return on college break and would sometimes stop at UAHS before even going to their home. Parents would come and consult with Joe about their children in

other schools, or about issues completely not related to education. Parents and community members knew that they could come to UHAS at anytime without an appointment. They also knew that they were not only welcome in the Rap Sessions, but they were even welcome to sit in the class session with their child at any time, unannounced. Unlike traditional schools in the area, teachers were comfortable with the parental presence in their rooms. Most of the parents and students had until now had very negative school experiences. But it is evident by how students have access to, and interact with, Joe and his staff that they are very comfortable with the UAHS school environment.

The community not only reached deep into the school; rather, the UAHS staff also had a very solid presence in the community. Joe and some of his staff visit the students' homes for dinner, or sometime just to stop by to "check in to see how everything is going." Just as parents may drop by the school unannounced, Joe will "pop up at your (a student's) house without warning." Khadija explained it like this:

> "If we call your house a couple of times and a student doesn't respond, either Joe or myself are going by (the house). We feel very comfortable doing so, and students know that. We're welcomed 'cause its in the best interest of the kids."

Community leadership

It was quite common for parents to ask Joe for advice. From racial profiling and police brutality to academic and racial marginalization in the district, the parents trusted Joe's opinion. Most parents seemed unaware that Joe needed their input as much as they needed his. He needed to be frequently informed by parents what their issues were, and how he could help and use the capacity that he already has in the district to push for positive change. The following field note entry of Shelia, her mother, and her

grandmother captures Joe's willingness to help on any issue. Shelia was a current UAHS

student, and her mother and grandmother had both previously attended UAHS. We had

been at the home for a couple of hours and were wrapping up our visit:

> Toward the end of the home visit, the mother again prompted Joe to speak about
> the education of her other children. She handed Joe her son's report card (who
> was not yet old enough to attend UAHS) who was currently in middle school. Joe
> commented, "Why you takin' fundamentals of math? You should be takin'
> algebra."

Sheila has a sister that was a year older than her but who attended the traditional high

school. The mother said, that she was about to put her in UAHS because she was starting

to mess up in school. Joe then spoke to her and Sheila both:

> "Boys love pretty girls that are dumb. You should be independent students. Your
> grades aren't bad, but they can improve. You've got two years left. College
> should be in the picture. I think you can do better."

Joe and Sheila's grandmother then speak about other administrators in the district. They

spoke of a Black female principal who was apparently released from her position because

"she was black." They agreed: "Our few black students needed her there." The

discussion went on for a little while longer about the experiences of Blacks in the

predominantly white school district.

Open door policy for parents

Parents resented not being allowed to come to see their children at the traditional

schools in the district. This openness and affability of the school is well liked by the

parents and it seems to more accommodating of their circumstances. Most UAHS

parents could be described as the 'working poor.' That not only means that their salary is

between $10 and $15 dollars per hour, but also means that their jobs are highly variable

and unpredictable. That would undoubtedly affect the schedule and ability to meet timely

appointments for this population of people. One parent who frequently has his shift changed from morning to evening enjoyed his accessibility to Joe:

> "I can come see him at anytime, it don't matter. At the other school, I had to wait weeks just to see the principal."

Actually, this parent was not the first parent to take note of the accessibility of the UAHS environment. Nikki has two daughters at UAHS. Last year, one of her daughters went to UAHS but tried to return to her traditional school this year. Within months, she felt marginalized again and began to fall behind. When her mother tried to visit the school, they made her sign into the office and wait for 30 minutes in order for her to see her child in class. By that time, that period's bell was about to ring, and the parent just left frustrated. She then started sneaking in the back door of the traditional school to see her child in class, and then 'signing in' as she exited the school:

> "Joe tells you, "Come in, okay . . . anytime." Where I was at, whether I was at, when I was at (the other schools), you gotta sign in, you need to call before you come to me, if I need to call in before I come, you're hiding something, okay. You're hiding something and that was, that was true over at Clague and at Huron. I always came into the school, but instead of signing in at the start of my visit, I would sign out, and secretly sign in, when I left. I went through the back doors 'cause they would call a teacher up and say, 'Miss (Henderson's) coming, here she come again.' If my child is acting up and misbehaving to the point where you're gonna kick my child out, I wanna see her act up."
> -Ms. Henderson (parent of UAHS student)

Anonymity Not Allowed

Most of the students who now attend UAHS were one of two types at their alternative school: either loud and disruptive, or invisible. Academically speaking, nearly all of them were unproductive and unnoticeable. However, that is not an option at UAHS. Joe has another morning exchange with Donna, a black female student who never seems to say anything. He challenges her on that:

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Joe:	We were talking about you in staff meeting. You act like a mute." (referring to a statement that several of the girl's teachers made about her participation in class)
Donna:	Yea, but I might have a legitimate reason though."
Joe:	Come talk to me. I need to know, so that I can help you."

Donna tried to explain that they (her and other students) don't understand course content, and she doesn't get enough rest. After a very short conversation, Joe convinced the students that it was in their best interest to participate if that meant that they would pass the class. Joe maintains an ongoing open dialogue with students about their academic and behavioral progress.

Rejection of zero-tolerance suspensions and expulsions

> Other administrators (in the city's traditional schools) didn't SOLVE the problem, they just lay down the punishment. He (Joe) always looks for solutions. The one thing that Joe shouldn't have done was let us cuss or let us smoke in the school. But now that I look back on it, that was his solution for getting us to come to school. As long as we were there, then he could always work on us. And he did, and many of us changed. If it weren't for him always on our ass about being there, none of us would have finished school, and we were all headed for dropout.
>
> -Ahmed

These words from a former UAHS student illustrate that Joe's primary concern was to get the children into school, and after that, into their classroom. Joe did not feel that it was in the best interest of the children to remove them from school. He questioned this policy: "Is it worth it for me to do this or punish the kid myself instead of putting them through the system. Putting it in their records, you know?" As mentioned previously, Joe would sometimes go to the district's hearings and fight for kids in order to prevent them from being expelled from the district. In many cases, they were not even students at

UAHS. Joe explains why, in general, he is not in favor of suspending or expelling kids and removing them from school:

> That's right. They (teachers) don't have to be included in the decisions. I have the decisions that are most comfortable for me that I can defend. They want me to get rid of certain kids. Where are they going? Where they going? My theory is if I put a kid out, I've gotta answer for them. I always tell them (teachers who are having difficulty with a student and want them expelled) look at yourself; before you come here, look at yourself.
>
> -Joe

High visibility of principal

Not only do the UAHS parents move freely into classrooms, but Joe does as well. In many school environments, the principal does not leave the office unless there is a specific reason. Joe rarely goes into his office unless there is a specific reason. Joe walks by and peers, but commonly goes into every classroom at least several times throughout the day. In my experiences as an urban educator, many urban educators not only complain, but actually file a work grievance against their school district if the administrator enters their classroom to observe without prior notice. At UAHS, it is an open door policy. Joe casually walks through the halls, picks up paper, and on the rare occasion that students can be found in the hallway during the class time, he speaks with them. Joe doesn't want anything particular from any teacher, but he may chat with them about anything. If your classroom management is poor or your students are a bit loud or disorderly, he would not hesitate to step in and quell the disruptive behavior. He would also not hesitate in telling the teacher what he or she is doing wrong, in the classroom in front of the kids or in staff meeting.

Joe's presence is certainly noted by the students and staff. And it seems to add a feeling of security and reassurance to staff and students. Once, a verbal battle between

two students erupted, and within seconds, Joe and three other faculty members were there addressing the problem. And though the students were posturing as though they really did want to fight, they both looked relieved that Joe was there and immediately began to yell their side of the story to Joe. As usual, Joe made the kids solve it themselves, and then agreed to resolve the issue and make up.

Follow-up with student absences

From the inception of UAHS, good student attendance has been a primary focus. Joe and his staff, through their concern and vigilance, have been able to take students who were excessively tardy, truant or absent all together, and get them to school. The persistence of Joe, Khadija and the other staff members seems to have been successful; according to district data produced (as calculated by the state) in the annual report, the attendance rate was 97.6% for the '05-'06 school year. It is important to note that all of the students interviewed said that they had missed a considerable number of days at the traditional school or had altogether dropped out. But at UAHS, Khadija calls the home or parent of every student who is absent from school, every day. According to Joe, "once they're here, I can work with them. But I got to get them here."

Practical application: resolving student conflict in school

Joe is effective in helping students resolve their own problems with each other. In most student fights and confrontations, students are not suspended. Many of the students profiled in this study are from neighborhoods or homes in which violence is common, accepted, and in some cases glorified. Because of the pervasiveness and the normalcy of violence in the life experiences of some of these kids, it is not something that can be left

without intervention. But again, Joe has mastered a way of dealing with conflict that is culturally and socially appropriate for the student population that he serves.

UAHS is school with a relatively small population of roughly 100 students; therefore, whenever a conflict happens, Joe facilitates students' resolutions to their conflict. My field notes capture how Joe often facilitates conflict resolutions:

> On this particular day, a problem erupted on the bus. And as usual, the problem followed the students into the school after they arrived in the morning at the start of the school day. As Joe and I stood at the center of the school, engaging students as we normally do, one girl started yelling at another girl in a very threatening and aggressive manner. The lead teacher, the normal classroom teacher and Joe and I took both girls into the office. It turned out that the two girls had previously fought, and that one of the students was acting in a way that was perceived to be aggressive by the other student.
>
> It was well known that, Joe would give beefin' students two options: either solve the problems—including walking down the hallway holding hands or going home. This time, Joe sat virtually in the middle of two girls, facing them to hear their gripes toward one another. He gave each student an uninterrupted chance to explain their point of view. When one student was talking and the other student interrupted, Joe softly kicked the interrupting student and said 'shut-up,' they smiled, stopped talking. After they explained their problem, he told the students that if they didn't solve the problem, they would have to walk down the hall holding hands. He remarked, "If you can't resolve it, then I get in and resolve it. You got 10 minutes!
>
> We all left the girls alone in Joe's office, then Joe weaved in and out of different teachers' classrooms for about 50 minutes. He had actually forgotten that the girls were in there until I asked him, 'Are they still in there?' Joe said 'Oh' as if to had suddenly remembered something that he had forgotten, and went directly to his office. The girls were in the office smiling—in fact nearly laughing and playing—together, and immediately proclaimed that '"We've solved it." It reminded me of infant children who cry for a few seconds until they get little attention, only to stop crying when they are noticed. But this method of solving conflict between students at UAHS was common and routine. And it worked over and over again.

This indicates that Joe had a tremendous amount of trust in the students. And simultaneously, in order for this type of conflict resolution to be successful, all parties must trust that the mediator is fair and just and not partial to either person. When

students first arrive, they are not sure that they can trust Joe, but within weeks of new

students' arrival, they trust and confide in him as they would a parent or very close

relative.

> Joe's approach was to include students as apart of the solution, and he found this to be sustainable and supportive of long-term solutions. In traditional school, students fight, are suspended, come back and the same students fight again. But at UAHS, students are part of their own solutions, and for UAHS, this has been a more sustainable and long-term solution where students have ownership. In one case, a male student offended a female student. Joe asked her to forgive him, and she refused. In order for the student to express herself truthfully —that she really was *not* ok with the student—and for both students to go along with Joe's recommendations, they must have trusted Joe. Joe said that when they fight, he almost always tells students that they must hold hands and walk down the hall or go home. He adds, "I never had a time when they haven't chosen it." There seems to be a strong desire amongst Joe and many of the other staff members to keep the kids in school.

But as noted, in cases of student conflict, Joe will attempt to negotiate a solution between

the two sparring parties. In another case, Joe and several of the UAHS staff were sitting

around talking. The school was quiet; students were in their classrooms, and classes were

in session. In an instant, there was a loud eruption of arguing and two students stormed

out of a classroom yelling at each other:

> In this case, a substitute teacher had apathetically responded to student gestures that had the potential for conflict. And so conflict erupted. Khadijah (UAHS's Community Liaison) rushed into the hallway, followed by the other staff and Joe. Two girls were arguing about a comment that one was an 8th grader (which she actually was, but she perceived the comment as derogatory). The 8th grade African American female student had a cellular phone with her, and a 10th grade African American female student said: "Ooooh, she not supposed to have that." The substitute teacher, probably either unfamiliar with the rules, or just wanting to quickly end any excessive conversation in class, said: "I don't care if she has a cell phone." Brandon, who is constantly involved in and instigates conflict, decided to fan the flame of the potentially contentious dialogue: "She said you a 8th grader." Almost immediately, the girls were facing off and throwing aggressive verbal attacks at one another.

Joe brought the girls into the Community Liaison/attendance office and started the dialogue with the females. He gave both women an opportunity to explain their interpretation of events. During that time, Khadijah verbally challenged a student's explanation of what happened. Joe immediately and forcefully responded, "I'm talking, wait! I brought them in here." (After the students, left he reminded her again: "We all can't talk at the same time, and I brought them in here.") The 8th grader kept mentioning other staff and the student who she felt verbally assaulted her. Joe kept saying "They don't run shit here, its my show! Now look at me when you talk." He told both girls: You've done an excellent job here. I told you that yesterday. I'm proud of you. I just told you that yesterday. Now shake hands and make up and go back to class." The 10th grader was ready, but the 8th grader wanted to explain more and didn't not want to apologize because she did not feel that she was wrong. Joe said to the 8th grader: "Shake hands; she didn't mean nothin' by it and you caused a disturbance." The 8th grader interrupted, "I didn't cause a disturbance." Joe cut in: "I decide that! Now look at me (getting in the 8th grader's face) If you don't look at me, I am going to think you think I'm ugly. Then, I'm going to call your mom and ask her to let us get married, and you'll be stuck with me for the rest of your life." Everyone laughs, and Joe is beginning to break the ice of a very tense situation. After a few moments, the students are shaking hands and agreeing to 'drop it.' Then they peacefully returned to class. Brandon agreed, again, to stay out of business that was not his own.

In a traditional school, the feuding girls would likely have been immediately suspended for bursting out of the classroom without permission and then issuing threats. But at UAHS, the students entered an intense conflict-resolutions session with Joe, came to a mutual understanding, and from that point on worked without incident.

Maintaining post-graduate relationships

It was clear that students who had previously attended UAHS came back to the school frequently; they could be seen there all the time. Many would express themselves during Rap Sessions. They felt a sense of commitment to giving back to the school and the students. When Joe would go back out into the community, he would frequently invite the former students back to speak:

Che: Mr. Joe Dulin!, I cant believe it's you.

Joe: Wazzup man?! How you doin'? I haven't seen you in years. How's your

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sister?

Che: Man. I can't believe it. She's good. Life has happened; I've been up and down, but I'm doing good now.

Joe: You're here now?

Che: Yup, I am the night time manager and cook.

Joe: Yea, I remember you and your sister. It's good to see you doin' well. We still in the same place, you outta come one by and speak to the kids. They need to hear from you. You can help them understand life, and give back.

Joe has these types of exchanges whenever he sees former parents or students. Many respond to his invitation and come back to speak to the students during Rap Sessions. The students see that after they finish school they can actually make it in life. But what may be less apparent is the extent of the relationship that students still have with Joe when they return. Tomika is a fourth-year student at a reputable all-female college. She had returned during Christmas, and had visited the school in December. She also had two cousins who currently attended UAHS. In January, she returned to the school again and asked Joe to help her to pay for her plane fair back to college. Joe willingly helped and remarked, "It's all apart of the struggle. Of course, whenever these former students return to the school with children of their own, Joe instantly has their support.

Background of Community

Advocate for Community Causes

> See I had my parents go down to the school board meeting, and they put it on TV I had them raise hell, and they stopped the damn meeting. Then they wanted to bargain then. I don't mind a protest. That's that America's about isn't it? See the thing about it is, I don't think I've changed as far as my belief system. But when I was in Iowa, I was doing the same damn thing with these white kids.
>
> -Joe

One of the behaviors that has given Joe a tremendous amount of trust, credibility, and rapport with the community is his involvement with issues in the community he serves. Joe has always remained in the loop of community affairs. He routinely tells students and their parents to come and tell him what is going on so that he can help. When Joe does find that there is injustice toward any students, but in particular students of color, he readily becomes involved. Joe's reputation in the community has become one of a community advocate. And his advocacy is generally in the interest of people who do not have a voice—generally Blacks and poor whites but inclusive of Somalis, Arabs, Hispanics, Latinos, Eastern European immigrants, ESL students or anyone else who has walked through the UAHS doors. Joe commented,

> I know how to organize. I'm an organizer. Heck, I organized about 12-15 schools in Detroit. So I can organize. I organized out there in Iowa. So I can get the people going. I don't back down. I got principles.

Joe's advocacy goes much further than what seems to be normal behavior of school administrators. This has allowed him to earn the trust and credibility of parents and community members. For example, once the local police called Joe and informed him that they would be picking up a male student from the school who had groped a female student. In this case, Joe did not permit the student from being arrested. It was Joe's opinion that the student was in school learning and had not caused any problems in

school. He didn't feel that the student's education should have been compromised. He felt that if the student committed the offense in the community, then that is where he should interact with the police and not in a school. Here is Joe's recollection of the event,

> Now, we had a kid here Wednesday that the police department said that he groped a girl. How does he know? They said his name came up. You can't come out here (to the school) godammit! I had them scared because I could have challenged it, but I didn't. But they can't take him from school.

Perhaps the most common and salient example of Joe's advocacy for students can be observed in his involvement in district's Student Expulsion Hearings and actual legal court cases. Here is Joe fondly reminiscing how he fights to keep Black students in school when they are disproportionately targeted by the expulsion hearings:

Me: I have been told by Khadijah that at these hearings where some principals (hearing officers) try to exclude some African American kids and you go to them and some of them—now this is how the story came to me—and you can clear it up. Sometime you might attend hearings; sometimes they trying to kick a black kid out of school for the rest of the year or out of all the district's schools, and you go to the hearing and say a few words on behalf of the student even though you might not have been the principle of the student at the point in time. Has that kind of thing happened?

Joe: Yeah

M: Why you do that?

J: Because I feel it's unjust.

M: How do you feel about the stories though?

J: Because I am a hearing officer. Somebody said this? They don't know shit about this man. They only know what I tell them. See this is a hearing when they want to put a kid out for the rest of the year, and the kids appeal to the board. The board has anonymous decision. If they don't like that they can go to the school board. The other day a kid (who the district was trying to expel), a woman said he hit her I said "well show me how he hit you." He said "he bumped up against me." I said, "I aint buying that." I carry a lot of weight on them things.

M: On the hearing thing...

J: Yeah you damn right that's why I get over. I watch out for black kids. I told them the other day not to be unfair toward Black kids. I've been doing this for the last three years, and I seen two white kids all the rest of them been black. I was shocked when I got a white. I said "we finally got some white kids out of this school system." But of course they (Whites) don't come in (to the hearings) because they got options. I come back and tell the kids that I made sure that this kid wasn't kicked out. I never tell who he is or what. But, you damn right that's why I'm there I'm suppose to be the one that's fair.

M: If you weren't there do you think that a lot more kids would be . . .?

J: Oh yeah! Yeah I had a guy the other day from transportation, He was there; he says, 'I know this woman, and she tells the truth all the time.' How do you know she tells the truth all the time? Boy, and you know and see whites think they right; they don't know.

J: I got to look out for them. I got to. Who else is in this district is going to look out for these black kids? Who? Give me a name of one. Give me a name of a black administrator who will stand up for these black kids. I don't care about white opinion. . Just like the other day we were talking about this equity and diversity. We've been talking about it for two years. Where in the hell is the union going to come out and take a stand as administrators? Some of us have went down there, man, put it to the school board told me they stood up for her. Now I'm going after the teachers now. If they talking about they believe that then make a statement as an organization. Show me your colors. That's what I always say. I ask questions and . . . I 'm an advocate for kids. If I'm not an advocate for kids that I shouldn't even be here. I shouldn't be here. Who else is going to I tell the teachers who else are they going to? They (UAHS teachers) gotta come to the principal. You think I would stand by and let you put them (UAHS students) out? Uh, Uh. The final say so is mine. So, and that's all I'm after and I don't know anyone else who does it like that. But I want to do it. And if I die in this process then I get mad, but I want right for these kids. Why am I a teacher? We have an election and the first thing this white boy do is elect all white people I object. I went on a rampage. All you got is white people on that committee except for me. One of them resigned man, they didn't get elected. They been holding all this power for all them years. That's my job. My job is to raise the questions for them people who don't have the power. Like I tell the kids, come tell me. I can go places you can't go. I can say things you can't say. Just like parents call here I say call me back and tell me what they said.

Similarly, it is not uncommon for African American students to face legal challenges in court systems, and some of the students at UAHS are no different; what may be different is the involvement and advocacy of the principal in those cases. He or Khadija frequently show up for students when they have hearings. In the past, they have even testified for students in court. Joe knows that the Zero Tolerance policies disproportionately affect African American students, and he tries to "do all (he) can to stop that from happening in this district." As described above, Joe attends the hearings, and adds input, much more than what is required so that he can advocate on behalf of the voiceless children and families in the district. This has given Joe tremendous credibility and trust in the community, which opens doors to Joe in his leadership in the school and makes him a more effective school leader.

Community trust in the UAHS staff

The trust that the community members and students place in Joe is strongly linked with how much Joe actually knows people in the community. Joe routinely visits families of students in their home. If they have an issue with the any school in the district, or central administration, they discuss the issue with Joe. Likewise, he sees himself as an advocate for their causes. This reinforces a deep trust that they have for him. It was clear why the community trusts Joe, and it was related to the strong relationship and presence that he has with the community. I wondered how he was able to build trust from the beginning of his career at UAHS. Joe explained how he gained entrance to the community through his own desire to be apart of it, his recognition that it was necessary for school success, and his inclusion of staff members who were from the

community he was serving. I asked him about the staff members who were instrumental at the inception of UAHS. He responded by saying, "In the beginning I had a secretary who had grown up in the community and knew everyone."

Black administrators, identity and fairness

Several of the participants interviewed in this study—parents, teachers, community leaders, students and Joe—feel that many other Black administrators are much harsher toward black kids than on white kids, and more harsh on Black students than are white principals. Newspaper articles referenced earlier seem to corroborate their sentiment that the African American principals in the traditional schools may be even more punitive than their White peers toward Black students. As evidence, parents cite that Black administrators would suspend Black students much more often, for similar offenses, than they suspended White students. A 2005 article in the city's local newspaper (see Table 1) substantiated the presence of this community's outrage as it described a forum held by Black parents in a local church. Black parents charged that one Black principal in particular was very unfair toward Black children. Their voices were heard, and the Black school principal was moved to another school in the district and eventually demoted. The perceptions that Black parents held of other White and Black parents remained. Parents featured in this study described him as being fair and always hearing both sides of the story. Here is Maggie's (UAHS social worker) description of Joe's fairness:

> I think there are several you know, black principals that you know, their main thing is to say, "Oh, I'm, I just be fair, I don't see color." I surmise that most of those white principals are seeing color, then why so many black kids in proportion to their percentage in the district, why are they three and four times more likely to get suspended? They don't have the monopoly on misbehaving and stuff.

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At their other schools, the kids know it, they get into a thing, the black kids get suspended, the white kids get you know, in-house detention, don't have to lose no days. Black staff complain about it, even white teachers have told me, they said some of that stuff would be going on with some black kids, it's just not fair."
-Maggie, UAHS Social Worker

Joe, Khadija and several parents all agree that the excessive and overrepresented Black-on-Black punishment is a problem, and that it has been substantiated by the one of the Black principal's demotion and transfer, the community forums, and the newspaper articles that purport it is indeed true. Everyone interviewed for this study, however, viewed Joe as being fair with the students.

Chapter V. Presentation and Analysis of Data:

<u>Leadership Behavior and Student Outcomes</u>

This chapter describes leadership as it happens at Urban Alternative High School

(UAHS); it presents data that come from extensive interviews and conversations with

UAHS principal, Joe. Here, we describe how he provides leadership for teachers,

students, parents and even the community at-large. The accounts included here shed light

on how trust, rapport, credibility and mutual assistance all play a role in establishing an

environment in which kids can succeed in school. The most salient feature of Joe's

leadership as related to students' school success, was the relationships that he developed

with the students, their families, the UAHS staff, and the local community. These

descriptions show that Joe relied on these relationships for successful leadership at the

school, as much as the student and community relied on him; home visits, parent

breakfasts, personal delivery of report cards and progress reports, and close contact with

students and their families not only kept the students in line and reinforced the UAHS

school culture, but these activities kept Joe informed and allowed him to more effectively

lead.

The data show that effective and relevant school leadership, strong relationships

and positive school environments led to school comfort and success, both academic and

social, for students. It is clear from the data that even in the rare event when a student is

not doing well academically or behaviorally at UAHS, the alternative modality of student

identity of being smart, academically successful, or well behaved is readily accessible

and accepted by all. Indeed, the school environment and efforts of the school leader, Joe,

and his staff seem to have tangible results. The data show that the strong relationship

with the community—both school in community and community in school—played a major role. Parent-teacher conferences are held in the students' homes, and the Saturday morning breakfasts for parents reportedly have 100% attendance. There was great overlap between the school and community. The success of the school is evident and the disproportionately low suspension of the African American at-risk students is easily observed at UAHS.

School Leadership

This section describes the leadership that Joe provides to the students, teachers and parents. Further, the section details the autonomous nature that Joe demands for UAHS and the occasional confrontational posture that he exhibits toward the teachers and central administration in the district. As mentioned earlier, the unit of analysis is Joe— UAHS principal; it is noteworthy that many current UAHS teachers previously taught in traditional schools in which many at-risk children are unsuccessful. Joe is a principal who is fiercely independent and frequently abrasive, yet very personable and caring. His character is described here as one that maintains a significant rapport with the community of people that he serves, and is accommodating of the culture and social norms that are characteristic of his student population. Both flexibility and rigidity can describe his behavior; for example on the one hand, he maintains a very strict attendance policy—the students can expect Joe or Khadija at their doorstep if they are inexplicably absent for more than a couple of days; but on the other hand, Joe is understanding of the students' neighborhood influences and may only have a student write an essay if caught with marijuana—an offense that would certainly lead to suspension and severe reprimand in the traditional school.

A noticeable trait of leadership that is not described in this research is instructional leadership; Joe does not provide this for his teaching staff because he "let(s) them be experts at what they do." This frustrated some teachers and empowered others at UAHS. The emphasis of Joe's leadership at UAHS is to improve the academic and social behaviors of students, not exclusively academics (increased knowledge of content area subjects). His actions indicate that he doesn't really care about high-stakes standards and what content the children are learning. Rather he cares more about their attitudes and disposition toward learning; he asks students about their laziness in class or their willingness to attend. The description is that of a school leader who primarily encourages good classroom management of teachers, a good academic work ethic, good behavior ethic, and plans for post-secondary schooling from students.

Principal's personal relationship and rapport with students

> "It's important to take chances on them, to believe in them. Make them feel good about themselves. Establish your self worth. Nurturing and caring, and be involved in your community. But, nobody comes in here and disrespects me"
> -Joe

This remark by Joe elucidates not only the warm care and trust, but also the confrontation and demand for respect that Joe exudes. Joe says he believes in all students, and in turn, they trust him. Once, someone stole a digital camera from school. Joe had a Rap Session about it. In the session, he said that the stealing was jeopardizing a lot, that family does not steal from family, and that there would be consequences if the camera was not returned. He said that it would be returned anonymously and that no one would know, but just to go and place the camera back on his desk. Shockingly, the camera reappeared. It was not surprising that Joe would tell no one who had the

camera.or did he share the information with other staff members. Here is Joe's description of what happened,

> "We had a camera missing you know. That was gone for about two or three weeks. Whoever got the camera, I don't care who got it, I said just bring it back. I get it back, they want to know who did it. I said none of your got damn business. I said it and the kids know that, and that's how I, I can't tell who had that camera to the rest of them. They would take it out on the kid all them nasty things they was saying. My thing was bring it back. As soon as I go take the camera back they say who had it. Was it so and so? I said I don't think so but, I got it. Oh it's so important that the kids feel that they can trust you."

On another occasion Joe has walked into houses with illegal drugs all over the house. I asked him, "Did they know you were coming?" He replied, "Yes, but they know I wouldn't say anything." This is the type of trust that has allowed the students to let down their guard when dealing with Joe. The students trust Joe, and to some extent the UAHS staff. One former UAHS student described him as an 'always in your face type of principal:' He confronts students with their bad habits and does not allow problems to go on unaddressed:

> As the students enter in the morning and during their hall passing times, Joe engages students about their status and progress: "Who is that, Mike? Mike, the teachers are saying you're lazy in class, and you don't speak in class." Mike shrugs shoulders and keeps walking. He goes on to his locker, but moments later crosses Joe's path again. Joe looks at him. He responds: "But I'm trying harder though.

This intimate knowledge that Joe has of each student allows him to constantly confront and encourage the students toward positive growth.

Intimate knowledge relationships: specialized advice for students

Each morning, Joe shakes the hand, converses, or jokes with every single student and parent in the school. He stands at the door at the end of the day and often gives them parting advice as well. He takes this time to get them straight if they need it. For

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example, sometime a student may enter the school with a questionable shirt. Joe will interrogate the student about the meaning of the shirt, and if it is problematic, he will have the student change. He has extra shirts on hand. The same may happen if a female student wears something that Joe or the staff consider too provocative. A student who is under the influence of any alcoholic beverage or drugs, if who has been abused, or who comes to school with an troublesome attitude, Joe catches it as they enter the school. Students may enter angry or worried, and within moments, Joe has them laughing and getting ready for school. An example described in my field notes of Joe catching students and straightening them out on the way in is that of Devan.

> Joe does not tolerate sagging pants, especially if the student's underwear of students is visible. Devan— an African American male student who walked with a swagger common in urban centers—entered with his pants sagging below what was acceptable to Joe. Joe told Deven to exit the school and fix his pants. When Devan returned, his pants were still not at an acceptable level. Joe sent him back a total of 5 times until his pants were at an acceptable level.

Joe demonstrates a toughness yet deep compassion for the kids. He remarked,

> I greet every student when they come in every morning, and it means a lot to them. Folks were up fighting all night and didn't get any sleep. Sometime a kid comes in and says: 'Joe, I can't do it today.' We have a good relationship.

He would get them to try. But it is also a very comfortable time for students that Joe uses to build a relationship with students and push them toward improvement. In staff meetings, the staff discusses every single student and their progress. So Joe and all of the staff members know how each student is doing. Joe has ongoing conversations with students throughout the day regarding the student's status in school and their personal lives. For example, Joe converses with another student about their mother:

Joe: "How did that turn out with her (your mother)?"

Student: "Ain't nothin' really changed with it

Joe: "Well when something changes with it, come to me and tell me.
                Matter of fact, tell her to call me.

One day during lunch time, Joe walked into a group of students who were

grouped together and congregated in the front entrance of the school. He jokingly, but

seriously, jumped right in, and although the students reacted to his presence, he easily

gained entry to their issues:

Students: Shhhhh.....here come Joe

Joe: Don't shhhhh cause I'm here, what ya'll talkin about?

Student: None of yo business, dang!

And within seconds, Joe is in the middle of the discussion, and they trust him

enough to continue and involve him in the discussion. Although Joe is adamant on

students solving their own problems, "cause you ain't gonna always be there to solve it

for them," the students always seem relieved when he steps in. He later commented that

it was some "he said, she said stuff" (i.e., gossip) and "that it is always a problem with

students." He helped two students solve a problem.

School leader personality and behavior

Joe is a charismatic and unorthodox school leader. He skillfully uses profanity

and comical put downs, anomalies and real-life examples, persuasive speech and

challenges to push students into a direction that he sees as positive. They usually respond

positively to what he tells them. These personality and leadership traits have indeed

given him an edge in his trust and rapport with students. Here is Joe commenting on his

use of profanity,

> Well I tell them I use profanity. They can't be like I do. I cuss, I've been cussing in schools every since I can remember. I use to tell them, " Bernard, get your fat ass over here." The Catholics they can cuss a lot, they use substitute words. I remember 50 years man nobody told me anything about cussing. I don't call people names . . . I go in there (Rap Sessions, but also district board meetings and parent meetings) and start cussing. It's a technique, you know. That's part of the games . . . I chew (you) out and then apologize.

His confrontational stance with students also gains him respect, for if they know anything, they know they cannot play games with Joe:

> I have never not used this phrase, "I don't take no shit." And some of the kids say, "Mama did you hear?" I say she heard me. I ain't taking no shit. I am 72 years old. I ain't taking shit from anybody and that includes you.

This disposition is starkly different from what teachers and administrator did in traditional schools. Joe was constantly in the face of students, but this allowed him to deal with their problems and issues. In sharp contrast, the students in this study reported that their traditional school principals would neither deal with their problems nor confront their deviant behaviors. In most cases, the traditional school principals were unaware of any behaviors until the student was already in severe distress. Then, the typical administrative behavior was to remove the student from the classroom or school. The tendency of the traditional school leader was to 'back their teachers' when they wanted to get rid of a bad kid. Joe would not get rid of students; rather, he would send troubled kids back to the teacher's classroom, or to their rival student, to solve the problem. Traditional school administrators were less combative than Joe, but were far more detrimental to the educational success of at-risk kids.

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Compassionate Humor

One of Joe's behaviors that puts at ease those who have contact with him is his humor. Joe is most humorous with the students, but the teachers and parents also spend a fair amount of time laughing with Joe. I asked Joe why he joked and laughed so much with everyone. He maintained,

> Oh, it fosters relationships; it fosters trust. Then they will talk to you. It's because of me that these teachers survive because they've seen me do it. I tell kids I'm their daddy. Their mother is coming in. Sure is. But they know that. I go in the community out there by the (housing) projects. They love that man, and after that they trust me and then they talk to me."
>
> -Joe

Joe uses comedy as a way to build relationships and trust among students, staff, and their parents. This charismatic feature of his approach to leadership of UAHS has given him entry into the personal lives of students who seem to have assiduously guarded themselves their entire lives. Many of the recently referred students to UAHS seem to be introverted and very protective of their own emotional and psychological space. Many would describe themselves as angry. Joe said that none of his students "have had any positive school experiences prior to coming" to UAHS. On the first day in the initial parent-student-administrator meeting, and within a few weeks, Joe would have earned the trust of, and the entrance to, the students and their lives. Some of this has to do with the reputation that Joe already has in the community he serves. Comedy and humor are a couple of the tools that he uses to make a smoother entry to their communities and lives. Sometimes, students would not be in the mood for playing with Joe. In those cases, Joe would back off, or use casual conversation to address his students' needs. Lastly, Joe does not joke with all students. With some students, he simply asked how their mother, or grandparent, or aunt, was doing and might reiterate what he expected of the student

during that day, and kept moving. Joe knew which students he could be humorous with, and which he used some other avenue to stay abreast of how the student was doing.

Typical mornings

Joe greets every single student in the way into the building. Primarily, he takes this time to observe the condition of persons entering the school. He has sent both staff and students home because they were troubled from the night before.

> On my first visit to the school, Joe joked with three students, one after another in succession, "God somebody smack him 'cause he's too ugly" and then to the second student to enter, "did ya mama ask how I was doin'?" "Naw!" the student responded. "Why not, she never told you we was in love?" Joe said. And to the third student he hit across the head and said "I might keep you (from a field trip) 'cause you so ugly; you ain't goin today!" "Aww, why not Joe?! Yea, right," the student asserted as she smacked her lips, "I'm goin'!

The students and staff would place Joe at the butt of jokes just as easily, but everyone seemed to know their limits. If Joe needed to discuss any issues with any of the staff or students, he would easily transition from the humor to more serious issues. His morning contact with students cut through the tension that students come with, and the tense disposition that many typically have toward school officials. Every current and former student interviewed mentioned that Joe met them every morning on the way into the school, and that because of this, they knew he cared.

Rap Sessions

> I told them that I don't have that much time left in life that I've decided that my efforts are going to be focused on the boys because they need the help. I can't do it by myself, I need some help. They (black boys) go rob the stores and there's cameras all over the damn place. Man ain't got sense enough to know that they taking pictures of themselves, and here's the girls. They (the boys) had three or four babies by different women. You're not helping. That's why I reward the boys because I go in these prisons and this is what I see, I see boys and they always be dumb. They don't finish high school.
>
> -Joe (During a Rap Session)

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In addition to the mandatory interviews discussed in Chapter 4 as a way to build relationships and school culture, Joe leads Rap Sessions (formerly called 'Family Hour' because community members are always welcome and attend) at UAHS for students and the community. Rap Sessions are one of the ways that Joe forged a direct relationship with students, redirected their attitudes and aspirations, and shaped school culture. Rap sessions, more than any other UAHS activity, allow students to become expressive about their education. All of the students examined and interviewed for this study stated that UAHS was different (from their traditional school) because Joe and the teachers cared. When I asked students how does Joe care, how does he express caring? Students cited 'Rap Session' as one of the primary ways that students knew Joe cared. It is here that they were left with no options, except to take ownership of UAHS, of their own education, and their futures. They were challenged on these issues in each Rap Session.

Rap sessions were scheduled at UAHS every Wednesday at 11:00 am in the school's center. Each student grabs a chair from a classroom and set the chairs up in the middle of the school. In the sessions, students are allowed to say anything they wanted about any staff or another student with complete immunity. Many former students described the sessions as therapeutic and empowering. One morning Joe and I had breakfast at a local diner. To our surprise, a former UAHS student was the manager at the restaurant. One of the first things he said was, "Mr. Joe Dulin! Aww, I think about ya'll all the time. And the Rap Sessions! They helped me so much."

Students may have been angry about things in their personal lives; if they perceived a teacher or principal was picking on them, they could be as forcefully honest as they wanted to, not in class, but in the Rap Sessions. The staff and Joe had a chance to

be honest about students as well. Rap sessions were for, and directed toward, students.

Sometimes staff would get carried away on one student and Joe would step in to redirect

the session,

> See the problem I have with some of these teachers in the rap session is when we get off on Jonny, everyone wants to kick Jonny's butt. No! We can kick his butt two or three times, but that's enough. Let's move on to something else. We're not trying to kill anybody. We can push it too far. So when some teachers get mad here, what they do is go around talking to each other trying to get people on their side.

The purpose of the rap sessions seems to be to change the way the students think about

themselves, the world, and how they might fit into the world in the future—essentially to

shape school culture. Joe expresses the purpose of sessions in the following terms:

> (Rap session) lets kids express themselves and reminds them of their responsibilities . . . It relieves some of their frustration. It gets them together as a group to talk about commonalities. You talk about dos and don'ts. You talk about loving each other, you talk about respecting each other. You can talk about anything you want to talk about. Talk about boys taking advantage of girls, sex.

Rap sessions also tackle head-on issues that confront students their age: sex, selling and

using drugs, prison, school failure, cutting class, negativity, racism, conflict, and

progress/improvement among other things. Joe confronted one of his students about their

behavior in rap sessions:

> I ain't havin' you come back and disturb the peace" (Speaking to a student who wanted to return to UAHS after leaving). "You didn't follow the rules when you were here, so why should I have you back, so you can continue to go against all the teachers?" (The student, who was there temporarily on a visit, was not allowed back).

To another student:

> Now Cheryl, you have been a problem for your teachers because you focus on negativity, and that's not going to get you very far in life. I wanna see a positive change from you.

At every rap session, it would be a different student, or groups of students, that Joe would either remark to, or challenge their notions or comments they made about relevant issues about life. He would admit to really criticizing and embarrassing students. I asked him about this and he said,

> Once you knock them down, you gotta pick them up by encouraging them to get up; you gotta fight. Stay on your back, somebody will kill you; somebody will walk over you. When you take them to a certain level, when you offer advice, talk to them in a positive manner; you still gotta wrap your arms around them.

One of the ways that Rap Sessions would mirror the cultural capital and background of the students is that invited speakers could speak about issues relevant to their circumstances and interests. Quite frequently, the Rap Sessions would have guest speakers from the community. Actually, the Rap Sessions, and the guest speakers in particular, are most telling about how the school culture validates and accommodates the cultural capital reflective of the student demographic. Speakers were affiliated with churches, other schools, the police force, or even motivational speaking. I asked the community liaison staff member and a group of students "Who was the most memorable guest speaker? The students responded, "The representative from the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the warden from the local prison. They thought both speakers were dynamic and motivational. Students had laughed, cheered and verbally agreed several times with the speakers' sentiments. The students were entranced yet challenged. It seemed to be an indication of their very strong engagement with the speakers. Either of these speakers may have been controversial at the traditional schools in the district, or even in large urban school districts. The discussion from the NOI minister was very relevant to the cultural background and capital of most of the students; for example, he spoke of the history of Hip-Hop music, the role of local radio stations, and how it can have either a

positive or negative effect on society and students. The warden of a prison may not seem controversial, but schools in some urban cities may complain about the message that kids take from being visited by a prison warden. His message may have caused an outcry: "If you keep messing up in school, you will end up like the guys that I own." In this case, Warden Mitchell was African American, and has been coming to the school for years. He has connections to the local community, and is very explicit and detailed with the students about what will happen if they do not finish school and/or end up in prison.

The Rap Sessions are used to reinforce the normative culture of the school. Joe engages students by having them speak regularly in the sessions, and this seems to reinforce certain concepts amongst students. On one rap session, Joe asked: "What do you like about this place, anybody?

Student 1:	I like that you can go talk to anybody.
Student 2:	I like the small classes, not like Harrison School
Joe:	We're family, and if you don't know why, maybe you don't need to be here.
Student 3:	They treat you like family here.
Joe:	Why? What do you mean?
Student 4:	I feel whole here, like I am accepted for who I am.

The conversation went on from there to Joe explaining that they all needed each other, but they had to all act like they wanted to help each other. They spoke for about 20 minutes. Joe uses the Rap Session to reinforce school culture as a family atmosphere and community.

Personal Relationship and Rapport with Community

"He's (Joe) hard on them. But he works with them, "You gotta problem? you need to come and sit down and talk to me. Well, let's figure it out." He tells 'em, "There's always good in you, no matter what. Let's bring that good out of you.' I interact wit people here more that I did my other school because they *let* me interact with my child. There is always an open door policy. At (the other schools) they didn't, and to me, if I need to call before I come, you're hiding something, okay?

-Nikki (parent of 2 girls at UAHS)

A primary element of the UAHS environment associated with effective leadership is the strong relationship that Joe and his staff had with the community. The local county Intermediate School District (ISD) reported in the 2005 'High School Senior Exit Survey" that 75% of UAHS students reported that they frequently "experienced teachers who communicated with my family regarding my education/career development;" only 16% of students in the country reported frequently feeling the same way about the relationship between their parents and teachers. This is a function of Joe's leadership. When compared with their experience in traditional schools, many UAHS teachers seemed to maintain a closer relationship with students when they taught at UAHS. Parents overwhelmingly see Joe as a savior for their kids' success in school and life. An indication of the accessibility and affability of Joe is that he (as well as all of the staff) is on a first name basis with students and community members. He has a strong connection with many entities in the community, such as neighborhood residents, churches, and small businesses. He has taught many of the parents, and even some of the grandparents of some of the current students at the school. Joe relies heavily on the initial mandatory interview to forge a relationship with the parents of UAHS students. Joe routinely visits students' homes unannounced. He will take a sick or disorderly student home just as quickly. Parents have a strong trust in him, and as is indicated in other accounts included

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in this research, even call on him in issues not related to their children's education at UAHS. He has credibility in the community, and Joe recounted how parents placed that trust in him: "See, I know their parents. I knew *his* (Billy—the phys ed. teacher at UAHS.) mother; he was a student here. She told me, "Shit, kick his ass!" and that was it. Joe never had any problems out of Billy. Because a mother would tell Joe to physically reprimand her son (Joe has not ever physically reprimanded students) suggest that Joe has tremendous trust and credibility in the community he serves. Virtually anything that Joe asks of parents will be supported because of this credibility. By protecting the identity of offending students and community members, Joe makes a conscious effort to secure this credibility among students and their families.

In Harold's opinion, the delivery of the report cards is perhaps the strongest connection that the teachers and other staff have with the students. He describes his role: "See, we deliver the report cards directly to the home, and on the report cards, we give a grade and a narrative explaining why the student got that grade. It used to just be the narrative, and before that it was just past/fail, but now its both (grade and narrative) because so many of our kids are going to college now and they need a grade."

Delivery of Report Cards and Home Visitation

Report cards that include both letter grades and narratives are delivered to the homes by teachers or Joe; everyone on staff has 6 to 9 report cards to deliver. Indeed, the home visits help teachers understand student actions and behavior. The biggest benefit to UAHS of the home visits is the maintenance of trust and rapport with the community. When Joe and the school staff speak with parents regarding their child, parents are far more informed and more willing support recommendations made by teachers and

principals. This is another way to ensure involvement from parents who may not

typically be involved in their children's education. These visits build positive rapport

with the school:

> Joe has known the family for over 34 years. Sheila's grandmother was in the first class of students at UAHS, and Sheila's mother attended some 13 years later. Now, Sheila is a third-generation attendee at the school. Joe had just arrived to the home from a prison where he had been talking to inmates. There were 8 children in the home, most too young to attend UAHS. Joe knew them all.

> Joe, with Sheila's report card in hand, began relaying educational and social advice about the academic progress of each of her kids, and not only Sheila. Joe was clearly comfortable there. He remarked, "This is a home I've been coming to for years."

> There is a mutual trust between Joe and this family. The family confided in Joe several other issues non-related to Sheila's school progress. As he sat by her mother's side, he turned to Shelia and encouraged her: "I feel honored to serve mother, father and grandmother. And that's why I push you so hard. You gotta change things, and that's why I push you."

> Sheila's grandmother described a relationship with the traditional school that could have been from the mouth of any student currently in school; the similarities are striking. She felt out of place and that the school did not accept her for who she was. Her behaviors, culture, speech, wardrobe, her family's activities, and her family structure, were not acceptable to teachers and administrators in her traditional school. When she got pregnant, it became a hostile environment, which caused her to become hostile. She was kicked out of the traditional school and began attending UAHS, which the school's first year open. Joe, sitting with his hosts, began to describe the context of the school at its inception:

>> "It (UAHS) was a holding ground for black kids. We had to build. The white kids and (traditional) school had a negative view of Black kids. Several kids were killed! They had to have some place to put these kids. The kids came, and they liked it."

> Joe continued, as he directed his attention toward the two former students:

>> "The attitude (of the kids) was getting in the way, but the parent felt they were black-balling Black students. We had to make people (students and their parents) feel like they were wanted at UAHS."

Sheila's Grandmother responded,

"Yea, and I felt like it too!"

After describing her experiences at the traditional school, Sheila's grandmother continued to describe her experiences and feelings at UAHS:

"They (UAHS staff) used to call us out. I went out of there crying many of days. When he (Joe) called me out, I said: 'I'm a tell my moma,' then he would say, 'Get her on the phone; let's tell her now!' and Joe would get on the phone and tell her."

Now, Joe summarized what he wanted Sheila and her family to remember, and finished:

"I enjoy this visit. We had some good times. I've been doing this for years. You know you can get in touch with me if you need me."

What became clear during and after this visit is that Joe was an integral part of this household and many others. He was not detached from the community he served, and was not scared to go into low-income neighborhoods. They relied on him for advice and help, or if parents rallied together on issues, for his support. He also relied on these parents for support in working with their children and on staying informed.

Mandatory Saturday Breakfasts

Mandatory breadfasts are served for parents at the school on 6 Saturdays throughout the school year. Breakfasts serve as a tocl for community building. For many years that UAHS had kept data, they have reported near 100% participation and attendance by parents or caretakers. Typically, all of the staff appears at the school early on Saturday mornings. The atmosphere is harmonious. Free breakfast is offered to parents, teachers and other staff, students, and community members. Unlike the home delivered report cards, the purpose of the breakfasts is not to discuss academic progress, but is an opportunity for parents and teachers to improve relationships. The breakfasts

are held in the gymnasium where students eat school lunch. Planned by the school principal and staff, the breakfasts serve to facilitate the social capital among African American and poor White parents in the community. Parents meet each other, the teachers, and other staff, to discuss general concerns about their children's education. Deals are made, agreements are settled and, as was the case when I observed, social networking produces tangible results. For example, one African American grandmother, caretaker for her granddaughter who lives in one of the larger subsidized housing complexes, was speaking with a White mother who lives in a different subsidized housing complex. They were joined in conversation with one of the teachers. Both complained their child was shy and would not speak up in class. The teacher explained he was involved in confidence building activities on some after-school days. The parents agreed to enroll their students in the after school activities. This type of bonding and opportunity development is similar to what Laurea described in mid-upper White educational communities.

NAACISD (National African American Community-in-Schools Day)

"I think I told you that, that it's so important to have parents feel that they're a part of things."

-Joe

NAACISD has become a widely celebrated event that occurs annually on the second Monday of February. Most recently, the NAACISD planning committee invited students out to showcase their work and talent. Cities across the country partake in the event, where African American parents are encouraged to go to their child's school; however, it is most commonly recognized by parents in the county in which UAHS sits. Last year, two nationally-recognized African American educators spoke to local

educators and community members. The sessions are well attended, and it gives Joe credibility in the community. The NAACISD event reinforces one of the keys to Joe's success—his ability to get parents involved in their children's education., but it provides an opportunity for Joe to get the community to rally around the issue of academic success for Black and poor White kids. His role as community leader transcends his role as school leader at UAHS. People across that section of the state and in that city find it easy to support the goal of NAACISD. After they visit their child's school, and visit the scheduled events for that year, there is Joe—seemingly behind it all. When Joe calls one of the parents to request help in dealing with that parent's child, there is rarely a hesitation. The child is left with few choices other than to conform to what Joe and his/her parents are asking. These findings confirm that there is a tendency for both African American students and their families to be disengaged from the traditional schools. However, the findings here suggest that NAACISD and other community events, as well as the principal's leadership behaviors can effectively mediate this tendency for disengagement.

Relationship with Teachers and School Staff

"You, you said you wanna be a social worker then you better get on out and get your degree, if you don't, I'm gonna, have to fire you, you gonna have to leave away from here," he said, "'Cause you ain't gonna do me no good and stuff," he said, "You just," he said, "You need to do what you said you gonna do," and I had said I was gonna be a social worker. He said, "You not getting any younger, so do it," I think I was probably in my thirties. So I went on up 'cause he was serious and I wanted my job. He told me to go over to, get my social work degree, so that's what I did."

<div align="right">-Maggie (UAHS Social worker)</div>

Although Joe challenges his faculty, according to him, he does so in their, and the students', best interest. In the former example, he threatened the Social Worker with her job early in her career (over 25 years ago) because she was slow in getting her degree. She believed that he would fire her. Joe said he was "only bluffing." Joe has a variable relationship with school staff; one fraught with humor, personable conversation, confrontation, and criticism. He says, "I just talk to them, I challenge them. I try to work with them in their own conscience." Joe acknowledges that he can be challenging to teachers:

I can be dictatorial because I say this ain't going to be it and that's it. I don't care about that union (teachers' union) and I told them that. I'm not bothered by what the pres says. Some of these parents get very upset if anybody bothers me. That helps relationships, trust. And proven trust. No, I'm not into what people think about me.

Nonetheless, many teachers said that they have a close, warm relationship with Joe. Don, one of two African American male teachers at the school, and Gary, who is one of five white male teachers were both brutally challenged by Joe on their classroom management. Gary chuckled and said that when he first got to the school, Joe walked up to him and said, "Hey man, you got to control the kids better than that. Go by their house

or call. But if you send 'em to me, they'll never respect you." Don had a similar

experience concerning his brushes with Joe:

> He's confrontational. And students find that authentic and respect him for that.
> Because he's not one of those guys that will pat you on the back when you're not
> doing what you are suppose to be doing . . . but Joe is one of those guys that he'll
> call it the way he sees it. If you're not doing what's in the best interest of the
> kids, he'll say it, and it's not always comfortable for teachers to deal that. He has
> done so to me numerous of times. I never considered myself to be a nice guy by
> no means, but Joe told me I was being too nice. He told me sometimes you gotta
> put on your mean face and your scowl in order for the kids to realize that you're
> not playing, and that you mean what you say. And I took that advice to heart.
> Some of the other teachers took it personal. For example, here is a Black man
> who will outright say that he may not point out any names in the staff meeting,
> but he'll say that certain teachers are racist. Now you know, *YOU KNOW*, that is
> very, very confrontational. He'll say that you view these kids as if 'they're not
> worthy to learn this way. You as a teacher must realize that these kids learn
> differently. And if you are not willing to change to educate them, you're cheating
> them and that's racist."
> <div align="right">-Don, UAHS Social Studies Teacher</div>

Humor

Joe's humor was not restricted to students. When teachers come into the school,

the conversation seems to be very personable. Joe and the other male faculty members at

the school all come together and participate in many of the online sport-picks competition

contests and websites for professional and collegiate sports. One might actually mistake

the collegial morning conversation for an ESPN television sports show, but with wagers

being placed:

Joe: Awww, they ain't gone do shit, gimme 2 on Oklahoma

Don: Man, I don't know, USC is looking good

Joe: How much?

Don: 4

Joe: Oh!, Oh!, man, you crazy

Don: 4!, you'll see

Also, the staff is not exempted from Joe's trite humor as well. It turned out that one

former female teacher consultant took his humor and comments in the wrong way some

years back and sued the school district and Joe. So the jokes about how teachers look

seem to be addressed to male teachers:

> "You say you've been out hunting, but you come in here looking like an animal. You are one ugly guy."
>
> -Joe (talking to one of his teachers)

Joking happens during the morning greetings and throughout the day, and seems to warm

relationships between Joe and the staff. Though he may have ferociously challenged a

teacher about classroom management a day earlier, now things are cordial and perhaps

even good between the teacher and Joe. At minimum, the humor is an opportunity for

teachers to depersonalize professional discussions that they have with Joe.

Confrontation and advocacy for students

> I don't back down. I got principles. And teachers better be able to defend themselves. I don't allow them to come down here and expect me to give a punishment and kids are failing down there. If they haven't done anything then they will continue to fuck with them, but they won't mess with me. And that's what I do on teacher's. It shows your ineffectiveness.
>
> -Joe

Joe sometimes maintains a combative and confrontational posture toward

members of his staff and central administration when he feels that they are not acting in

the best interest of the students at UAHS. Usually, the confrontation is about the teachers

trying to remove students from their classroom or school. Joe maintains his credibility

with students and their families, and rarely blindly takes the side of teachers in a dispute.

Rather, he routinely challenges teachers on their notions and practices, and pushes them

to consider his version (or perhaps even the student's version) of events. Joe, who is

conscious on how to maintain his own credibility among students and in the community,

challenges teachers to maintain their own credibility:

> Yea because, if you bring 'em (students) to me all the time, that that doesn't
> establish your credibility. You got to establish your own credibility. The kids
> will start saying 'Watcha gone to do, go tell Joe?' you know, that's what they do.
> -Joe

Teachers placing students in the hallway for misconduct or poor behavior is

certain to attract Joe's attention and will likely lead to his intervention in that situation.

Joe begins by asking teachers why they placed the student in the hallway, but he will

nearly always end by telling the teachers that it is an unacceptable practice and by telling

the students to go back to class. This has enraged some of the teachers. One teacher

described how Joe ignored how, according to her, a student physically touched her.

According to Joe, Carrie is racist because she is always putting Black students in the hall.

So when Carrie approached Joe to speak about the incident, he ignored her for several

days. Her version of events is as follows:

> So I've had more problems with Joe than I have had with my kids and I try not to
> interact as much as I can, I try to control it, until I get to the point. Just recently I
> had a girl push up on me. She said she didn't put her hands on me, which is true,
> she pushed her chest to me while I was standing at the door and she got
> (inaudible) and she wanted to go to the bathroom, and I said no and I wanted her
> to watch a video that I was showing and that was, you know, certain things you
> have to, have to dismiss and go and take of, but for the most part, I just run my
> own management, take care of things myself the best I can and when I need
> reinforcement you know, you can threaten so far and then you gotta follow
> through on your threats, then you have to get Joe involved, you know, kinda like
> the last resort. Since Joe finally listened to me about after two days 'cause we had
> that Tuesday on break and he listened to me on Wednesday, he kept hollering at
> me on Tuesday that and the other staff jumped in to say, "Hey, this is what

happened," and he goes, "Well, I didn't know anything about it," I said, "Yeah, because you never talked to me. You never gave me a chance, you shooed me away. You told me, I'll take care of it. Well you never heard the story for you to take care of it and I just got pushed away." And then when the staff got on him on Tuesday, there was chaos in our staff meeting, there was some serious screaming at each other and then when, the next day the girl came in with a parent and Joe took her in and said, well you pushed a teacher, and heard the story from me, and he gave her a five day suspension. But she had sworn at me and I reported that and it just was... 'cause the girl was having a tantrum, she was screaming at me, and denying that she ever did it, but I, I started to think, this is my question that I have maybe you can hear me out on this is, when are these kids that are classified emotionally impaired, when do they become psychotic? When does that transfer over because I know there's more and more high school adolescents that are becoming psychotic. Okay, they're initially diagnosed with something, they have to be and I'm looking at the emotionally impaired, to me that would be the first way of taking that tangent off and when do we classify that as being psychotic?"

<div align="right">-Carrie, UAHS science teacher</div>

Obviously, this teacher did not like the fact that Joe ignored her complaints. According to Joe, she had already earned a reputation of putting kids out of her class for minor infractions. However, this constant threat of Joe challenging staff and central administration—often times open and in front of the students or their parents—seemed to serve several purposes. First of all, it seemed to lend credibility and the image of a fair broker to the children, their parents, and the community. Secondly, Joe does not necessarily confront staff members in order to gain credibility in the community, rather he does so because he believes that those he confronts are in error. However, credibility in the community and among families is a result of his student advocacy and staff confrontation.

Joe commented on the eagerness of some of his staff members to get rid of certain kids that are difficult in their room. Joe says that he makes these decisions based on the

student body's best interest, not in the teachers' best interest. In one instance, Joe would

not put Jerome out of school:

> They want me to get rid of certain kids. Where they going? My theory is if I put a
> kid out, I've gotta answer for them. They don't even come bitching, because they
> (teachers) know what I'm going to say. I always tell them, look at yourself.
> Before you come in here, look at yourself. I make teachers apologize too!

In a separate instance, however, Joe refused to take in another kid who had attended

UAHS but who had caused major problems within the student body and abruptly left

UAHS for the traditional school. Now that the kid was failing, he wanted to come back

at the end of the year:

> My supervisor called me and told me to take this kid and I told them this kid's an
> asshole and I had him before, so she said I think you need to come down and see
> me. When I went down to see her she brought the superintendent and I said I
> don't care who's here, I'm not doing it. She said okay. I act in the best interest of
> the kid.

There are no clear rules to what Joe will do. But what is clear is that he decides, by

himself, based on what he feels is in the best interest of the child in question, the school,

and entire student body. Joe also challenges teachers to consider alternative ways of

teaching students and not use excuses to 'not teach' the students.

Accusations of poor classroom management

> Joe has challenged all of the teachers on their weak classroom management. Joe's
> basic approach is to refuse to solve problems that the teachers face with students
> in their classrooms. If two students have a problem with each other, he doesn't
> suspend them. He sits down with the students, but usually without being present
> and pushes all parties to solve the problem. He used the same basic approach
> when teachers send problem students to the office. Teachers often become angry
> when he would send students back to the classroom without a suspension. Joe
> would, however, address some of the problems in staff meetings or by just telling
> teachers how they might be more effective.

I asked Joe about his accusations toward teachers and he said that he remarked,

I point out the teachers all the time because I believe that 85% of the problem is classroom teacher related, if they know how to handle the situation. I never have discipline problems out of my music teacher. I don't have a lot of discipline problems out of my language arts teacher. And then, they come and tell me I want you to put them out. Aint nobody telling me who to put our, shit! And I don't take kids who come down here by themselves after they send them. They better bring their ass down here too because there's two sides. And they aren't always on the right side. And I make teachers apologize too Got-dammit!"

Teachers seem to now know that Joe is not going to accept their discipline problems. Consequently, they have been forced to become creative in how they deal with poor student behavior in their class, to establish a transparent and frequently-communicated discipline policy to Joe, and to rely on Joe basically only in case of emergencies and gross student misbehavior. Here is a teacher describing how she became accustomed to the situation,

> I think that it's just still straightforward uh, you know, he, he wants us to deal with our own business in our classroom. If we can't deal with it in the classroom, then we have to get him involved, so he's like the last link before we can't, we've done everything we possibly can, calling home, talking to the parents, trying to get the parents in here, you know, stopping our class and calling the parents you know, right away. You know, if they don't have a phone number that I can reach from the room, I have to go out to the front room to do it.
>
> -Carrie, UAHS Science teacher

> "And so what happened is I had to reassess how I was doing things. Well how could I do this better? How could I do this where I've got the support of my administration? How can I set this up where my kids are gonna learn or be more successful? I, I thought in the beginning that Joe didn't like me very much. I felt like there was nothing I could do to please him or that it, it felt like in my mind that I was doing things right. He'd say, "Well why didn't you come and talk to me?" Well people don't wanna go talk to Joe because if he's in a bad mood they get stomped on. I felt like there was a lot of bias opinions so it's more like well how can I protect myself as well. But how can I let him know that what I'm doing. So a written form actually is much easier than verbal um, in the standpoint that there's less opportunities for communication errors because it's all there in black and white. So I developed a report form that I now use in my classroom to inform him every step of the way. And now there is mutual respect between us."
>
> -Marissa, UAHS Art Teacher

Constant discussion: the issue of race

Discussions of race, racism, and white privilege are regular conversations to the staff at UAHS. The staff is handpicked, and relieved, by Joe. Most of the teaching staff is white. Specifically, out of 13 teachers, 5 are Black and 8 are White. The two teacher coaches (consultants) are also white women. But Joe is Black, and most of the other non-instructional staff (social worker, counselor, and the para-educators) are Black. There have been instances in which entire staff meetings have focused on the issue of race, and it is regularly talked about outside of staff meetings as well. Both Black and White teachers have said this has helped them in dealing with the students at UAHS.

> In these meetings, the staff discusses race frankly and openly and in great detail. When I mentioned to Joe that he mentions the issue of race in the school quite a bit, he responded, "Oh, we must. Who do you think let them in here (i.e., gave the White teachers an opportunity to work at UAHS)?"

On Friday afternoons, the staff holds their weekly meeting. At one meeting, the issue of race was foremost. It seemed that teachers were comfortable discussing the issue:

Don: Here our kids are just students, but at (the other district high schools) the kids are black students"

Don: Many of the white teachers do not understand the dualism that black kids face. When black kids are intelligent, they are blamed for acting white. There was a funeral that I went to at my church of a young kid who had written about his experiences as an intelligent black student and speaking in that environment but he also had to know how to speak the common street language spoken by his black peers in Detroit. Kids will tell you that they view ding well in school as acting white."

Joe: Many white teachers can teach black kids, but they may not be able to Relate.

Mark: I don't know, I grew up right outside of Detroit, but I don't know about some of the racial issues that our students face.

Joe: Shit, everybody knows that at both High Schools in (the city), the black

> principals suspend black students far more than they do white students. Hell, they even suspend them more than white administrators suspend them. And they all have white spouses.

Joe: See, if a black guy is married to a white woman, he can't go home at night and say dam life is hard as a black man."

Mary: Black kids from Stoney Creek (one of the local Black low –income neighborhoods) or other low income areas are like "yea, I'm from Stoney, oooh, I'm tough, and that's why they don't make it at Harrison (the district's traditional high school) They lack an identity whereas me, as a kid in Detroit, I didn't have to prove that I was black and all of my teachers looked like me. I didn't have identity conflicts.

Joe: Well, we talked about what they don't know, but what do they know? What DO they know? (Joe pauses): Wow, it got awful quiet"

Joe has similar conversations about race with the parents and students. In fact, he previously used it as a catalyst to get parents to relate to his vision. In one meeting with a parent and her two female students who attend UAHS, Joe said:

> White folks don't bother me. I went to an all white school, an all white university, then I worked in an all white town for six years. Racism is bad in this city. I've been fighting it for years. And we should all be fighting it.

The mother enthusiastically agreed. Statements like this seemed to give parents the impression that he knew of, and was involved in, their struggle; it lent additional credibility.

Many school principals and district administrators avoid the issue of race all together in staff meetings and discussions. Racial wounds, suspicions and prejudices are not addressed. Joe has pushed race into the forefront of many discussions—to the point of discomfort for some teachers—about the students. Harold described how one of his White colleague's cultural insensitivity earned him a public reprimand in the hallway and later in a staff meeting:

"Like I have a, , a race and equity workshop you know, or series about, and our equity team you know, meets in the district and brings stuff back to the staff. But you know, one good example of an informal thing is, one of our former staff members was really upset with a kid continually, continuing to tap his or her head, I don't remember, who the kid was, but she kept like patting her on the top of her head and the staff member kicked her out because she was mad she was disrupting class. He kept telling her to stop and she kept doing it. Well it ended up that her braids were too tight and so she didn't want to scratch her head, and pull her braids out, she just tapped it. That was a good example of a cultural thing that came up in staff meeting; it was like, well you know, "Duh, don't you know?" That's how come, you know, that's how it was put, you know, in so many words, "She didn't want to pull her braids out, you kicked her out of class?" Every other kid in the class knew what she was doing and you're the only one that didn't know. You just get in an adversarial confrontation, and then she gets kicked out of the class, and although it probably wasn't bothering any of the students in the room, but because you didn't know why she was doing that, you know, she ended up being removed. And so that's how things come up sometimes you know, and I think that's very valuable, um, that was good lesson for me, you know, I mean uh, I don't know if I knew that before that incident or not, you know. And then we get into, you gotta talk to your kids, ask them why they're doing that you know. If your kids trust you, they'll say, "Hey, I'm just you know, my braids are too tight, my head itches or hurts," and if they don't trust you, they may not say that. With race, so, I'll ask the some staff members that I'm friends with about questions that I have."

-Harold, UAHS technology teacher

When Joe exhibits a confrontational or challenging stance with staff members whom he feels are unfair with the students, it is sometimes done with accusations of racism. In one case Joe suggested that it was a racist practice to place African American students in the hallway because the students had disruptive or confrontational behavior. Several staff members understood Joe to be referring to Carrie, a seasoned White female teacher. Carrie is a 50-something white female teacher that Joe accused of being racist. When I asked Joe why he hired her, he responded that "everyone makes mistakes," and that he will eventually pressure her so much that she will be forced out. "She's always trying to get rid of kids out of her room. They're all black kids. She ain't got but 4 or 5.

So you gotta look at yourself." Joe's accusations of racism were not directed exclusively

at White teachers:

> Black teachers, they get into the middle class stuff and they start acting like white people. (You can see this) in their attitude towards kids. I got a couple of them on their toes . . . racist. I told her the other day, she didn't want to know what the undercover racist is (she didn't respond to Joe when he asked). I was going to tell her, YOU! I say what I want to; I don't care if they go along with it or like it or not. That's the least of my worries. They (some of the Black teachers) grow into it. They think there are better kids than that. They forgot how it is to be poor. They don't have any understanding about what it is to be poor because they lost it all.
>
> -Joe

Joe argues that principals and teachers, some of whom teach at his school, forget where

they came from and start acting more harshly toward Black students in the district and at

his school. Statistics from the school data, as well as parental sentiments in the

community, seem to confirm this notion of heightened Black-on-Black punishment.

The role of race in teacher expectations

At first glance, the race of UAHS staff members seems to be unimportant because

the students experience tremendous academic and social achievement. In other words,

UAHS teachers of all races generally experience a tremendous amount of success with

the students. This data, however, suggests that teachers have differentiated expectations

of students. The race of the teacher seems to play a role in expectations that they have

for students. Observed in this study is that when students complain and say that they

have, for example, "had a bad night," or are "coping with something" in their personal

life, White teachers were more likely to give the students a pass on completing their

assignment or what was expected of them. Whereas when students "tried to get out of

doing their work" with Black teachers, they were not given a pass. Alternative school

and at-risk students have a history of academic failure, so it is not surprising that they

would look for excuses for not performing well in school. Two Black teachers

interviewed for this study, Don and Candice, would leave the students no room to wiggle

out of their assignments. Don reacts when a student does not feel like working:

> Like I don't allow kids to sit there and tell me . . . like a kid there this morning
> told me that he was sick and unable to participate in a writing assignment. I asked
> him "Tell me about a time where you have been ill before in the past and still
> been productive?" And he thought about it. I said, "So how is it different today?"
> You know, "how does your illness prevent you from writing?" Now I told him,
> "All I want to see is effort." And he finished the assignment.
> -Don, UAHS social studies teacher

> They, the reason they don't like me is because I'm strict, right to the point. Oh
> you're having a bad day, too bad, let's get on with it. Oh, you having a bad day,
> you're only one story in the big city. You must focus on what, what you gotta do.
> You gotta focus, we all had a bad day, but you gotta buck it up, let's, let's go. I'm
> here for ya, I'm gonna cheer you on, go, go, go, you know. And I see that
> happening with maybe a few students um, that are, either they move me out of the
> way, and then what I'm doing they've gotta do. They feel more confident and I'll
> ask them, "Do you like me now?" "No," and I'll say, "I don't like you either, but
> I respect you."
> -Debra, UAHS reading and library teacher

These two Black teachers had remarks that were very different from two of their white

colleagues who also taught at UAHS. Carrie and Donald mentioned that they gave

students a pass if they were having a bad day. It is not argued that all White teachers

would be lax on the expectations of African American students. Two other white

teachers interviewed for this study did not mention anything that would suggest that they

would allow students to pass on doing their assignment workload. But out of four White

teachers interviewed, two said they would allow students to disengage from their work if

the students offered an excuse. One of these two white teachers indicated that she did not

want to deal with the confrontation that may accompany her compelling a student to

complete the assignment. Black teachers interviewed were not willing to relax standards

for students who complained of a 'rough weekend' or 'bad night.' The following

statements are from White teachers who were willing to allow students some latitude in

disengagement from their regularly scheduled learning activities:

> "Well it's like the other day, I had a student he just wrote down a note to me, he was sitting back here in the corner and he just wrote a note and said, "You know, over the weekend, it's a really tough weekend, I'm going through some hard things and I'm really having trouble concentrating," and uh, you know, a student, he's being trying all year and it's not like that. He doesn't have a pattern of not wanting to do anything and, and I've seen a dramatic, drastic, no, dramatic, sorry, dramatic increase in how well he does even coming to school and so you know what, it's just one day and I gave him a puzzle, try to make a cube out of these foam blocks. I said, "Here, work on this until you know, maybe it'll help focus a little bit, take your mind off things a little bit," and uh, sometimes students they'll ask, "Can I go talk to the social worker?" and I say, "Yeah, that's fine," and they go, they say, "Can I go talk to Tina, across the hall?" and Tina's talked to students in the past and it's helped.
>
> -Billie, math teacher

> And if I pressure 'em just say, you know, "What's going on?" then they just give you a wall and they don't, they don't share anything. Um, academically, I, I don't really push hard on the kids, I kinda back off and then encourage 'em. If they're having a bad day, then they're having a bad day, I can't expect everyone to respond every single day. I mean sometimes I don't throughout the day, some days it's just like, hey I've about had enough and, but just tell them that can go back and do it. I don't make my work that if you turn it in late, you get, you lose your points. I want them to succeed, I want them to have the information because the ACT exams are coming up, the SAT exams are coming up for 'em and then the Michigan Merit Exams, so I wanna make sure that they can get all that, it doesn't matter when you get it, you know.

> When I really pushed, in the beginning when I got here, I pushed too hard, I really got resentment, so know when I just back off and say, okay here's the assignment today and they'll say, "I don't feel like it," I don't respond, I don't challenge them, 'cause it's like what for? I'm gonna getting a little chaos, I'm gonna disturb the rest of the class, for what?

> I'll just let 'em take it home, take the book from them and then they get the test back. I've had a couple kids that were really slow and I just got to the point where it was like, just use the book, you know, but I don't tell everybody, we just kinda keep it real low-key, done privately and then you know, (inaudible) their success on their academics then, some of them just will never have it, I know that, and I can't make them take a test like somebody else because it doesn't do any good. Maybe they'll learn more if they got to see it and practice it properly then if they tried to practice it and get it wrong they'd never learn anything.
>
> -Carrie, science teacher

After differences were noted in the interviews, I asked Joe if he noticed any differences in

expectation in teachers. He commented,

> "Black teachers don't take a lot of stuff that white teachers take because it's like
> the White woman said, I don't want to stir up any trouble. The Black teacher
> said, bring it on over here (the fight)....and bring your momma too. We
> understand when they talk, when they go over to the other high school, a kid from
> a group home, goes over there and sees the teacher and she says something. He
> says 'I'm from Detroit, I'll kick your ass.' Boy she scared now, you know you
> heard all these stories about Detroit. And that's what it is. Black kids talk a lot of
> smack. They don't understand the smack. And when they don't understand the
> smack that's when white teachers get in trouble because the black teachers go
> after them. But I have never been scared of them. I ain't scared, I ain't scared of
> dying now. They can get what they want. You die, you die."
>
> -Joe

Joe's comments here referenced the tendency of at-risk African American students

attempt to intimidate White teachers. According to Joe, White teachers are intimidated,

and Black teachers are not. I asked Joe who on his staff had lower expectations, he

remarked: "Mostly white teachers. They don't know how to push them because they

don't want to make them mad. Some of them are just certified saviors." Joe has

repeatedly referred to the unwillingness of teachers to address these population-specific

problems as teachers' failure of students.

Choosing and removing staff

Joe is responsible for what staff and teachers are present at his school. All

teachers who come to UAHS must first have an interview with Joe. In this interview,

they must agree to deliver report cards to students' homes and partake in other

educational outreach (community-based) activities. Joe has had a difficult time getting

rid of teachers if he made a poor choice in hiring a teacher. If Joe does make a poor

choice, he has generally been successful at pressuring the teachers to leave UAHS. For

this research, several documents dating back to the mid 1970's were reviewed; Joe was

reprimanded by superintendents and hearing officers because of his 'firing' or removing

teachers from his school. He felt that they were not able to work with the UAHS student

demographic population. The teachers union protects the position of teachers, and Joe's

action caused a series of complaints and law suits against the district. According to Joe,

these teachers were not in the best interest of the kids, and they had to go. With the

exception of one of his teachers, Joe seems to be happy with all of the teachers at the

school. As for this teacher, he is unhappy with her poor classroom management, and

therefore suspects her of being racist:

> **Joe:** There is a lot of under cover racism that goes on. There are a lot of habits and the whiteness comes out. You've got to gear yourself to know black kids. You don't know the black kids then you don't know the culture of the people. The other teacher aint worth shit 'cause she doesn't wanna teach all kids.

> **Me:** What makes you think that she may be an under cover racist?

> **Joe:** Oh because she always trying to get rid of kids out of her room. They're all black kids. She ain't got but four or five (good ones out there?). So you gotta look at yourself. She doesn't say anything in the staff meetings. She hasn't made any meaningful contributions to the staff meetings since I've been here. The most positive thing is she put that flower bed out there and took care of it all summer. I'm not impressed with her, I think I made a mistake. I'm trying to encourage her, she ain't going nowhere, but I can stay on her ass. I don't give a shit if she makes, like I was telling one of them I don't give a shit if you make an agreement with me, shit what do I care about a fucking agreement.

Relationship with Central School District Administration

Joe has a good working relationship with the central district administration. Generally speaking, Joe is autonomous in his leadership of UAHS. The central district administrators seemed to respect Joe's expertise in dealing with the students and seemed to recognize that Joe had much greater successes in dealing with the students than other schools in the district. For this reason, they have allowed Joe a very high amount of independence. Several district administrators come to Rap Sessions, including the deputy or general superintendent

Joe makes every attempt to be kind and respectful, but will fight anyone over 'the best interest of kids" even if they are central administrators. Joe will not hesitate to do whatever he thinks is in his kids' best interest, even when it comes to breaking district protocol. In one instance, Joe went against the wishes of district administrators because it was not in the best interest of the student:

> My supervisor called me and told me to take this kid, and I told them this kid's an asshole and I had him in before. So she said I think you need to come down and see me. I went down to see her she brought the superintendent and I said I don't care who's here, I'm not doing it. She said okay. I act in the best interest of the kids. Like this woman who called the other morning who wanted her son back. He goes to (a neighboring district). He acting up, he acting over here, but she always took his side. So stay over there and let them kick your ass. And he lives out of the district anyway, he just can't come back.
> -Joe

Disregard for other district norms, protocol or opinions

Joe makes school management decisions about what is best for the students at UAHS. He asserts that "no one else can do this job." He will listen to the opinions of his staff and to the district's central administration, but in a competition for Joe's vote, their opinions are no more validated by Joe than are the opinions of students, their parents or

community members. Joe maintains the same approach with other district norms and opinions.

When compared to other administrators in the district, one divergent practice that Joe implements at UAHS is the suspension policy. Joe is reluctant to suspend students. He would rather keep students after school, embarrass them in the hallway and Rap Sessions, and keep them from activities that they like than suspend them. Students mentioned that other principals in the district seem to be interested in getting *rid of the problem*, whereas Joe is more interested in *solving the problem*. Joe would only do what he felt was critical for the students' success. The district officials expect principals to attend School Board Meetings as well as meetings that principals held among themselves. But at one point in the schools development, Joe did not see it in the immediate interest of his student population:

> I didn't go to them meetings, I was trying to hold on here, but I didn't have the power until I got the parents organized. Once I got the parents organized, our students were transferred. They come in and leave. Then they start staying and you get a power base. Then you start guiding them. Parents need guidance too.

Leadership Between Flexibility and Rigidity

One of the characteristics that allows Joe to be more effective is the flexibility he employs when addressing problems or crises in the school. School and district rules are clear and consequences follow a student's infractions. This is understood by students and staff. It is highly reliant on the school and district rules. The loose coupling and flexibility can be found in Joe's response to violations of the rules. But because Joe is interested in solving the problems that the students face, and not only in removing them from school property, the responses to infractions can vary quite a bit. For example, if two students argue or even violently put their hands on each other, Joe rarely suspends

the students. He is far more likely to simply leave them alone in his office to talk, and will tell them, "You've got 10 minutes, and if you can't work it out, I will." Joe's response may differ from one conflict to another and could depend on whether these two students had a problem before, if they are generally good or generally disruptive, if the conflict seems solvable, if it is in conjunction with other cliques (there are no apparent gangs in UAHS), or on the severity of the conflict.

However, in other cases, Joe may seem to overreact when faced with seemingly minor offenses because of his insight that something else more dangerous is at hand. In one instance, Joe suspended a student for having a 'user' amount of marijuana—not usually a cause for suspension at UAHS. However, because the student was suspected of *dealing* the drug, Joe reacted firmly and enforced a 3-day suspension and mandatory parent conference. This encounter raised questions about how and when Joe decides to suspend a student. When asked if he suspends students, Joe elaborated on his position,

> Well, sometime we have to. But not usually. See, I don't have no problems here. And when the kids get into it, I tell 'em: "Now walk down the hall holding hands to let everybody know you're all right with each other now." And if they don't want to do it, shit, they can go home.

In his leadership, it is clear that Joe demonstrates the ability to both punish poor behavior and work ethic, but retain students in school as much as possible. Joe commonly hands out writing assignments. If a student is caught with marijuana or outside smoking, Joe will have the students write an essay about being responsible—something too lax for the traditional schools; however if a student is exhibiting a lazy work ethic, Joe and the relevant teacher will keep kids after school—something unlikely and far too stringent for kids at the traditional school. Students seem to know the type of offenses that will be punished, but the flexibility at UAHS allows Joe to more effectively punish the students.

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Academic and Social Outcomes of Students

In all cases, both former and current UAHS student said that UAHS had a tremendous impact on the way they viewed school, their own education, their behavior, and their plans for life after they had graduated from high school. Five former students and five current students (total 10) were interviewed for this study. Each former student interviewed for this study said that he/she would have dropped out of school, but after being recommended to UAHS by the traditional school or parent, completed high school. Two of the former students interviewed actually did drop out but returned to school at UAHS and finished. Each of the former students finished high school, while one student eventually got a GED because he "just wanted to be done with school and had enough credits to graduate, but I just didn't feel like waitin'." Each of the students was working. One student, Ahmed, an Arab American student who was from an affluent background but who identified with a Black ghettoized culture, had actually served time in prison for attempted murder over a craps (shooting dice/gambling) game that went bad. He was now a successful owner of an RV dealership in Arizona. What is relevant about this data is not the graduation rate or the mid-low income jobs that many of the former students now held, it is the change in perception about their education and school staff, themselves, and their own futures. So often people influenced by a Black urban culture see themselves in a non-academic identity. Gangsters, hustlers, sex symbols, class clowns, and athletes are all acceptable modalities for people from this background.

(At my other school) I wasn't doing what I was supposed to, I wasn't going to class. They (the teachers and administrators) didn't care and they never noticed that I was skipping. I was flunkin' (failing) everything.

-Darnell, 2006 UAHS graduate

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Um…he makes me wanna come to school and when he talks about how you need to get a education, makes me wanna come to school and take care of my business so I can be able to, you know, be successful when I get older. I didn't used to even think about my future at my other school. And they helped me a lot cause I wouldn't even be in my right grade. I was getting' straight E's (failure in every class) and now I'm doing good, I have like B's and C's now…..I either want to be a nurse or lawyer, I don't know which one yet.

-Tisha, current student

Change in attitude and view of school

The students in this research, as well as their parents and teachers, unequivocally

note that the attitudes of the children in this study became more positive. One of the

former students explained how Joe helped him modify his own attitude:

> He was on me daily. He would see me in the morning and drop something in my ear; like one morning I came in and the day before, I had gotten into a beef with this dude from The Heights (a local housing project). Joe whispered to me, "now you know what happened yesterday, I don't want no problems today. You gotta stay positive and don't try to fight every battle. If you think something might happen, come talk to me first. You've gotta respect your elders, and I'm your elder." You know, and even though I went to prison after going to that school, it stuck with me until this day. It was me who got myself into prison, but it was Joe who kept me out after I got out. And you know, now I own my successful dealership.
>
> -Ahmed, former student

For students who previously only had poor school experiences, UAHS was different

because, as one student said, "Joe made school kinda fun; he wanted you there, and you

wanted to be there." In Rap Sessions, Joe not only called you out, embarrassed you, and

made you responsible for your actions in front of the UAHS community, but he also

reinforced a UAHS positive school culture and empowering futuristic thinking:

> Some of you are doing very well. I just told Rhonda last week that her attitude was very negative, but I've noticed a positive improvement. Maryann also is doing better, number one, 'cause I think she realizes that won't get her anywhere here. And anyone who doesn't want to be here can go. How far can you go in life without a positive attitude? You can't even get a minimum wage job with that, so how will you survive in college? And without an education, you ain't shit, and ain't gone never be shit! One student responds, "Yea, but Dianne (one

of the teachers) be acting like she be pickin' on me and that she don't care if I make it or not." Joe cuts in firmly, "And even if she is, you've gotta first believe in yourself. And sometimes Tony, it doesn't seem like you do that.

The students also reported that with the positive thinking about school and their future, they no longer partake in risky behaviors.

Change in relationship and view of school leader

Students reported that they now felt different about teachers and administrators. They felt that Joe and his teachers actually cared about them, and cared about whether they succeeded. This built a level of responsibility for many of them because now they were no longer just letting themselves down. I asked one student if he would have graduated from his traditional high school. He said, "None of us would have." Part of the reason for their success is because of the necessarily strong relationship that the students had with Joe and staff. If a student was quiet and discrete, Joe and his staff would force a relationship on the student and their family. At their previous traditional schools, they had to initiate a relationship with teachers or administrators. Most even took a confrontational stance toward authority. But the strong relationship they have with Joe and the staff causes the students to think differently about school and school staff:

> Whenever I have a problem, I usually go to Joe first, talk about it. He tells me what he thinks about the situation"
>> -Denise, 11th grade UAHS student

> Teachers would take me home, and I'd have dinner at their houses. Joe was very close to my parents, and has eaten at my house maybe nine or ten times with my family.
>> -Ahmed, 1990 UAHS graduate

> "He (Joe) is hard on you; he doesn't let you give up, and that is how you know he cares"
>> -Darneli, 2006 graduate

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"He acts like my grandfather, like he jokes around, and you can just tell that he cares. But at the same time, he tells me 'you can do it if you really like,' and like, he wont let me give up on something that he knows I can accomplish that I can do.

-Tisha, 10th grade UAHS student

"He's a granddad or something like that. Like, he's always teasing and playing around, and so I feel comfortable around him like you know, if I need to go talk to him, I know that I can. So I think that we have a good relationship."

-Raymond, 9th grade UAHS student

All students indicate that they have a very strong relationship with Joe and describe him as a fatherly or grandfatherly figure. Nearly all of the students interviewed for this study were from single-parent female-headed households, and Joe did not portray any disdain for the students because of that fact. Though the students described Joe as being rough on him, they viewed it as tough love or as a gesture of compassion. This is in stark contrast to how the students viewed the traditional school administrators and teachers:

"They didn't care; if we skipped, nothing would happen. They would just call you house and it's like a recording, they would just call your house in a recording and if nobody answers, then your parents just didn't know."

-Raymond

"Joe has become a member of my family. I call him like I do my family members. When I got pregnant, he was there for me as much or more than my own mother was. The principal at the other school didn't even know me (stopped being friendly toward me) after I got pregnant"

-Former student (and grandmother of Sheila, current UAHS 10th grade student)

"The other administrators didn't solve problem; they didn't care if your issue was solved or not, they just laid down the punishment. Joe was the in-your-face type, but they (the other administrators) just remained in their office until there was a problem.

-Ahmed

"At my other (traditional) school, I didn't even know my other principals. I didn't know who he was until I was leaving for UAHS and we had a meeting with my mom. But he's (Joe) glad your are at school, like he greets each one of us every single morning to see how we are."

-Darnell

"I used to get into it with them 'cause its like they used to pick on the Black kids."
-Tisha

This feeling of exclusion or even hostility was markedly different from how the students felt at UAHS. Indeed, the students described two disparate scenarios: a principal who was an integral part of their lives vs. a principal who did not know them unless they were in trouble; a principal who was willing to stay with them until they had worked and helped them solve their problems vs. a principal who quickly moved students out of their way with quick and decisive action; and a principal to whom students attributed their success vs. a principal that students felt contributed to their failure. Toughness, for example, in one instance was describe as a trait of care and compassion, while in the traditional school context, was described as the principal's unfair targeting of African American students.

Change in academic standing and school behavior

On the one hand, students had a much closer relationship with Joe than they did with principals at the alternative school and felt that he cared for them. On the other hand, students were now succeeding socially and academically in this nurturing school environment. The social and academic behaviors exhibited by students at their traditional schools in this study are strongly associated with high school dropout. All of the students interviewed felt that they would have dropped out if they had not come to school at UAHS. According to Joe and his staff, over 95% of the students who come to UAHS graduate. (State data indicate that the retention rate—i.e., non-graduating students who returned to UAHS year after year—is 98%). That translates into one student every three years dropping out of school. But since the students actually receive a high school

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diploma from their affiliated traditional school, there is no hard data on how many actually graduate and go on to post-secondary education. There are certainly very few fights at UAHS (less than five every year). Students are orderly and respectful. In general, they do not use profanity toward teachers, and they all say that they are smoking marijuana less and drinking alcohol less. When asked about risky behavior, all students say at UAHS they are involved less, or that they have given up completely on drinking, smoking, skipping, and unprotected sex. The students are even taught to negotiate with teachers if there is a disagreement. This leads to their confrontation with authority lessening a bit at UAHS. The students know they can solve the problem and complain about the teachers in Rap Sessions. While the data on which students actually finish school is not disaggregated and the comparative behavioral incident data is irrelevant (Joe does not suspend students for the same offenses, and tries not to at all), one thing seems clear: the students have redefined themselves in terms of how they approach behavior and education. They are no longer strongly tied to the urban identities that are so highly associated with at-risk behaviors and school failure.

Positive identity formation and alternative student modalities

One of the most striking findings in this research is the positive educational identities available to students at UAHS. It can be summed up in a brief phrase: at UAHS, it's good to be Black, or poor, *and* smart. In many large urban districts, as well as smaller districts with urban characteristics, identities available to students are sometimes disparagingly narrow: there is that of the tough-guy gangster; there is the class clown; there is the playboy ladies-man; there is the sex object; and there is the athlete. And there is *not* the scholar. This data suggests that it has less to do with *acting white*,

and more to do with the fact that these identities are informed by the larger environments around the school, or that produce the students in the school. Joe has successfully forged another identity at UAHS: one of a good work ethic, intelligence, and educational achievement at UAHS and beyond. The propensity for UAHS students' to identify with academic achievement was corroborated by the local ISD 'High School Senior Exit Survey; when asked how important academic coursework was in 2002, only 67% of the students in the local county said that it was 'very important,' whereas 88% of UAHS students felt the same way. Here is how Darnell, a former student who graduated nearly two years ago and is now taking classes at the community college, put it:

> "When I was in middle school, I used to try to fit in, and I smoked with 'em and drank with 'em, and then when I came here, I learned that that's not cool and what it can do to your body and everything and it really wasn't helpin that I was doing all this stuff and I still wouldn't fit in, so I just said, I'm not gonna do that no more and I'm gonna go straight. And Joe was always tellin' us not to do those things 'cause it wouldn't lead to nothing later in life."
> -Darnell, former UAHS student

As described at different points in this chapter, Joe used Rap Sessions, principal-student exchanges during hallway passing, initial and subsequent parent-student-administrator conferences, home visits, and any contact he had with UAHS students to reinforce this positive behavior mode that permeated the school culture at UAHS. Even if students had no plans to attend college, university, or a post-secondary institution, they all claimed that they did. In fact, at UAHS school failure was something that students identified at an undesirable or unacceptable trait:

> "I'm successful here. I was getting' strait E's. Um, I'd doin' good, I have like B's and C's now. Um, yeah because when I was at Huron and stuff like, I wasn't really thinking about what did I, what I wanted to do and taking my life more seriously. Then when I came here, that's when I thought about what I want to do and how I want my life to be better."

"Some people, the students here do think like, "They just picking on me," but he's (Joe) really not. He's letting you know that he cares about you. Me and most of my friends, like before, none of us wanted to go to college, but now all of us do.
-Denise

"(Joe) makes me actually want to get it (an education) 'cause like he said, there I can't really go anywhere in life without having an, education, that's what everyone is telling me at this school. It's like at the other schools, they didn't really say uh, 'if you don't get your education, you're gonna go somewhere.' I just look at life different now."
-Tisha

These are students who have not compromised their socioeconomic, racial, or cultural self-image, but have incorporated into their identity academic and social success. Likewise, even if they were engaged in risky behaviors, they neither admitted to doing so, nor viewed the behaviors as socially acceptable.

Chapter VI. Analysis and Conclusion

Introduction

The significance of this study rests on two central premises. First, that Black, at-risk students are likely to experience social and academic failure in school, and the reforms, including alternative school programs, have not adequately addressed the underachievement of at-risk, alternative school or Black students. This study describes some of the reasons that these students have failed in traditional school. Second, though there has been a tremendous amount of analysis regarding the causes of school failure for at-risk alternative school students (Dunbar, 2001; Kelly, 1993; Sefa Dei, Mazzuca and McIsaac, 1997), there is a serious void in the literature regarding successful education with this group of students, particularly as it pertains to school leadership.

The Michigan Department of Education dropout survey indicates that for much of the past 30 years, the dropout rate of Back students has been two to three times that of White students, with the racial dropout gap widening as time progressed over this period. In 2003, only 50% of Black males in Michigan graduated from high school, compared with 77% of white males (Darden, Stokes and Thomas, 2007). Articles in the city's local newspaper suggest the Black student in this study fare no better than state trends.

Urban marginalized groups—poor, Black, Hispanic and indigenous—have a sustained record of school failure. This school failure—both academic and social—has forced educators to beg the question: why have the pedagogical or administrative theories and methodologies missed entire populations of people? And with the added context of this study, why have the prevalent theories and models of leadership not worked well for urban, at-risk Black students? Hence, the primary purpose of this study was to describe

effective school leadership practices with urban, at risk children. In answering this question, I found it necessary to describe these at-risk children, as well as some of the reasons that they failed in traditional schools; I suspected that the school failure of theses students may be related to an underdeveloped, or even negative, relationship with school staff at traditional schools.

My findings suggested that essentially, traditional school teachers and principals who served at-risk Black students had a strong relationship with neither the students nor their families. Furthermore, they either did not understand, or did not value, the cultural and social capitals of the students; consequently, students experienced social and academic failure in the large, loosely-structured high schools. The data showed that a strong relationship with students and their families, based on trust, credibility and rapport, helped explain the principal's effectiveness and the students' successes.

Another major finding in this study was the principal's ability to create a school culture where students were able to comfortably and with dignity assume a positive posture toward academic achievement and long-term positive educational aspirations without compromising any of the other identities in which they had an investment. With this, they were able to migrate away from risky behaviors with their chosen identities in tact. The principal's effectiveness was associated with the directional freedom and autonomy. He maintained control of the school irrespective of district administrators or UAHS teachers. This autonomy permitted him to focus on the goals that he thought were important: teachers should maintain effective classroom management and students should maintain a good work ethic and plan to enter a post-secondary learning institution. Lastly, this study revealed that a teacher's race is associated with teacher expectations.

Summary and Analysis of Major Findings

Tight-knit relationship between community and school

The data demonstrates an effective school leader of at-risk, African American alternative school students must have a strong and overlapping relationship with the parents and communities of the students. The school staff and culture must have a strong and overlapping relationship with the parents and communities served by the school. These findings suggest that educational leaders can no longer offer the excuse of 'the parents in this community just don't get involved in their children's education.' While it may be true that in urban, poor or African American contexts parents do not participate as much as much as their unlike peers, this data clearly shows that there are ways that school leaders can still merge the two environments.

In this study, Joe was able to choose his own staff. This allowed him to, interview teachers, explain the school structure and hire only teachers that would buy into the UAHS vision. This meant that teachers agreed to all of the structures and practices in which the UAHS staff engaged. If they did not, they were not hired. In most urban school environments, it is very rare for principals to request teachers to perform home visits, to stay after school, or to allow unannounced parents (or administrators) entry into classrooms without prior notice. But these UAHS practices led to strong mix between the students' school and non-school environments. As represented by the **Table 2**, there were a total of nine behaviors, each of which was practiced, led or enforced by Joe that led to a school-community overlap:

Table 2. Relationship between school and community

School into Community Practices	Community into School Practices
Delivery of report cards to the home by Joe or the students teachers	Open-door policy to parents to visit anytime they wanted without prior notice
Joe's high visibility and involvement in causes important to the community	Saturday morning breakfasts open to parents held at the school
Joe or Khadija (community liaison) first calling, then going to the homes of students who are not attending school	Mandatory interviews that Joe holds with parents as they enter the school
Joe or his staff attending hearings, or giving letters, to support students that face legal troubles or school expulsion	Invitation to parents to attend rap sessions (formerly called family hour)
The establishment and maintenance of NAACISD (National African American Community in Schools Day)	

Although Joe exhibits several other behaviors that seem to facilitate this community

school relationship, the behaviors listed in this table represent practices that are less

attached to Joe's personality. Unlike some of Joe's personality-attached behaviors such

as his humor, his targeted confrontations, his leadership (as opposed to support or

participation) of community causes, and his culturally appropriate use of language, the

behaviors listed in the table above could conceivably become policy at any school.

Implications?

There are two implications relevant to the strong school-community/parental

relationship. One, community and parental support is a necessary component of effective

school leadership of at-risk, urban, African American alternative school students.

Traditional school leaders have had a relationship with traditional families; however,

there is no evidence that traditional school leaders have ever had relationships with

marginalized Black and poor families. This research suggests that (1), it must be

established, and (2) this relationship may look very different from what traditionally exists. Two, this community-parental support can actually be attained by a school leader and his or her staff. Each community is different, and each community has an entry point. I have described how Joe entered the community of UAHS. Joe relied on this support. When he needed to make crucial decisions regarding the children, he always had the unwavering support of the parents and community. Because of this close relationship with the parents and the community, UAHS was able to provide effective educational services to the children.

When education leadership programs prepare principals and superintendents that will serve children who are at-risk of academic and social failure, they must begin to train school leaders to build in extra supports that will allow school activities to merge with the community. School leaders must themselves—and train their teachers to—think about their duties differently. Finally, school leaders must neither be scared of the students nor of the neighborhood where their students live.

Acceptance of social and cultural capital of students

The cultural capital that students and their families had was at least acknowledged by the school leader and the staff, if not accommodated. The data suggests that traditional school leaders and teachers did not accept the cultural capital of students and were often intimidated. Therefore, the Black students in the district were suspended at a much higher rate than their White classmates, even for the same offenses. From parent and student interviews, it seemed like fear or misinterpretation of student posture was quite common in traditional schools. This research showed that the devaluation of Black and poor students' social and cultural capital that existed in the district's traditional

schools was successfully mitigated by the leadership at UAHS. The school leader would

not allow teachers to devalue the students' culture. If the teacher, for example, sent a

child out of their classroom for acting aggressive or being 'disorderly,' the principal

would send the student back to the classroom, so the teacher could learn how to deal with

that student. Or if, for example, a poor family felt uncomfortable getting involved in

their child's educational process because of their own negative school experiences or

because of their view of the separation of community and school, the principal would

develop a school structure that successfully breached this separation. The school was

respectful and accommodating of the social relationships, or lack thereof, of the parents.

This led to students feeling validated and comfortable at school, and consequently, they

began to take ownership of their school environment. **Table 3** illustrates how UAHS

validated or accommodated the capital of the students, and how the students responded:

Table 3. Acceptance of student capital

How School Accommodated Cultural Capital	
Principal used culturally acceptable language, humor and expressions	Staff did not shun cultural vernacular and proclivities of the students
Alternative punishments were available that responded to behaviors related to hyperghettoization (ex. disputes and drugs)	The speakers addressed issues that were relevant to the lives of children (ex. Crime and hip hop)
How School Accommodated Social Capital	
School leader constantly asked parents about their issues & needs, and would give advice about how to help their children	School leader and teachers went to homes to speak with parents about strategies and opportunities to improve child's education
NAACISD allowed parents to get excited, form team and get involved with child's education	School breakfasts allowed parents to socially network with each other and staff
Student responses to the acceptance of their social and cultural background	
Students (and their parents) reported they became more involved in class discussions	Student kept the school clean; they did not deface the school/facilities
Students would comfortably speak about issues in Rap Sessions, with principal, staff	Students were less confrontational with administrators and staff and referred to UAHS as their family

At UAHS, students were not allowed to stay in the periphery of the educational process; rather, they were front and center. The principal said that it was hard for parents 'not' to be involved with their child's education; he provided opportunities for the parents and community, and they gained their trust.

Implications?

This finding forces school principals and teachers to think differently about how they respond to children who speak and behave differently from traditional White students. School leaders must learn to accommodate and validate people who do not have a tendency to use the educational system to validate a privileged position in society. In this study, families of the at-risk students did not use the educational system as a means to attain a position in society. Generally, these families had no position to maintain in society. Therefore, parents hand no incentive to interact or *use schools* to help their children. School leaders must be aware that they must reach out to communities for non-traditional students.

Preparation programs for school leader must train leaders to recognize that every group of people has cultural and social capital, but traditional schools are built on structures and school cultures that do not reward all capitals equally. School preparation programs may address the problem by considering the following courses of action:

- Train school leaders to recognize valued and devalued cultural capitals
- Develop strategies that will incentivize parents toward involvement in schools
- Provide training for school leaders that will allow them to train teachers to equally value all school cultures

- Provide administrators with the tools to discuss with teachers the concepts of privilege, racism, classism, sexism, white supremacy and other constructs that typically inform how capital is rewarded

Trust, Credibility and Rapport

The school principal was an effective leader because he was able to establish trust, credibility and rapport in the community and student populations that he served. He was not afraid of entering the most dangerous communities in the area, for he frequented his students' homes. When community issues erupted, he was there at least as a supporter, and at times will act as a community leader. He would advise families on an array of issues, and actually help them in their times of need. Because of their trust in him, he was able to be a more effective school leader. Unlike many other urban environments, the parents sided with the principal when he sought parental help in changing the school behaviors of their children.

This was quite a remarkable accomplishment because each of the parents interviewed for this study described negative school experiences (at traditional schools), stemming from when they themselves were students in school. The experiences of their own children in the traditional school were often a negative, or even confrontational.

Even though the population of parents could primarily be described as African American and of the working poor—and therefore characteristically disengaged from their children's education—the school leader in this study was to able to get 100% parental participation in some school activities, and to design a school structure that ensured a school-community overlap. In other words, he was able to accommodate this community's tendency to 'not involve' themselves in their children's educational

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experience. **Table 4** summarizes the activities that allowed to Joe to gain the trust,

rapport and credibility with the community he served, and the responses that he

experienced:

Table 4. Trust, Credibility and Rapport

Parent behavior (of mistrust) toward administrator in traditional school	
Confrontation when academic or social behavior of their child is reprimanded by school leader or teacher	*Aggression* toward authority when they perceive unfairness toward their child
Suspicion about what is said regarding their child's behavior	*Disengagement* from schools and *relinquishment* of direction and remedies of child's education
Joe's leadership behavior that gained him trust and credibility	
Visibly supporting community causes, particularly as they pertain to justice	Not 'snitching' on students or their families when they may have erred
Using language and cultural expressions that are prevalent in the communities that he serves	Confrontation with teachers or district administration in defense, or interest, of the students = fairness in community's view
Actually frequenting the poor and 'unsafe' neighborhoods	Speaking about race and racism
Parental behavior (of trust) toward Joe	
Constant communication and consultation on many issues	Supporting Joe in the policies and behavior that he suggests regarding their child
Coming out to support Joe on community issues when he requests their presence	Coming into the school and supporting school activities

Implications?

Marginalized groups are suspicious of the traditional status quo precisely because

they are so marginalized. This finding is relevant in understanding this: alternative

schools cannot work well unless strong parental and community support (and not merely

involvement) are implicit in the population served. Some of what Joe did to earn this

credibility and trust is strongly associated with his personality. This is evident in the

cultural synchronization that he had with many of the African American and even poor white families. But much of what he did, such as his high visibility in the community and challenging teachers when they may have acted wrongfully toward students, could be done by anybody. The myth that principals must back teachers, even when they are wrong, has been debunked by Joe's example. Many of Joe's behaviors were unorthodox and would have been resisted by parents if Joe did not have the trust and a strong rapport with the parents that he served. This data further suggests that the opposite was also true; in other words, when the traditional school leader acted in a manner consistent with traditional school leadership, the parents resisted.

These findings demonstrate that Joe developed rapport, credibility and trust. Joe frequently communicated with parents and students about almost anything, and they felt comfortable doing so (rapport). Joe was seen as credible because parents and the community saw him as a fair broker between the interest of students and the teachers and district (credibility). This data revealed that parents did not interfere with, or challenge, Joe when he dealt with their children (trust). Because these elements were present in the relationship that Joe had with families—including the children that attended UAHS—Joe was able to be more effective as a community and school leader. The major implication here is that it would be difficult for anyone to lead at-risk children without having these characteristics. Thus, implications for school leaders really revolve around questions similar to these:

- To what does the community I serve respond, and how can I become involved?
- How is credibility gained in the community that I serve? How can I become credible?
- How can I be fair with all students, and how can I demonstrate this fairness?
- Do I speak in ways that are culturally appropriate for my student and their community populations? If not, what are other ways that I can establish rapport?

Merging modalities: being 'smart' and 'normal'

The data here demonstrates that space was created so that students could maintain their own identity and also merge with this identity the role of being 'smart.' The school culture, which was heavily informed by the school leader, prevented negative imagery and ridicule of students who wanted to perform well socially and academically; students were able to perform well while maintaining their dignity. This finding perhaps has the most far-reaching implications because it allows at-risk students to academically transcend their challenging circumstances and negative aspects of their communities. Joe made possible a school environment where kids can re-define themselves in a psychologically safe and dignified manner.

This research revealed that the street/prison code was prevalent in the student population and in the communities from which students came. This was visible in the music and behaviors of the students. In the nihilistic identity choices that urban kids often choose, performing well in school has not traditionally been apart of their identities. Rather, toughness, promiscuity, territorialness, the jokester, and other hyperghettoized identities are all roles far easier for urban and Black children to assume. In fact, maintaining an aggressive toughness is often necessary for travel to and from school. But by outlawing 'capping' (public ridicule of students), and by reinforcing positive choices along with academic achievement in Rap Sessions and hallway exchanges, Joe made students comfortable with adding positive identities to their pre-existing modalities.

Implications?

It is possible for children to assume youthful and seemingly dangerous identities, yet still academically achieve and disengage from risky behaviors. Contrary to what Ogbu

(2003) found, the data here suggest that there was no indication of student who performed well were afraid of 'acting white.' Student interviews conducted in this research suggest that even students who did not perform well, or who did not have solid plans to attend college, verbally identified with academic achievement and post-secondary plans. For students at UAHS, it was actually 'hip,' or very acceptable, to be smart. For example, when Joe frequently asked in Rap Sessions: 'who wants to go to college?,' every single student in the school raised his or her hand.

Likewise, students disidentified with risky behaviors. Students interviewed—again, who were very comfortable with their pre-existent identities—said they had smoked less marijuana, drank less alcohol, and had not skipped school since coming to UAHS. This research suggests that students can maintain non-traditional identities (such as gangster, athlete, or sexy girl) and not actualize those behaviors with which they identify. In other words, not every female sex symbol is promiscuous, not every tough-guy fights, and not every gangster sells drugs or murders. But if students can feel psychologically comfortable in both their neighborhood and school modality, this research demonstrates that the two identities can be conjoined for successful student outcomes. This does not mean that rules, school culture, and norms are disregarded. Rather, it means that students are not pressed into assuming different psychological characters in order to attain academic success.

Differentiated student expectations and race

One unanticipated finding that this study revealed is that White teachers, more so than Black teachers, were more willing to accept academic disengagement-related excuses that at-risk students gave. White teachers, because of their unwillingness to deal with the students' confrontation, were more likely to allow students out of their classes or to disengage from work if students gave excuses. One White teacher said she would rather not deal with the fight that it would take to get the student working. Black teachers, however, were willing to fight and to force students to complete their assignments, even if students did complain of illness or a bad night.

Joe's constant discussions and references to race not only lent him credibility among students and their parents, but it also compelled teachers to rethink how they dealt with Black students. Joe seemed to discuss race because he thought that Black students were being treated unfairly because of their race, and he was unconcerned if teachers' feelings were hurt because of these racialized discussions. Many of the teachers, both Black and White, openly and willingly discussed race and even discussed why they thought Black students were doing disproportionately more poorly, or how students might be disadvantaged by their Black skin. This allowed for a more frank and honest collegiality. In many schools, Black teachers and school leaders seem to shy away from discussions of race in an attempt not to be offensive to their white colleagues. But the findings here suggest that in reality, that might be exactly what many urban school staffs need: a platform where they can analyze and discuss all issues that students and teachers face, including those that have their root in race.

Implications?

Many at-risk students are 'at-risk' because they failed to complete their academic expectations. One obvious issue that cannot be avoided is the fear that some teachers have in facing and challenging students who do not want to work or acquiesce to the school's academic and behavioral expectations. Educators who teach challenging students often find ease in looking the other way when dealing with students who are not performing. This urge grew if the children were more difficult to deal with. But this urge, and any fears associated with dealing with students, must be surmounted.

Teacher and administrator training programs must address issues of race and racial fears. Neither American history, nor current circumstances allow educators to avoid discussing the issue of race. These programs would be more comprehensive and relevant to discuss expectations as differentiated by race. Joe routinely spoke about race and racism. His conversation and speech was open about race, and was often difficult and even abrasive for some staff members to address. It is difficult to say that racism played a central role among these staff members and their differential treatment of at-risk students, even though Joe argues that racism does play a role. In addition to racism as an explanatory factor, racial intimidation or even a lack of cultural training in dealing with Black students could explain why some White and Black teachers had different expectations for Black students. Joe said that he is aware that some White teachers on his staff have this problem, and are 'scared' of the kids. The implication here is that teachers and administrators must be willing not only to maintain a presence in the schools, but also in the communities that they serve. The findings suggest that

discussions of race and racism must be part of staff discussions and professional development in cases where racial disparities exist in the student population.

Autonomous Leadership

UAHS maintained a small student-teacher ratio; the school leader was fiercely independent and made autonomous decisions based on what he viewed as being 'best for the students'; the school leader rarely suspended students for infractions that would be severely punished in traditional schools. This allowed a tremendous amount of flexibility in how student behaviors were modified. When necessary, the school leader exhibited a confrontational posture with his staff, students, and central district personnel. Joe hand-picks his staff based on whether or not they can deal with Black at-risk kids, and early in the school's 34 years history, he removed staff that refused to learn how to deal with the kids at UAHS. Because of district reprimands and policy, now he merely puts strong pressure on certain teachers to leave. In many instances, Joe tells central administration what he will and will not do, and the direction he will take the school. The district's central administrators see the results of the school, and therefore typically comply with his wishes.

The independence that Joe demands for UAHS also spreads to his leadership of the teachers and staff at UAHS. One senior teacher said that when he got to the school about two decades ago, "it was clear who was in charge, and it was Joe." Not much has changed since that time. The most frequent conflict that Joe has with UAHS teachers has been the treatment of students. In Joe's mind, he alone decides what was in the best interest of children, and he felt that many of the teachers just didn't want to deal with threatening Black children

Part of the UAHS autonomy that led to success for the at-risk, urban students was the ability that the school leader had to determine the school structure, expenditure and location. The location of the school, block scheduling, the smaller class sizes, the inclusion of Rap Session and other unique scheduling features all contributed to the success of students. The findings suggest that this additional leverage gave the school administrator the tools needed to shape school culture and environment in a way that was responsive to the needs of the UAHS student population.

Implications?

Independence is necessary for school leaders of at-risk children in alternative schools because the job will inevitably call for unorthodox and highly flexible leadership practices. All disciplinary outcomes are contingent on non-static circumstances—such as behavioral history of student, current life circumstances, or even the type of family support the family may offer—and these circumstances could only be known by the local school's administrator or staff. This autonomy allows the flexibility needed in alternative school environments.

When forming policy of school structure and principal leadership, school districts should consider the strong link between school autonomy and flexibility. Although this situation has worked successfully for the students at UAHS, many of Joe's teaching staff complained about two things: his lack of instructional leadership and his 'dictatorial' or 'authoritarian' leadership; they thought these two issues were especially relevant because of the new demands of state law and NCLB. Therefore, policy considerations would need to both allow flexibility, and to write clear expectations about what is expected of

school leaders. Lastly, policy-makers should grant more autonomy to principals of alternative schools to shape the schedule, class size, and even location when possible.

Student-Principal Relationships

In order to maintain rapport, credibility, trust and effective leadership, principals of at-risk Black students must establish a close relationship with the student population. Joe made it his business to learn the name, daily condition, family members and circumstances, aspirations, and the social and approximate academic progress of every single student in the building. Some argue that school leaders impact children by providing leadership to teachers and other staff, by impacting school culture, by maintaining transparent and tightly-coupled school structures, and by providing resources necessary for successful learning; in these cases, however, there is often an unchallenged notion that school leaders are capable of impacting students in this indirect manner. This may be true in traditional schools. The data here demonstrates that school leaders can impact student outcomes by having a very strong direct relationship with students and their families. **Table 5** illustrates how Joe maintained these one-on-one relationships and the students' responses:

Table 5. Principal-student relationships

Joe's behavior toward students	
Interviews students and parents to get a preliminary glimpse of students' issues	Greets every UAHS student, every morning to see how they are doing
Regularly counsels students on their issues and conflicts, and constantly pull students into his office to redirect student behaviors	Home visits, holiday calls, and availability to students. Students can speak to him whenever they want
Talks to, encourages or reprimands individual students in Rap Sessions	Attempts to fairly solve disputes between students, their peers and faculty
Physical affection: hits 'upside' the head, hugs, playful shoves, and handshakes	Strong confrontation when he perceives students as wrong

Table 5. Principal-student relationships (continued)

Student responses to Joe's behaviors	
Students turn to Joe for advice and open up to him about their life's circumstances	Students do not fight Joe's reprimands and punishments for their behavior
Physical affection is something that students reciprocate and initiate with Joe	Will allow Joe to solve their disputes (as opposed to their parents, other teachers)

Implications?

In alternative schools, a very personal principal-student relationship is a necessary component of trust, rapport and credibility with students, and consequently effective leadership. At-risk students—particularly those who are Blacks or poor—are accustomed to challenging school authority; and many have nothing to lose and everything to gain by doing so. This data suggested that the students are not accustomed to structure in their home lives, and therefore run into problems at traditional schools. One might ask whether alternative schools for the at-risk are more structured. The answer is yes. What is different here however, is that Joe's relationships with the family and students themselves helps to mitigate this confrontational disposition and resistance that students exhibit.

School district administrators and policy makers should know that additional resources can serve to create smaller schools and smaller class sizes—something necessary for these personal relationships. As mentioned in chapter IV, UAHS receives roughly $17,000 per student annually, compared to only about $10,000 for other students. This allows Joe and his teachers to develop strong bonds with a few students as opposed to weak bonds with many. Joe personally cared about the students and had deep concern for them and their families. This obviously cannot be taught or required of school

leaders. If alternative school leaders are given the resources and tools they need for success yet students continue to fail, they must look at a different set of ingredients to ensure student success. This data demonstrates that a strong personal relationship with students is one of the essential ingredients.

A single focus objective: improving social and academic behavior

Joe focused on modifying students' social and academic behavior. Social behavior includes all of the interactions students have with other people and the students' observance of school and classroom rules; are students disruptive, aggressive, truant to school or class, insubordinate or dressed inappropriately? Academic behavior is a students' disposition toward their studies, their attitude toward learning, their work habits, and their educational goals and aspirations.

The findings in this study suggest that alternative school leaders must define what is most important for their school's population and focus on that. In the case of at-risk students, this research suggests that the foci should be social and academic behaviors. As one senior teacher said, "in the beginning (years ago at UAHS), we used to be a fix them up and ship them back out to their traditional school" program. The students still actually graduate from their traditional high school, even if they finish all four years of coursework at UAHS. Another teacher said his comment to new teachers is that you will have to sacrifice your curriculum in the beginning of your teaching experiences here. The school leader in this study did not define success in standardized tests or state standards. Rather, for him—*and for the community he served*—success meant high school graduation, positive behavior, having a good work ethic, and having post-secondary plans after graduation. Therefore, these things were his primary focus. As for

teachers, he was concerned about their classroom management. His and the community's emphasis on these features seem to have paid off for students. Every single student interviewed said he/she planned to go to college. All of these findings led to the success of the students in this study, as they defined success.

Implications?

When I spoke to other principals in the district and asked them about UAHS, they were quick to point out that the students standardized test scores are not excellent. In fact, the scores are similar to most of the other Black student in the district. But in reality, high test scores are not the purpose of education at UAHS. The indication is that if the school leader was more concerned about standardized test scores and the mandates of NCLB, the school would not be as effective in redirecting at-risk children who were on a track to dropping out of school. One teacher said that new teachers usually have to temporarily suspend their curricular ideas until after they have mastered their classroom management. In many ways, alternative school leaders of at-risk children must consider doing the same, particularly for students who have not yet become acclimated to the positive educational modality and school culture. The policy implication here is for leaders of alternative schools to define the overall purpose of the school, and to define success and build the program in light of that purpose.

Model of UAHS Leadership vs. Traditional School Models

Two of the most remarkable differences between the UAHS model of leadership and traditional approaches to leadership are the close relationships that the school leader has with the community, and the close relationships he had directly with students. UAHS students said that they—and their families—met the principals after they got into trouble in traditional schools. The Black families of these at risk children were not likely to be involved in volunteering, nor the support or parent groups that lent a tremendous amount of social capital to the districts traditional students; therefore, in the traditional schools, there was a very weak connection between the school leader and the students and the communities from which they came. However at UAHS, the students and their families maintained regular contact (not only at troubled times) with Joe both in the community and in schools. Below, **Figure 1, Model 1** illustrates the UAHS model, wherein the principal does have a direct relationship with school and community; this has led to a higher amount of school success for the Black, at-risk alternative school students at UAHS. **Figure 1, Model 2** illustrates how the principal, who was naturally constricted by a larger student body, lacked a strong relationship with students and their communities.

Figure 1. Leadership and impact on students
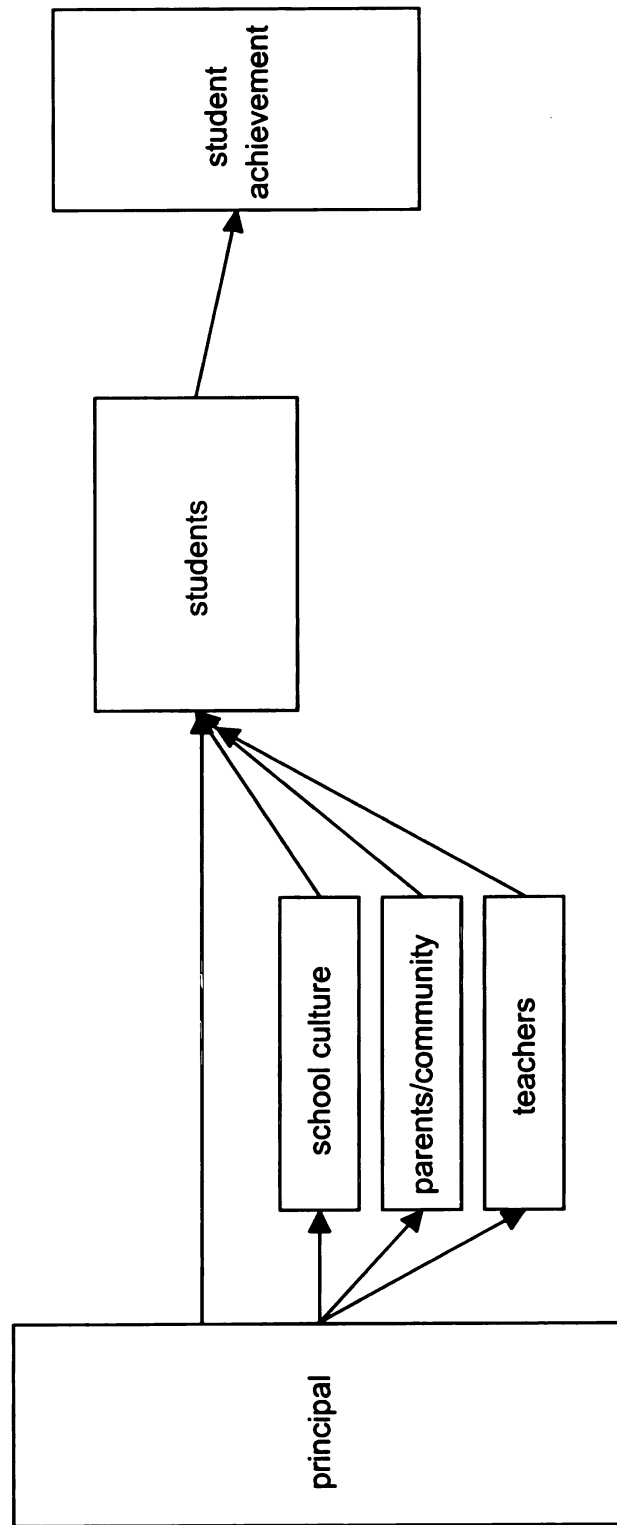
Model 1.

Principal has a direct relationship with students, which intern impacts student achievement.
Principal also has an impact on school culture, UAHS teachers, and community support which leads to student achievement.

Figure 1. Leadership and impact on students (continued)
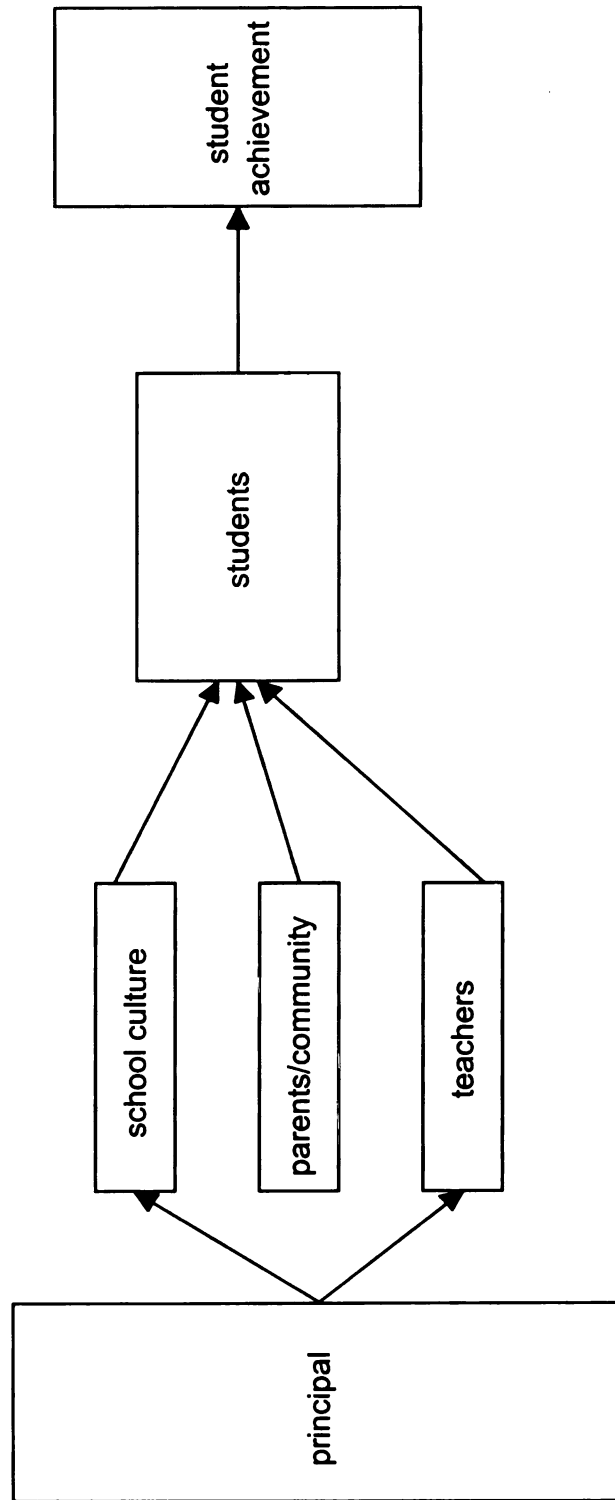
Model 2.

Principal has no direct relationship with students and very minimal relationship with community and parents. Principal impacts school culture and teachers, which leads to student achievement.

Recommendations for School Leaders of At-Risk Students

Traditional school leaders in many districts rely on heavy punitive measures when responding to academic and social behaviors of at-risk youth; the tendency is to fail, retain, and expel at-risk youth. And in many alternative schools, this trend has not abated even when schools claim to specialize in helping at-risk students. The findings in this study, however, indicate that there are ways that principals can successfully lead alternative schools for at-risk students.

Aspiring school leaders of alternative schools for at-risk students must, from the very beginning, find innovative and culturally-appropriate ways to involve the parents/caregivers in the school, and to bring school personnel and presence into their community. This overlapping relationship is essential to gaining the trust and credibility, which then leads to parental support, needed for effective school leadership. This parental trust and support allows school leaders to then develop strong bonds with the at-risk students because, like their parents, students also begin to trust the school leader.

While developing a strong relationship with community will lead to a mutual trust, credibility for school leader, and a strong rapport, this is not the *only* way to establish trust, credibility, and rapport. When leading schools with large numbers of at-risk students, school leaders must look for effective ways of establishing trust and credibility with their particular student demographic—particularly if they are from different cultural and generational backgrounds from their students.

Cultural and social capital is very unique and population-specific. School leaders must learn to recognize their students' capital, and ways that it is traditionally devalued by schools. School leaders must also learn how to validate and accommodate the capital

of the students and the communities from which students come. This school validation of student capital is an important first step in allowing students to maintain identities that are essential to their survival and cultural preservation. It secondarily allows school leaders to offer additional identities and modalities from which students can safely and dignifiedly choose. Hence, another important recommendation that comes from this research is that school leaders must create school environments that allow at-risk students to assume the alternative identity of being intelligent, but that at the same time maintain their personal/cultural identities in which they are so heavily invested.

School leaders of at-risk children, must negotiate an autonomous relationship with the school district that hires them. This was key to the success of the UAHS leader. And this autonomy allowed the school leader to implement a host of other successful practices that are recommended:

- Choose a location for the school that, while *socially* integrated with the community, is physically distant from any of neighborhoods that could have a negative influence on student behavior.

- Choose teaching and support staff that will visit students' homes and communities, that will address issues of race, and value capital of students

- Structure the school and class schedules that are considerate of the capital of students and their families

- Preliminarily interview all students and their families secure behavioral and academic commitments from students, and support from parents

- Focus on the purpose of alternative schools: students' academic behavior, social behavior, and future aspirations; and focus on teachers' classroom management

- Maintain a small student-teacher ratio and a small school environment

One of the most important recommendations for principals of at-risk students is for them to establish and maintain direct relationships with between themselves and students. In many traditional and alternative school environments, school leaders prefer a vicarious approach to impacting student outcomes. For example, providing leadership for teachers, shaping school culture and structure, and establishing relationships with communities are all typical and accepted practices in many schools. And indeed in this research, all of these practices were important for successful school leadership of at-risk students. However, the successes of this school would not have been realized without the direct relationship between the school leader and students.

One final recommendation is that school leaders must discuss issues of race, class, and other issues that are relevant to the social dynamics of their students' lives and communities. At UAHS, one finding was that White teachers lowered expectations in order to avoid conflict with confrontational student; Black teachers did not. Racial occurrences like this, or the perceived Black-on-Black racism, or even the enduring racial achievement gap must be discussed, addressed, and challenged by school leaders. This will serve as a first step in addressing the achievement gap and other racial issues that are often avoided by well-intended teachers and administrators.

Areas for Further Research

This is one of the first ethnographic studies to explore effective leadership for at-risk alternative school students who are primarily African American. What was also unique about this study was the transcendence of what many consider to be 'urban,' for although the children in this study were not in a large dense city, their socioeconomic, behavioral and ecological characteristics resembled that of any large urban city. Because of the groundbreaking direction of this research, there are several inquiries or studies that would shed further light on the leadership and the students in this study:

1. A comparative study of an alternative school for at-risk African American children that does not have such an involved leader, and who may not enjoy community support

2. A comparative study that looks at a school that does not have the same level of resources (funding) that Joe had at UAHS

3. A longitudinal study that traces the educational and life choices of students who began to self-identify with being 'smart'

4. A more extensive study on how White and Black teachers may differ in their classroom, or behavioral, expectations of 'confrontational' Black students

5. A more extensive and comparative investigation of the explanatory differences in treatment of Black students, from Black school administrators

6. A comparative study that investigates how effective traditional school leaders lead schools with at-risk students who have been impacted by hyperghettoization

7. A comparative study of effective leadership of at-risk Black alternative school students with school leaders that provide different types of leadership, such as instructional leadership or some type of collaborative leadership

8. A comparative study that looks at how school leaders of Hispanic, Latino/a, Chicano, Indigenous peoples, and middle-class whites can establish and maintain strong community relations (i.e., rapport, credibility and trust)

9. A study that deals with *care* and *compassion* of at-risk urban traditional-school students

Reflexivity of Research

When I went to the research site for this study, I introduced myself to Joe and told him about myself and my research interests; within a couple of hours, he had me in front of Rap Session speaking to the staff and entire student body. He immediately trusted me; because of that many of the students, a few of the Black staff, and at least one White staff members were trusting of me. One White teacher accused me of being a 'spy' for district administration; he later turned out to be very helpful to the study and seemed to be one of the most effective teachers with the at-risk Black students.

Joe and I developed a close relationship, and I was careful to keep our friendship separate from my research. General speaking, I did not accept Joe's or his staff's analysis of what went on at UAHS; and everyone definitely had an opinion about what happened there. Rather, I would only accept their statements about what they did and why. Joe, several teachers and students, and I all developed a strong rapport.

Race certainly seemed to play a part in this study. When I visited one home, along with Joe and an all White camera crew (they were doing an investigative documentary of the school), I clearly saw how I, as a researcher, benefited from being of the same racial background as many of the participants. In this case, the participants seemed to accept me; the grandmother of the UAHS student (a former UAHS student herself) said that she thought she knew me from a previous job where she had worked. Joe had to quickly explain why the Whites were there. I noticed that when Joe spoke with the camera crew, he spoke a bit more properly and a bit less 'Black English' than he spoke with me. But for me, this mattered, because all of Joe's extra cultural and Black

linguistic expressions allowed me to more fully understand what was happening at UAHS.

Frank exchanges about race, racism, sexism, classism and teaching were common between myself and Joe. Part of the explanation for this was that Joe's personality and age allowed him to speak his mind. Part of it was a racial synchronization between Joe and me (researcher and participant). I believe that Joe and the students, and eventually most of his staff, had a tremendous amount of trust in my presence at UAHS. This added to my strength and credibility as a researcher. Once, I was so tickled by something Joe said, and had wondered about his use of the word 'nigga' and profanity and so I asked Joe if he spoke like this to everyone. He responded, "naw, just the brothers!'

As for the research itself, I am most hopeful and excited about the future ramifications of students maintaining their dignity, while simultaneously redefining themselves as intelligent. That was not an option to most of my friends when I was a student in middle and high school. Throughout the study, I was astounded by the number of students that we met, or that I had already known, who claimed to have their life changed by Joe. Actually, I frequently hear about 'that one teacher' that redirected a youngster's life. Joe seems to have that impact on nearly all of the students in the school.

After having personally witnessed school failure in cities like Detroit and Los Angeles, I was very excited to see a successful school for at-risk children. I know that some time ago, 'at-risk' could describe a few students in every urban classroom. Now, unfortunately, that few has become half or more of the students in many urban classrooms. 'At-risk-ness' as become ubiquitous, and urban transcends large dense cities.

This research is relevant not only in large cities, but in mid-sized and small cities throughout the country.

Lastly, the school culture and family concept that the students identified with is particularly promising to me. To describe, or even to compare, a school with one's family is very rare in urban education. Raywid (2001) said the following when speaking about small schools:

> If you want to get the benefit of small, then the kids have to affiliate with the unit —the small school —in order to bring it off. Unless teachers can create their own school climate—unless the kids can see some difference when they leave their own part of the building—then they are not going to identify with it. And if they don't identify, you have lost the battle. Unless the kids bond with the teachers (and the students as well) then they aren't going to feel that they are really involved with or a part of this process and won't buy the school's values, and therefore schools won't work.

It is reassuring to this research what Raywid found about small schools. His comments are relevant to the successes that UAHS students have experienced; they bought into the school's values. This gives me hope that schools can change the lives of the most marginalized and at-risk children.

What I have learned is that educators and districts can indeed effectively educate marginalized Black at-risk and alternative school students. For this to happen, a different and unorthodox set of strategies must be applied in schools that serve these students. Undoubtedly, families and communities must be apart of the process, smaller classrooms must be set in schools that validate any cultural or social capital that their students have, and schools must create psychologically safe schools that affirm positive educational identities for children who come from hyperghettoized dysfunctional communities.

Questions for Principal

- How do you provide leadership for at-risk kids here at this school? How is you relationship with the students?
- How is what you do different from what the principals at other schools do?
- How do you provide leadership for the teachers?
- How has your leadership improved the academic, and social, successes of students?
- How is your relationship with parents and other people in the community that help, or can influence, the school?
- You speak about race quite frequently. Why? Does the race of your teachers matter? Does the race of students matter?
- Why do you believe these students failed at their traditional school in the district?

Questions for Teachers

- How does the principal provide leadership for you? How is your relationship with the principal?
- Why have the at-risk students who were unsuccessful at traditional schools, much more successful here?
- How is the leadership's influence related to the success of the students?
- What are some of the impediments to learning that your students experience? How does this school help students succeed and defy these tough challenges?
- How does the principal empower you to help these children?

Questions for Community Members/ Parents

- How is your relationship with the principal? With teachers?
- How does this school differ from the school your child attended before?
- How does the principal help your child's education?
- What makes you feel more comfortable with the principal at this school, as opposed to your child's other school?

Questions for Students

- How is your relationship with the principal? How does he help you succeed?
- How is this school different from you other school? How were the principals different?
- Do you think you will be more successful here, or at your other school? Why?
- When do you expect to finish and what do you want to do when you finish?
- How has this school changed the way you think about life? About your plans after school? About misbehavior or risky behavior?
- How has this school helped you improve your grades and academics?
- Does the race of the principal matter to you?

Appendix B
Sample Interview

Interviewer: Okay, so basically um, I wanna ask you to describe the leadership of Joe, and I mean, tell me what you know about him, how would you describe him and then his leadership.

Liaison: I would describe him, one, a person who genuinely cares about his students. Um, even in comparison to the other administrators you know, to me, they seem to just be there for a job and to me, Joe is here for the betterment of his students and I don't know any other way to describe it. You can see it you know, you can see how passionate he is about the kids, you know what I mean, he is passionate about what goes on in this school, as far as the students are concerned and that's what attracted me to the school, you know. I think that it's a excellent program over here. Uh, personally, I wouldn't work anywhere else in Ann Arbor Public School District, only here, you know, only under Joe where I know that... like I said, if my kids were going here, I know they are in a good, safe environment and that's the only way to describe it, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah, how do you know Joe?

Liaison: I used to drive a school bus. Well, okay, I, I drove a school bus for quite a few years and I drove for Roberto, so I kinda had a feeling about those students already. My husband used to go here, so I learned about him through my husband, plus my mother-in-law, rest in peace, uh was one of the first bus drivers for Roberto Clemente, you know. So you know, I knew of him, but once I got to know him, I was like okay, yeah he rough around the edges, he's grumpy granddad, but he got a good heart and his heart is in the right place and really that's the basis of it and you don't have that, the rest doesn't matter, how much education you have, how, how much money you have, none of that matters if your heart is not in the right place and that's why I thought he was.

Interviewer: I keep hearing you say, he cares about the, how do you know that?

Liaison: You know, you know it by, I, I, to me it's a big deal for him to be out there shaking their hands when they get to school, you know, but he knows their parents, you know what I mean. You talk to their parents, you take an interest in the student, not just, well this is the consequences and you didn't follow rules, so these are the consequences. We, every person is different, every single student here is different. Every single student here has a story and to get to know each one of those stories, to me that shows that you care, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. How, how does this school differ, I mean you as a, you as a community liaison person, what do you do?

Liaison: I uh, wear many hats. I am the attendance officer, so I have to, if you're missing from school, I'm calling home, find out where...

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Interviewer: Everyday?

Liaison: Everyday, every student.

Interviewer: What if they don't answer?

Liaison: Well, if they don't answer, I will uh, if I don't get a answer, I might not get to hear anything that day, but eventually you know, even if it's the next week you know, I'll run into the parent in the grocery story or in the community like, "Look uh, he wasn't at school," you know, so I, essentially, I get...

Interviewer: Two or three days go by, you got a feeling the kid is not...

Liaison: I'll go to they house.

Interviewer: You go to the house?

Liaison: I will walk over to the house.

Interviewer: Have you done that?

Liaison: Yeah, and they know it. I got a student that's here right now 'cause I went to his house on Wednesday, like, "Oh, you, what's this not coming to school, what?" So he was mad about it, but he came to school the next day and he here today and his mom brought him in today because he overslept, he's like, "Ma, I gotta go to school 'cause if she show up again..."

Interviewer: (inaudible)

Liaison: Yeah, like (inaudible) yup, she show up again, it's gonna be ugly and they know it and I tell 'em not because I'm mad at you, but, but 'cause I believe you and I'm not gonna let you give up on yourself, not like that, you know what I mean. Once you get eighteen, if you give up yourself, but while you here with me, I'm gonna treat you like I treat my kids and to me that's what Joe do, treat 'em like they're his kids, like I'm not doing nothing that I wouldn't do to my own children, so I like that, I like that better, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. Is this school working you think for the kids?

Liaison: Yes, I believe it.

Interviewer: Why?

Liaison: I believe it works because aside from the smaller classrooms and the more personal attention, just the feeling that this is a family, I was telling somebody the other day, I don't care how much our students bicker back and forth and fight, they have got to

physical fisticuffs, you know what I mean, but they out in the community and they together, nobody can separate and even the two that just fought, if, if it's a group of kids from Pioneer or Huron or any other school, Roberto students stick together, like a family, no matter how mad you get at each other, you know, what you gonna do? You know, you still, I'm not going no where, we still here together, so they get over it and it's more like sibling rivalry as opposed to fighting you know, just another person at your school. So I think that helps make it work, just feeling a community, the feeling of being at home.

Interviewer: What's your relationship like with the students?

Liaison: I think, well I have a good relationship with the students. Some of them be mad at be, but I think that I try to take in to consideration, for me, I have however many students, ninety-five students, there's ninety-five different ways to handle students and so you gotta know their stories, you know, you gotta know a little bit about what's going on. Some of our students, I could rattle off they phone numbers, you know what I mean. See them opposite the street, you know, and they know who I am, "Let me tell you what's going on, come over to the house," so I have a very personable relationship with all the students. You know, some of 'em I think can relate better to other staff and when they do, I like for that to go 'cause I have enough on my plate, you know, but in general, I um, like I said, to me I just treat all of 'em like they're my own children and they know it. So they don't give me problems, you know.

Interviewer: So, so you can step to a student and he ain't gonna try to, try to step up or nothing like that?

Liaison: No, no they, not, not really. No, they may get angry, but I expect that 'cause you know what I mean, but nothing crazy like, like getting cussed out and I'm not even saying that that has never happened, but in general, it doesn't happen.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Liaison: And when it does happen, it is an extreme circumstance and there's something really going on outside of what's going on here, so I never take it personally, like oh this student, I never take it personally 'cause it's a kid.

Interviewer: Yeah, definitely. What's Joe's relationship that a lot of students may be doing differently from how they were doing in their other schools? What's his role in it all? What is, what is he doing?

Liaison: That making it (inaudible) different?

Interviewer: More successful yeah, or...

Liaison: Like I said, taking that time and getting to know students, I think that that interview that they... (cell phone rang) stop ringing no more (inaudible). I think that

interview is very important because you know, he asks, he says, "I need to know about you so I know, so I can be sensitive to, to you." I think that is very important 'cause you learn a lot in those interviews.

Interviewer: Oh, what do you mean? When a student first comes to the school?

Liaison: Yeah, before a student can come here, each student has to interview, so the parent is there and the student is there and they have to be there and they have to do the interview process, period, and there we learn so much about the student, you know what I mean. So much about what's going on at home and you sometimes need to know that because a student could be acting out because they have problems going on at home. Well if we know that, you know, we would address it differently than somebody who just mad 'cause they mad at the girl next door you know, or students sitting next to him talking about him. So you able to handle things different and approach it differently, so the interview process, I, the interview process is key. It's key 'cause you learn a lot, you learn a lot and, and the students tend to feel like somebody really care. Well if they asking me all of this, they probably really care.

Interviewer: How do you all get them to talk in the interviews? What do you say stuff like what?

Liaison: We gotta sometimes like pull teeth, you know, you ask 'em questions, you know, I ask 'em, anything, anything that you think can help you. Like I says, with kids it's like pulling teeth, so you know, if this girl, if I'm asking, "Do you gotta a boyfriend?" You know, little stuff, you know, or, "What's going on, what was going on at your other school? You know, tell me about you." Joe was always like, "Tell me about you, what do you like? What do you dislike? Do you have problems with people touching you?" You know what I mean, 'cause that's something we need to know because if a staff person touches them and they go off we can say, "Oh dude, look, they gotta problem with that or something," you know. You know, just asking questions to get to know students personally, like, "I wanna know about you, don't tell me about what people say about you, tell me what you think about yourself," and you know, and what they expect of themselves. So we try to, I don't know...

Interviewer: Umm hmm. So, so those, those interviews play a pretty important role then?

Liaison: Yes, like I said, that's key. That's, that's what I would do. I mean when I have a school, that's what I'm gonna do, like you gotta interview. And it's not to say the interview gets you in or denies you, you know, it's just so we know what's going on with you and I'm, I like that. And you know, sometimes they get in those interviews, "Well I chose to come here." "Well these records say that you've been put out of every school you..." you know what I mean? So it, students are very clear on what's expected of 'em in those interviews and we are very clear about their expectations and what they think of themselves. So I think that makes it much more, much better and much more easier for the students to adapt 'cause they know like, "Okay, and they're the only people who

know my story, everybody doesn't have to know what's going with me," 'cause they don't want everybody to know, but somebody knows, so I can go to that person and they'll protect me, in a sense.

Interviewer: Umm hmm. Do you think the students feel comfortable after that, more comfortable with you all from fighting and you know, stuff like that after the interview?

Liaison: You know what? Yes, because they come in here kicking and screaming, saying to everyone, "I don't wanna go to this school, no way," and then you got a child that you gotta kick 'em off the school to make 'em leave and that's for real. That's for, you know, so I think once they, you know, 'cause we got the reputation for being the bad school, the school for bad kids, but once they come... Hiya, where you going?

3: I got a meeting over at Valour....

Interviewer: Yeah, so, so what role will you think, do you think the interviews play in terms of making uh, the kids assimilate into the school better?

Liaison: Well, I think they know that, one thing they know is they can't pull that same old garbage they been pulling over at the other schools, like lying, you know, just saying stuff to get out of things, you can't do that because we're putting everything right there on the table, "Look, I know why you here, so," you know, and once they know that somebody is really on 'em, not, and paying attention to what you doing, they tend to not really try to get away with it, 'cause you know, students gonna do what they can get away with and once you find out in the interview that you can't get away with it, then they don't try to get away with it, "Oh, I know I cannot push the envelope to that point." So they stop and what I say is, the problems that the mainstream high schools have, we don't have. All that fighting, the cussing, and crazy, we don't have that here, skipping, we don't have that here, so...

Interviewer: Why?

Liaison: Maybe the smaller environment, maybe the idea that some, these people are gonna help me, they really care about what happens to me. I think that even though we know students are gonna cuss and, and say mean things and whatever, down, deep down in they hearts they know, they care about happens to me, and I know that's the difference you know. You just a number at the other schools and here you are a name, you are a person and we gonna treat you like it every time. You know, I hug 'em, Joe hug, we, I treat 'em like I treat my own children and that's what I see; that's what attracted me to this school 'cause I think the staff here in general treat them like they, their own children.

Interviewer: That's phenomenal. Okay, um, how, how do you think his leadership is related to whether students succeed or not?

Liaison: I think it's a key part because one, he can stand up for the students where they might not of had a voice before, you know what I mean, and they feel like, many of the

students like they are protected, you know what I mean? Like, you can't just dupe me in a kind of way, 'cause Joe is not gonna let you do that to me, and a lot of times...

Interviewer: Oh, you mean from the teachers?

Liaison: Well...

Interviewer: Or from home?

Liaison: Even just in the community, even at the other schools. You know, we have students who do split schedules, they do half time here, they go to other schools. You know, they, over at the mainstream schools, they do crazy stuff like they want you change the student's grades to make 'em eligible, you know, we don't let, we don't let those other schools exploit the students and take advantage of 'em. You not gonna do that, if you are not in it for that student to get an education, and even when they do something, maybe they didn't do anything, but get blamed for it, they know Joe will stand up for 'em, and, and you gotta appreciate that and I think that they appreciate that and their parents appreciate that. And that's the other part that make, you know, Joe is very vocal with the parents, they trust him, and when the parents trust in, in the staff and joining the staff, it makes them more, they, they trust us to know what we're doing and they allow us to do what we do here, you know what I mean. You don't get all that whole, of course you get the one or two parents who always calling downtown, but they don't ever take they kids out, so it must not be too bad, you know, but they trust us to do what we are known to do and they are accepting of it. They don't mind when I call them in the mornings, you know what I mean, they don't mind, even when, when you have uh, a, well I don't wanna say opportunity, when there's a time, when we have to restrain students, we don't get a whole bunch of flack from the parents like, "You did this," 'cause they already know, if we did, if we restrained 'em, that student was way out of line, you know what I mean, so they, parents...

Interviewer: Right. Are these the parents who are distrusting of the other schools, you think?

Liaison: I think, I think so you know, I think so because, especially for black students, and that's what most of our students are, they get the short end of the stick, you know what I mean, you just are grouped by association. To tell a student that plays on the football team, that goes here, that he can't go to the football game 'cause he is part of a gang, come on now and we don't do that here, come on. You don't even know this kid to say that, but you know, at the big, and you know, in all fairness, they have a lot of students. We have one tenth of what they have, you got three thousand students over there, what we got a hundred. So I can see the different, but to me it doesn't make a difference, you need to take interest in the students. If you are disciplining the student, you need to know at least what's going on instead of just, well these are the rules and you gotta you know, abide by 'em 'cause maybe they're not in a position to. I don't know, it gets very difficult, I think that Joe does a very good job of uh, as far as politics, the

politics of Ann Arbor. He is very good at voicing his opinion and shutting everybody down.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Liaison: Well, you know, you know, politics. You know...

Interviewer: You mean at some of the board meetings, is that what you mean?

Liaison: Board meetings, administrative meetings, any kind of meetings, it could just be, it could be parents and students, he may go to a hearing where you got staff, students, and parents and, and I tend to agree with him. If I feel like ya'll railroad the students, I want somebody to say something about it and Joe will do that, and we have students who have been railroaded and he'll stand up for 'em and not let the, you know, they wanna, that expulsion, "Well this student did this." "It wasn't that, you are making it into that when that's not what it was." So he stands up.

Interviewer: Can you, could you think of an example, or no?

Liaison: Well yeah, uh, I wanna say, I think it was (inaudible), I'm not sure of who the student was, but just wanted to put her out of school 'cause she's this, she's, oh no, it was uh, it was Lakita, a student we used to have, she's already graduated, but, "She's fighting all the time, she's disruptive," but of course, I mean, to have her expulsed from the school.

Interviewer: From this school?

Liaison: From Ann Arbor Public Schools period.

Interviewer: But she was student here?

Liaison: She was a student at Pioneer first and Joe went to the hearing and he was like, "Well I'm not willing to do that, 'cause you don't even know anything about her, you don't know..."

Interviewer: How did Joe know her?

Liaison: I don't know if he knew her.

Interviewer: Okay.

Liaison: You know what I'm saying, I think he went to the hearing and found out what was going on and said something about it and she ended up coming to us, and then she was very bright student.

Interviewer: Oh, wow.

Liaison: That is the part that gets you, but so many times in the mainstream world, you know...

Interviewer: So they wanted to kick her out of all the, all the Ann Arbor Public Schools?

Liaison: Yes.

Interviewer: Joe went there on her defense and he was, she wasn't even his student at the time?

Liaison: Yeah, I don't know if he, he goes to hearings. I don't know if it was you know, he goes to hearings and once he heard what was going on, he said something about it, whereas, and we've had this issue 'cause, you know, I let stuff happen over at Pioneer. You don't, you do stuff, you pick out students and you dog 'em.

Interviewer: Umm hmm, yeah.

Liaison: And then, or you'll let somebody else dog 'em and I, I said to one of the administrators over there, "Do that even sound right to you? Are you scared to say something? 'Cause that don't even sound right," you know what I mean? Instead of doing what you know is right like, "Nah, you can't do that, that don't even sound right." If I was telling you, and I'm a outsider, that it don't sound right, you cannot tell me that you didn't know that that wasn't right.

Interviewer: Right.

Liaison: You know, but he'll say something and where a lot of administrators won't.

Interviewer: You think there's anything about race going on?

Liaison: Yeah, always, always. It's always the underlying issue, you know what I mean. Can I pinpoint it? Probably not, I was born and raised in Ann Arbor, you know what I'm saying, but what I do know is, having been born and raised in Ann Arbor like many of these students, we instinctively knew when somebody was talking down to us. Instinctively, 'cause that's all you grew up with and many white staff don't recognize that, you know what I mean. They, you talking down, and they resent it and I resent it, and a lot of white staff don't see that. So it, it is racism, is it, is it because they, intentional? I don't say it's intentional, but it's there nonetheless, you know what I mean. I mean, look at our school, look at how many black kids is here, ninety-five percent black, period. So you mean to tell me, black kids are only, out of three thousand students at Pioneer, the only kids that can't go to the football games is black, the all kids that you send out is black. They the only ones that's causing trouble? And I know for a fact, another incident happened, you have four white students from Pioneer going to the elementary schools to tutor, got stopped by the police for speeding, they drinking and

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smoking weed. Their parents say, "I don't even wanna know they school record," and that was the end of it.

Interviewer: They didn't get (inaudible)?

Liaison: The parents said, "I don't even wanna know they school records," and that was the end of it. Our students, we had a student that got in a fight, not even on campus, got, fought a white girl somewhere off campus, not even during school time, you know, and got kicked out of school. They wouldn't, she wasn't even, and she came here, and so I know it happened.

Interviewer: Some, some people have said that um, the black principals are uh, are um, as rough as on black kids that white principals are. Is there any truth to that?

Liaison: I think it may even be worse 'cause they wanna prove that, they wanna, I don't know how to explain it, they want to show the powers that hire them that they gonna be tough no matter what, but you are being tough to the point that it's unfair. You know, I, I had a personal incident, I had a couple incidents, and when I say my son, my son is not a angel 'cause he give me the fluff at home, you know what I mean, but as far as going to school, he gonna be on the honor roll, he doesn't hang out with the hip-hoppers, you know what I'm saying? His friends are, he would hang out more with the skateboarders, but, or the athletes 'cause he played football, he played basketball. So you have, a white student on Monday with a bag over his head, talking about he was the KKK, "Kill all the niggers, nigger, nigger, nigger," all day. The black kids reported it on Monday, they reported it on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, different people, including the principal and the assistant principal. On Friday, he got pieced up, you know the students was like, "You ain't gonna keep," my son was one of them, was like, "Why you gonna keep calling us that," and then he was like, "Shut up, nigger," mine said, "You call me that again, I'm gonna slap you." Called him that again and then he slapped him. So then they got suspended from school, talking about they a gang. I, I still, I still, I saved it, you know what I'm saying, so and that was a white administrator, but still that's, that's where they go, they all do the same thing, the black ones do the same thing, which is stupid. How can you say a, how can you say that he is a member of a gang 'cause the boy got pieced up when you never took care of what was going on in the first place. You allowed him to do that, you know what I'm saying. Pioneer, my son got kicked off the bus for ten days and suspended for three weeks, or for three days and kicked off the bus for ten days for throwing a uh, a cherry on the bus. Okay, never had any incident before that, nothing, three days suspension, ten days off the bus, but you let these white boys have food fights and you just give them three days, you know what I'm saying, come on now, come on, but you know, what I try to express to my son is, look that's how society is, you have to always be on top of your game, we always gotta be better and I think that the black administrators around here who are married to, not that I'm knocking, marry who you wanna marry, do you, but don't dog the black the dogs kids while you sleep with white women, don't tell us about being black and you ain't black.

Interviewer: So, so you think there's an issue, I mean when they're married to a white woman, that they have?

Liaison: I, I, I do, I do in a sense because you don't have the same fight as these kids have at night, you know what I mean. You close the door, you, you sleeping white and talking black, you wanna tell these kids how they need to be better, but you ain't one of them, they don't see you as one of them. So how can you say that? How can you, and they get, and now you wanna punish them 'cause they don't see things the way you do? I don't see things the way you do, but the only difference is, I'm grown and I can say it, you know, but you'll dog the kids who say it. They call, they call him "Oreo" 'cause he's into all that stuff and then you punish him, but you won't punish the white kids for calling black kids "niggers." So I don't get that, ain't that ugly?
Interviewer: That's...

(tape cut out)

Liaison: We know what's right.

Interviewer: Right.

Liaison: And that's my whole thing 'cause I'll tell you in Ann Arbor Public Schools, there's only really three black administrators, I don't care what they look like, there's three black ones. Joe Dulin, Ché Carter over there at Forest Heights, the assistant principal who I love, and Ben Edmondson.

Interviewer: And where's he at?

Liaison: Over at Scarlett. Okay, I'll take that back, I give it to Broom to his assistant principal, so I'll say four, other than that, I wouldn't trust, I can't trust...

(tape cut out)

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. So now, Joe talks a lot about race. I hear teachers here talking about race, do you, what role do you think that plays, the discussion of race?

Liaison: I think that it needs to exist because to pretend like there's not a problem or issue with race, first of all is, falsely leads our students. We gotta prepare 'em for the real world; race is a part of the real world. In America it is, so I think we need to talk about it, say, and get the students accustomed to saying what's on their mind instead of having to, you know, keep it in. If we could, you know, once we get 'em to, to, you can say it, you can say it; they're better prepared to go out into the world and say, "Look here, uh uh. You can't do that," you know what I mean? So I think it helps 'em, I think it helps the staff too 'cause some of 'em don't know, some of 'em just don't know. They haven't been, I mean, yes they work here, but you're not part of the community, you don't know what's going so to talk about it, they get a better feeling, better understanding of what's going on.

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay, let me ask you this, um, what it is about this school that helps students succeed and defy the tough challenges that they do face in life?

Liaison: I think the smaller classrooms, the, the idea that there's people around them, you know, who've been there, done that, you know what I mean? I try to be very open with the students, you know what I mean, I try to let them use the mistakes that I've made, you know, don't be like me, be better than that. So I think that that helps them, being able to express themselves. I, I think all of that helps and I hold them accountable for everything that they do, and I gotta get that...

(tape cut out)
Interviewer: Okay, so you were saying about um, what does this, this school, how does it help the students defy the odds or the challenges they face?

Liaison: I think it, I don't, I think they feel stronger, you know what I mean, like...they feel stronger because, because you got this family life, you know, like okay, I know this is a bad analogy, but like gangs, you know what I'm saying? You got a student, or a kid who just wanna belong somewhere, so he join a gang 'cause now that's his family. When students come here, this is your family now, so they feel stronger 'cause they have that support, they got support from other students and they have our support. So I think that that helps 'em, I, I really believe it helps 'em. As many students as we had go off to college, you know what I mean, and keep on going. Gabby, that was just Gabby on the phone, the one, she come, she coming up here.

Interviewer: Okay. The question I think that, you could, you could probably help me most with is, tell me, number one, about some of the success stories, and then tell me, number two about what, describe the reasons that led to most of the students ending up here in the first place? Since you had a community aspect to...

Liaison: Um, the success stories, wow. We got a...

Interviewer: Choose your three favorite ones.

Liaison: Okay. My, Gabby Eubanks is at a all girls college, about to be a senior, and her family is a very needy family, dysfunctional by all the standards, you know, that Americans say is dysfunctional. Her biological father, prison, you know what I'm saying. White mamma who married another black guy, you know what, lived the projects, but she about to be a senior and is doing very well, so she's my absolute favorite. The person who is inspired her to go to that college has graduated from there, you know what I mean, so she's doing a very good job, I had a Tywon Pew came to us, she had been in ten different foster homes when she came to us. She always stayed on the honor roll despite all of that. Now she is in nursing school down at Wayne State. I still hear from her. So oh, how many, we got another student who repeated his twelfth grade year, he, all his friends was graduating, he didn't have enough credits. He only needed to stay one more semester, the end of that semester came and he said, "You know

what? I don't think I'm ready, you know, I need to brush up on my skills," stayed another semester, graduated, is playing basketball down at Henry Ford Community College, loving it. So you know, if, those are my favorites, I mean, you know, and we hear from students all the time. Does every single student make it? No, but more are making than would have if they had stayed at the other school where people, you could skip school and nobody even cares, nobody even notices, you know what I mean? So that's the big part.

Interviewer: What are some of the reasons in the, in the student's lives that led them to have, to...

Liaison: Mamma and daddy crack heads, or they don't have a mamma and daddy because either they passed away or the streets have 'em, you know what I'm saying, being raised by their grandparents, which is a big deal because even though I know the grandparents have all that love, once you move into grandparent homes, you are no longer, it takes a lot of work to raise kids, you know what I'm saying, you gotta be strong and ready to buck with 'em and grandparents are, are past that. So students run around 'em a lot, you know what I mean, you know, it's a lot of girls have a boyfriend, which like my daughters, no way, you know what I mean? It's young girls doing all kind of stuff because of the, these dysfunctional homes, no academic skills, you know what I mean, broke as hell, just anything that you can think of that would make a person not be successful is why our students come here. Behavior problems, acting out, you know, like I said, I just told a lady today, I said, "Look, you gotta remember, it's the holiday season, students are angry and don't even know why. Ain't no Christmas at home, it's tight for people who even have money, it's tight. So, you know, just take it with a grain of salt, I don't think it's anything personal," it's just, it's rough out there and students don't know how to express it. And then you get into a school...

(tape cuts out)

Interviewer: A lot of them don't have fathers?

Liaison: I, I would say, yeah, most of 'em, literally. Oh I thought that was Terry coming back, Lord have mercy.

4: Oh are you being interviewed here?

Liaison: Uh huh, attacking him.

Interviewer: I didn't know that part of it.

4: You've been adopted?

Liaison: Now he don't know you...

Interviewer: Hey, nobody talks to me...

(inaudible, talking over each other, laughing)

Interviewer: When you open that door...

Liaison: Whoosh, whoosh.

4: Well continue.

Interviewer: Thank you. So, so what impact does that have, I mean that you see here, it being played out in the school...?

Liaison: Okay, with the young girls, like I said, you thirteen year old and sucking ding-a-ling? Thirteen, straight up?

Interviewer: Here in the school?

Liaison: Yeah.

Interviewer: Bathroom?

Liaison: Okay, we had one incident in the locker room, it was a couple years back, but they asking the boys on the bus if they doing it. I mean they doing, flat out, they doing it.

Interviewer: They're asking the boys to do it?

Liaison: They asking the boys if they want them to do it on the bus, "Come on, let's go to the back of the bus," straight up, (inaudible) or not, what.

Interviewer: Bus driver, what, oblivious?

Liaison: Yeah, you got a lot going on, you know what I'm saying, but if they quiet, you ain't really paying attention like that, you know. I can say it, I was a bus driver, you know what I mean, what I do with these kids, I ain't had nobody back there, but let me tell you, but on Pioneer bus, when I drove for Pioneer, it happened.

Interviewer: Blacks?

Liaison: No, they was white. They wasn't on my bus, but it happened when I drove for Pioneer, it was on somebody's else's bus, so you know.

Interviewer: Oral sex?

Liaison: Yes, yes. I mean, and the, for the young ladies letting these boys just do you any kind of way, you know, you should... I have a thirteen year old at home.

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Interviewer: A girl?

Liaison: Yeah, and I'll be honest, she got a Facebook page, I don't have a problem with it, and see I look at their Facebook, these students here, I look at their Myspace pages and they Facebook pages. My thirteen year old's Facebook page has got her and her friends teasing you know, peace signs. These girls is like they at the poles, straight up.

Interviewer: How do you know where their pages at? Did they tell you?

Liaison: Yeah, and plus, 'cause I'm active in the community, I hear stuff and then I'm like, "Oh, I got their webpage," and you know, I can get on and yeah. Or, you know, like I said, I've been in Ann Arbor almost forty years, so I can be somewhere and it'll be a student there that doesn't go here, I'll be like,"Go to so and so's webpage," or you know, their Myspace page (inaudible). You wouldn't, you wouldn't believe some of the stuff these girls doing, putting they had the rainbow thing going on, putting on different colored lipsticks and then have oral sex with the boys, seeing how many different colors of lipstick you can, you wouldn't believe it.

Interviewer: Come on.

Liaison: I'm straight up.

Interviewer: Drugs?

Liaison: Yeah. Yeah okay, this year, I'm gonna say, it's mostly the, you know, you might have a couple drinkers, mostly weed, I'm gonna tell something, I'm gonna be real with you...

Interviewer: What else?

Liaison: I have less of a problem with that.

Interviewer: But I'm saying, if mostly weed, what else have they had?

Liaison: Ecstasy, what? What's out there? 'Cause that's what they trying, ecstasy, uh, acid, what? Whatever, whatever's out there, they gonna try it, you know. I even have less of a problem with them smoking weed than drinking, even though I tell 'em, "I don't want you doing none of it," but I say, "At least if you smoking weed, at least be on the honor roll," you know what I mean 'cause I know, I've been around, I know the difference, you know what I'm saying? I know how drinking impairs you as opposed to how smoking would impair you, you know what I mean, and I know you could still take care of your business, even though shouldn't be doing it, you can still function, as opposed to drinking, you don't even know what's going on. So, man, yeah, yeah. I found those pills, all kind of prescription pills, prescription medication, yeah.

Interviewer: What's your role in helping students succeed here?

Liaison: Whatever, whatever I have to do, whatever I have to do. If it's, if I gotta go to your house and pour water on you to get you up morning, to you just need somebody to talk to staying after school and helping you with your homework, whatever it is, I do whatever it is 'cause that's my ultimate goal. Our ultimate goal is to graduate students, you know what I'm saying, so whatever will help you do that, that's what I'm gonna do and I have to say, literally, whatever it is. Go pick 'em up, have 'em stranded in Detroit, gotta go leave my warm house, my husband fusses, but sometimes he come with me, we go pick up students if they stranded, you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Do you, do you think this school would be as successful without the community component?

Liaison: I think it could still be...

Interviewer: Without the strong relationship with the community.

Liaison: ... but it would, it would make it more difficult. I don't know if it would be as successful, you know, because community is part of, we hold students responsible for what they do in the community, so that's a, that's a part of it. It's one third of it, academics uh, community, and what you doing at home. So it wouldn't be as successful, I don't think, but it could still be successful, you know.

Interviewer: Umm hmm. What, what do you think um, could be transferred, that we do here, to another school environment to make that school successful?

Liaison: One thing is, uh, really hands-on. At Pioneer and Huron, they used to have a ninth grade transition person. That ninth grade transition person should have been doing the same thing that I do here, you know what I mean? I call if the student's missing from school, I call, hands-on. If they got the students to buy to them, you should, you should be very personal with them, you should know their names, their parents' names, everybody should know who everybody is and if you're not doing that, you have a problem 'cause you don't even know who missing. I know, I know exactly who's missing here, I can look around the classes and tell, I can get the attendance list and be like, "Oh, so, they forgot to put so and so 'cause I didn't see her this morning," you know what I mean and, and we can catch each other like that, but I think that's the biggest thing is being part of the students' lives and they, for many of 'em this just a job, you know, they need more community liaisons and the community liaisons need to do what I do. You need to be active, you need to be calling, you need to being going to courts with these students, you need to show them...

Interviewer: Going to courts, why?

Liaison: Well if they have hearings, you know, not like the hearings Joe go to where the board members and that, but you know, you call it case, you know for whatever reason.

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Interviewer: And what role do you serve there?

Liaison: Well, you know, just go as support, you know what I mean?

Interviewer: To support, yeah.

Liaison: It's good for the parents, you know what I mean, they glad to see somebody from the school there, you know. We had a student who had, really had some issues and his grandfather was very glad to see me there. I wanted to (inaudible), his grandfather was very happy to see me there, especially the boy don't have a mom, you know what I'm saying, he don't have a dad. That's the role I play, is I'm his mamma, you know the little white boy called (inaudible) telling everybody I go down to Ranfield's bar right now and everybody say I'm that boy's mamma, "You gonna take your son," you know what I mean. So, so I don't know.

Interviewer: Do you find that parents confide in you?

Liaison: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Why?

Liaison: You know, I don't, I don't know if I know why they do. I, I know for me, it, I let them and your secret is always safe with me, you know what I mean, I ain't telling your business, but it does, I think they tell me to let me know what's going on. Like, "Okay, this might be a problem, let me tell you, just let me tell you what's going on," you know, or just sometimes they want help, you know what I mean? I have parents calling like, "I need counseling," you know what I mean, I try to get 'em, I try to encourage them to go back to school, you know, whatever. You know and, "The way you can make their life better, make her behave better, is for you to do what you need to do. If you doing what you need to do, she gonna have to fall in line, period," you know what I mean?

Interviewer: When parents aren't cooperative, what do you do when they on crack and you can't get a response out of 'em?

Liaison: But, there's always, we have a person that we, the go-to person. Like if the mamma and daddy on crack, there's usually the grandparents that you go to first and I just go to the go-to person.

Interviewer: What if the go-to person is like angry, combative, uh, (inaudible)?

Liaison: You know...

Interviewer: Or have you never had that happen?

Liaison: I'm not gonna say I've never had it happen. What I'll say is usually they are very combative, but after I talk to 'em, you know uh, get 'em on my side like, "Look

here, the bottom line is, I want your student to be successful, you know. It's not gonna help us to be at odds because we both want the same thing. You might not agree with our tactics, you may not agree with what we're doing, but we do it for, to help your student," and once they really figure that out, I don't have problems with a lot of 'em and that's the truth. Yes ma'am.

(tape cuts out)

Interviewer: I don't know if you want to finish your last you know...

Liaison: I don't know what I was saying, what I was saying about the, about the parents?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Liaison: I, I think that the parents trust me 'cause they know and I tell 'em, "I'm gonna treat yours, I'm not gonna do nothing to yours that I wouldn't do to mine," and I think that, and especially for the mothers, as a mother, I think they can appreciate the fact that I'm gonna do for yours like I do for mine and I think that's the, where the trust comes in. You know, I'm not out there trying to, I'm not trying to hurt 'em, I'm gonna do what's best for them and I think, 'cause for myself, that's what I would appreciate. If I knew it was a person that I could trust to treat mine like their own, that's my go-to person and so that's, and I try to establish those relationships early so that if there's a problem, we can...

Interviewer: Yeah. Do you have students that you don't have anybody to work with like that, like maybe somebody in a home or something?

Liaison: No, because even...

Interviewer: Even then?

Liaison: Even then, the person who comes over here to represent 'em, we have a very good relationship. They call me all the time, they call me at home.

Interviewer: So that thing is mandatory in order to have success here?

Liaison: It's mandatory to have a relationship with the parents, it's mandatory.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay.

Liaison: Even if it's, even if they don't really, even if the parents don't really like me, they would never say it 'cause they know I'm not, you know what I mean, 'cause I'm just never here to hurt the kids.

5: Do you happen to know....

(tapes cuts out)

Interviewer: Thank you for your time, one final question.

Liaison: No problem.

Interviewer: Um, now, students come with something that people call like their culture, the relationships that their family has with people in the community and with teachers and stuff um, and sometimes schools value that and sometimes schools don't value that, okay, and for some students it's valued, for some students it's not valued. Do you think that Clemente, this school is different from any of the other schools in how they value what students come to the table with their cultural background, who they are as people?
Liaison: I think that is one of the main things that sets us apart because, like I said, every student that enters our school is a individual. They come with this baggage and that's why we do the interview so we know what's going on and it does play a role in their culture, you know what I mean? I'm not, even though (inaudible) with all black kids, I don't care what color they are, I don't care, and that's the other way around with little black kids 'cause you're (inaudible) child, so I can call you that, but how I would address Tariq's parents is different than I would address uh, maybe Brianna's mom 'cause Brianna's mom is from the hood and Tariq's dad is Muslim, you know.

Interviewer: Right, right, right. So you deal with parents different based on where they're from?

Liaison: Well yeah, yeah. I, you know what, I treat, I treat everybody exactly how they want to be treated, you know what I mean. Well, at least I try to, so uh, and I think that's, have that respect for their culture. I don't, I have enough respect for Tariq and Moe's family, I have respect, I respect their kids, so I'm not gonna dog their parents, I'm not gonna make their parents feel like I'm unapproachable. And Tariq's dad, I'm telling you they come in looking for me.

Interviewer: Are they middle eastern?

Liaison: Yeah, Tariq?

Interviewer: That was the woman that just came in the door?

Liaison: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. Terry?

Liaison: Tariq, T-A-R-I-Q.

Interviewer: Oh, Tariq, okay.

Liaison: You know, even the white parents like, look, you know, and I know there's a, definitely a culture clash, but look, the bottom line is, we are all here for the same purpose, you know, and once they really understand that, you know, we just don't have problems. You know, I call them, and I don't just call 'em with bad stuff or 'cause we got a gift basket. You know, my one little student, Will Seagler, who is mixed, but his step dad is white and his mamma's white, you know, I'm not calling ya'll anytime there's a problem, I'm gonna call you and look, "Will is one of the favorite students around this school, you know what I mean? I just wanted you to know that. You don't have to tell him that we called 'cause he'll think we like him or something, but he one of the favorite students, he's a bright student, he's gonna go a long way," and I think parents appreciate that and like I said, they trust me, sometimes they trust, they trust me more than they trust themselves, you know, me calling, and sometimes I have to 'em, "Look, I'm not gonna do more for your child than you gonna do," you know what I'm saying, "She won't get up." "Well what you want me to do?" You know it'll be, 'cause I fuss at the parents too, I do, I fuss at 'em. If they making some stupid decisions, like letting a boy live in your house with your fourteen year old daughter, you letting her boyfriend live there, I'll let them have it and I got a message on my voicemail right now from that mamma I said that to who's trying to get help and to see her, you wouldn't think that she is the type of parent that would let her daughter's boyfriend live in and they can't understand how she got pregnant. Yeah, then what? You know how I don't sugar coat it, I tell 'em how it is and we gotta understand and that's how come every time I'm gonna tell you exactly what's going on so there's no mistakes, you know, and I think they appreciate that., somebody being real and telling 'em and not just telling 'em what they want to hear.

Interviewer: If a student comes here and says, "Hey, I'm sleepy, I don't feel like coming to school," do you except excuses like that from them?

Liaison: What? I'm sleepy too, but I'm here. No, no, no.

Interviewer: What if they don't feel like doing their work and they tell you why?

Liaison: That I just don't feel like doing it? Well you have to, I, what I try to do is stand in the way when they think it's their own idea, how, whatever that student is, however you gotta approach 'em, but I, when they, "I just need to lay down." "Okay well go back to class and when class is over if you still need to lay down, we'll talk about then," never, "You can come lay down then," but "We'll talk about it then," you know. So I just push for, even when they said they sick, "Okay well get some water, go back to class and if you still feel sick after class, come back and see me." You know, just, sometimes they just want the attention, usually that's what it is, so and when they say they not gonna do work, now sometimes if they acting out, disrupting, that's different. You, see? When you disruptive, "You're not gonna do the work and disruptive? Go home," and at the point that I gotta call your parents to tell 'em that you coming home, see they don't want that 'cause they know the parents is gonna be on my side 'cause I already established that. So they, they just, they just will listen to what I say, are they angry? Yeah, are they bumbling on they butt when they walk away? Yeah, but they doing it so what else can I say, you know? So I think that's it, you know, this, I don't know, I think treating 'em

like I would want to be treated and I always tell 'em, I remember being a teenager and I know how I would want to be treated and that's how I treat them, but I still feel young, you know what I'm saying? Regardless of my age, I feel young, I, it feels like I still relate to a lot of stuff that's going on 'cause I'm very active in my community. I've been here for forty years, I've never lived anywhere other than Ann Arbor, so I know the pressures that you feel, I know how Ann Arbor treats you and I'm here to show you that you can make it and I tell people, the reason I stay here is so these, our students don't get stuck here 'cause I could go somewhere else, I could go down south, I could go wherever I want, really, you know I will, but I don't want them to get stuck here, that they see me and they know I travel, they know I'm gonna do this, they say, "Well if she did it, I can do it," you know, so that's what I try to do.

Interviewer: That's right. I can't wait 'til you get that blog up then.

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