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The Impact of High Stakes Testing on Highly Able Gifted Students in a Selected High Achieving New Jersey Abbott district and a Selected High Achieving J district as Perceived by their Teachers and Administrators

Anne Davie Mucci

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THE IMPACT OF HIGH STAKES TESTING ON HIGHLY ABLE/GIFTED STUDENTS IN A SELECTED HIGH ACHIEVING NEW JERSEY ABBOTT DISTRICT AND A SELECTED HIGH ACHIEVING J DISTRICT AS PERCEIVED BY THEIR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

BY

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree Doctor of Education
Seton Hall University

2008
APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

Doctoral Candidate, Anne Mucci, has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the Ed.D. during this Fall Semester 2008.

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ABSTRACT

The impact of high stakes testing on highly able/gifted students in a selected high achieving New Jersey Abbott district and a selected high achieving J district as perceived by their teachers and administrators.

**Background:** The authorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has increased the amount of national attention placed on high stakes testing. This attention has caused more instructional time to be spent on assessed areas. The nation's gifted/highly able students pass these high stakes examinations with ease. Educational advocates for these students believe that the current trends in high stakes testing are limiting the curriculum offered to our most talented students.

Purpose: To examine the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding the impact that high stakes testing has on their most successful students while controlling for socioeconomic status.

Settings: An urban, Abbott district in Hudson County and a suburban J district in Morris County.

Population: Seventy-two teachers and administrators in the selected districts.

Research Design: Non experimental: teacher surveys, teacher focus groups, and administrative focus groups.

Findings: Both schools were invested in collaborative school cultures that resulted in teachers and administrators providing an enriched curriculum, beyond the areas assessed in high stakes examinations, to ensure that gifted/highly able students are well prepared for post-graduate studies.

Conclusions: Although the Abbott district uses student achievement data more extensively than its J district counterpart, teachers and administrators in both districts perceive that curricular changes based on high stakes testing have had a positive impact on the curriculum for all students including highly able/gifted students. Teachers and administrators in the Abbott district believe that state examination has a positive impact on school climate. Teachers and administrators in the J district perceive that high stakes testing has no impact on the culture of the school, but does negatively impact highly able/gifted students.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research has consistently proven that, more than any other single factor, a student's socioeconomic status (SES) affects his or her ability to achieve academic success (Sirin, 2005). New Jersey has the second-highest median household income in the nation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). However, this wealth is not evenly distributed. Historically, the state public education funding system relied heavily on property taxes, offering extremely unequal educational opportunities to the state's school-aged children.

Beginning in 1970, the New Jersey Supreme Court attempted to legislate adequate funding for the state's most economically disadvantaged children. The New York Times termed this group of legislation stemming from Abbott v. Burke "maybe the most significant education case since the Supreme Court desegregated schools" (Strunsky, 2002). The state uses a formula containing six socioeconomic traits to determine district factor groups (DFG). New Jersey school districts are ranked "A" through "J" with A representing the 31 Abbott districts, the state's most economically depressed areas, and J representing the most economically advanced areas. In J districts, the average home is valued at approximately $1.2 million while the median home value in an Abbott district is approximately $125,000 (Workforce New Jersey Public Information Network, 2007).

Although the state has 522 school districts, currently more than 50% of all state education aid is allocated to the 31 Abbott districts, where the majority of the state's children are educated (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2007). Each year, aid to the state's wealthiest districts decreases, creating higher property tax bills to support local schools. The state and federal governments continue to require that all districts, regardless of student achievement levels, comply with the mandates of No Child
Left Behind (NCLB), including expensive high-stakes testing and extensive recordkeeping.

School administrators in New Jersey's wealthiest districts are held accountable to parents and the media regarding the quantity and quality of educational programs offered. This accountability also extends to government officials, who require more and more standardized testing and documentation of student achievement each year. Meanwhile, school administrators in Abbott school districts are burdened with tremendous documentation for all state and federally funded programs. With these dollars come mandated, prescriptive, curricular programs that are driven by the student achievement benchmarks outlined in NCLB. Although A and J districts are at opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, the pressures faced by the school administrators for accountability to their constituencies and government agencies regarding student performance are remarkably similar.

History of High-stakes Testing

Perhaps one of the most widely published and discussed recent studies on the status of American education is A Nation At Risk, the 1983 report compiled by the National Commission on Education. It concluded that the United States was falling behind other industrialized nations and losing its position in the global market. The report promoted higher standards to improve curricula and suggested the administration of assessments to hold schools accountable for student success. Many states, New Jersey included, launched statewide high school graduation tests in response to the report. If students failed to pass the test, they would not receive their high school diplomas (Gardner, 1983).
Some 20 years later, similar research abounds. For example, in 2005, the American Electronics Association published a study, *Losing the Competitive Advantage? The Challenge for Science and Technology in the United States*, which concluded that, in many instances, American schools are not providing their students with the knowledge needed to become international leaders in the fields of science and technology. More than 50% of the doctoral engineering and math degrees awarded by United States colleges and universities go to individuals from foreign countries. American scholars are drastically underrepresented in the professions most crucial to a flourishing 21st-century economy. Other countries are placing greater emphasis on educating students in the areas of science and technology, fields absent in NCLB-mandated examinations. South Korea, which has only a sixth of the population of the United States and 1/120th of the Gross Domestic Product, graduates the same number of engineers as the United States (Kazmierczak, 2005).

Politicians ranging from the president to members of local boards of education claim that greater accountability by school districts as measured by high-stakes tests will improve the quality of instruction, bolster curriculum, and produce better prepared students (Dorn, 1998). Today, if schools fail to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as delineated by the NCLB legislation, students in the school may be issued vouchers to study elsewhere, teachers may be reassigned to other schools, and the state may take over the district (U.S. Department of Education, 2007a).

Despite research that proves performance-based assessment is the most desirable and meaningful type of assessment, few states promote this type of testing. A handful of states such as Kentucky, Vermont, and California took steps to move away from
multiple-choice tests, but those experiments were short lived, and traditional, narrowly focused multiple-choice tests returned to the classrooms (Moon, 2003). Not only have these tests returned, but it also appears to all observers that these tests are here to stay. President George W. Bush received tremendous bipartisan support on January 8, 2002, when he signed NCLB into law (U.S. Department of Education, 2007b).

NCLB extends federally mandated testing to all student groups. Testing requirements include all K–12 public and charter school students. These mandated state assessments must be disaggregated within each state and school by student demographic subgroups, including economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, students with limited English proficiency (LEP), major racial and ethnic groups, and gender. The rationale behind the use of these subgroups is the presumption that districts will no longer be able to mask the performance of groups that have historically had lackluster achievement levels behind school-wide averages. NCLB advocates also claim that these reporting requirements do not allow school officials to exempt students with disabilities from having their testing results reported (Wenning, 2003).

Since adopting the NCLB legislation, the Bush administration continues to vociferously support it and tout the increases in student achievement that the administration claims are solely the result of NCLB mandates. For example, on the Department of Education website's April 2006 update on NCLB, the following claims were listed:

The long-term National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results, released in July 2005, showed elementary school student achievement in reading and math at all-time highs and the achievement gap closing.
* For America's nine-year-olds in reading, there's been more progress in the last five years than in the previous 28 combined.

* America's nine-year-olds posted the best scores in reading (since 1971) and math (since 1973) in the history of the report. America's 13-year-olds earned the highest math scores the test ever recorded.

* Reading and math scores for African American and Hispanic nine-year-olds reached an all-time high.

* Math scores for African American and Hispanic 13-year-olds reached an all-time high. (U.S. Department of Education, 2007b)

While this sounds impressive, educators, administrators, and the media report quite a different story regarding the success of NCLB:

Laquanya Agnew and Victoria Duncan share a desk, love of reading, and a passion for learning. But because of a loophole in NCLB one second-grader's score in Tennessee counts more that the others. That is because Laquanya is black, and Victoria is white. ("States Omit," 2006)

Research from an Associated Press computer analysis reported on www.eSchoolNewsonline.com in April 2006 identified that nearly 2 million children are not having their test scores reported on the measure that is supposed to indicate how different races are achieving in school. Under a provision in NCLB, schools are not required to report scores if there are fewer than 45 students in an ethnic group; however, state officials decide when a group is "too small" to count. In some cases, as many as 50 students of a given race did not have their scores reported. Nationwide, about one in 14 scores is not being recorded because of this NCLB provision ("States Omit," 2006).
The evidence that states are manipulating student test results continues to mount. An analysis conducted by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, a research group based in Washington, DC, led by organization's vice president, Michael Petrilli, found that in Oklahoma, where 25% of schools were failing to meet AYP just 1 year ago, the Oklahoma State Department of Education now claims that only 3% of its schools are failing (Basken, 2006). As the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) posits in their position statement on NCLB:

although the P in AYP stands for progress, AYP does not measure the yearly progress of the same students over time. Not surprisingly, the evidence shows that whether or not a school makes AYP does not necessarily depend on its effectiveness or the presence or absence or size of achievement gaps. (AFT, 2005)

**High-stakes Testing Narrows the Curriculum**

Because high-stakes testing is administered through state educational agencies, the state commissioner of education and the governor determine what state proficiency level for AYP will meet the requirements of NCLB. These proficiency levels are often much lower than they should be to ensure that schools will meet the desired benchmark and federal funding will not be jeopardized. According to research from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, more than 15 states that reported they are on target for meeting the NCLB requirement for 100% students meeting proficiency levels by 2014 are actually either making minimal or no gains on NAEP (Davis, 2006).

A major consequence of NCLB has been the loss of liberal arts teaching time: enriching experiences in the arts, foreign language, and social studies have been pushed aside (von Zastrow, 2004). Since the passage of NCLB, 71% of the nation's 15,000
school districts have reduced the hours of instructional time spent on areas of an enriched curriculum such as history, art, and music to increase the amount of instructional time spent on reading and math (Stark-Rentner, 2006). Nationally, instructional time for subjects not tested by NCLB has fallen by one third since the law was enacted (McMurrer, 2007).

Perhaps one of the most pervasive criticisms of high-stakes testing is that it focuses on minimum standards. Dr. William Sanders and his research team developed the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System:

The TVAAS system takes every student at his or her own starting level and measures how effectively the teacher/school/district increases what the student knows. This is the "value added part of the system. Teachers and schools are held accountable for making sure that their students improve in scores from one test to the next, not for having their students meet some fixed standard minimum score. (Sanders, 1994)

In the process of collecting volumes of student achievement data, Dr. Sanders determined that student achievement level was the second-most important predictor of student learning (the teacher was number one). The higher the student achievement level, the less growth the student was likely to have. There is a lack of opportunity for high-scoring students to proceed at their own pace, a lack of challenging materials available to them, and a lack of accelerated course offerings. Reviewing curricular offerings revealed a concentration of instructional time on average or below-average students. Often, high-achieving students spend their days reviewing material for proficiency tests they mastered years before instead of learning something new (Sanders et al., 2002).
Vocal advocates for highly ablegifted and talented students have drawn upon research that concludes acceleration is the most effective way to address the needs of highly ablegifted students. In A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America’s Brightest Students, scholars from the University of Iowa and the University of New South Wales investigated 18 different types of acceleration ranging from curriculum compacting to grade skipping. Although each of these forms of acceleration has yielded impressive results with the most highly ablegifted students, the forms are unlikely to permeate a school environment where high-stakes testing is valued:

Any “benchmarked” performance assessment that measures school or district success on percentages of students passing a minimum standard is prone to disenfranchising large segments of the student population. For highly ablegifted children, problems with the "percent passing the minimum standards” approach extend to the possibility that children who might have otherwise been advanced in the grade level may not be, according to the perceived possibility that they might have trouble meeting the standard at the next grade level. In other words, from the administrators perspective, "Why risk a sure thing?” (Baker, 2001)

Instead, highly ablegifted students end up in classrooms where the wide body of research indicates that there is an increased emphasis placed on test score results, drills, and basic skills instruction to ensure student success, clearly, an alienating, frustrating experience. Testing substantially influences teachers’ instructional planning. Specifically, teachers reported devising instructional plans that included all or most of the test content and test objectives. In addition, teachers reported adjustment of the curriculum sequence based on what is included on the tests. But not all teachers respond to testing pressures in
the same way; the level of investment of the district administration in high-stakes testing results determines how much preparation takes place in the classroom (Colangelo, 2005).

A study of students identified as highly able-gifted and the teachers who were engaged in preparing students for high-stakes tests concluded that the most obvious consequence for bright learners is underdevelopment of their potential and missed opportunities to develop the skills and attitudes necessary for success in rigorous academic and arts programs. Due to the extreme national focus on NCLB mandates, any available district money is used to further the district’s movement toward meeting AYP. Money that had previously been allocated to purchasing novels for students has been redirected to test preparation materials (Moon, 2003).

This trend will not change in the foreseeable future; in fact, funding for highly able-gifted education programs has either been significantly reduced or completely cut since the mandate of NCLB. None of the major provisions of NCLB address the exceptional needs of highly able-gifted students; in fact, in the legislative definition NCLB provides, it is obvious that the importance of mandating programs and funding for highly able-gifted students is not valued:

The term "highly able-gifted and talented," when used with respect to students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (Title IX, Part A)
Nowhere in the legislation does the federal government provide guidelines to educators on developing the capabilities of the highly able-gifted student.

Federal legal protection for these students is unavailable. While local, state, and federal monies are routinely allocated to districts based on non-educational factors such as the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch, these same agencies refuse to acknowledge the research of groups such as the Accelerated Schools Project that have proved that challenging student strengths may be the best approach for achieving academic gains (Aladejim, 2006).

Since the introduction of NCLB, programs for highly able-gifted students have been under funded. Some states have completely cut funding for highly able-gifted programs (Baker, 2001). In Illinois, $19 million per year was designated specifically for highly able-gifted and talented education programs. In Illinois in 2003 when that money was removed from the budget, highly able-gifted students who had been in enrichment programs or clustered with other high-achieving students were returned to heterogeneous, general education classrooms. According to one student, this funding reduction caused him to repeat what he and others had been taught 2 years earlier: "Every time we have a spelling test, I always get a 100 on it because I already know the words. It's boring because I already know all of this stuff, and I don't want to learn it again"

(http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education/jan-june04/education_05-25.html)

Unfortunately, all states are not even required to spend money for highly able-gifted and talented education. Among those that elect to spend money on highly able-gifted and talented education, not all designate funds based on numbers of highly able-gifted students but instead use various funding formulas and implementation procedures that do
not guarantee an equitable distribution of funds. In those states without state funds for highly able/gifted students, education for highly able/gifted and talented students can continue only in communities that can provide the services without state or federal help (National Association for Gifted Children, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

Leaders in public education are currently caught between government mandates ordering more high-stakes testing and research proving that such tests do not improve the preparedness of students and actually limit high-achieving students. Despite the flaws that exist in the law and the fact that it is universally applied to all students without a universal measure for success, this authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act will remain in place, reporting the AYP of districts each year through 2014 when the act is due to be reauthorized. Billions of dollars, and countless hours of legislators, school administrators, and teachers' time, have focused on the implementation of a variety of types of high-stakes tests, indicating that these tests will remain a fixture in American education.

According to the 2006 New Jersey NCLB report, 84.3% of elementary students are proficient or advanced proficient in Language Arts, and 85.3% of elementary students are proficient or advanced proficient in Mathematics (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2006). NAEP reports that significant improvements have been made in student test results in many areas. According to Mark Schneider, commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, "Twenty-three states had higher fourth grade mathematics scores compared to 2005. None experienced a decline. All forty-two states
that participated in the 1992 state NAEP assessments had higher scores in 2007 than in 1992" (Schneider, 2007).

Yet, each year between now and 2014, those same students will continue to spend time preparing for their schools' high-stakes tests, and days taking these tests. The students' teachers will spend much of their preparation time ensuring that the accountability for these measures is in place. District administrators will continue to invest much of their time in the administration and reporting of tests results and must conform to increasing state and federal documentation requirements that have been enacted with NCLB. In fact, the 2008 New Jersey state-mandated testing schedule includes more time for standardized tests than ever before. The state has added an additional day of testing for elementary and middle school students and two additional tests, Biology and Algebra II, for high school students (www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/schedule.shtml). Such a shift in focus, instructional priorities, and time has an impact on the overall quality of instructional delivery in these districts and a profound effect on highly able/gifted learners.

The high-stakes tests mandated by NCLB were created to lessen the achievement gap and force districts to report on the progress of students by specific subgroups. Research about the success of NCLB is inconclusive. Educational researchers are also carefully observing and remeasuring the achievement gap with the publication of each set of test results. Research conducted by Raymond and Hanushek refuted a widely publicized study by Amrein and Berliner, and Raymond and Hanushek asserted that states that have high-stakes tests were doing more to lessen the achievement gap than those states that do not (Center for Public Education, 2006).
Research conducted to explore the unintended consequences of NCLB and high-stakes testing on high achieving and highly able gifted learners has been more consistent. The suppositions that high-achieving and highly able gifted students will do well regardless of their educational programs in addition to the long-held belief that students of higher socioeconomic status will always fare well has caused a significant portion of students in America to have their needs ignored by policymakers (Chapman, 2005).

The total enrollment for students in J districts in New Jersey is just over 21,000, less than 1% of the nearly 1.4 million total public school enrollment in the state. These students are educated in 35 schools by 15 superintendents and 32 principals (www.state.nj.us/education/data/fact). These students and administrators will never be able to have a significant impact on state or national educational policy.

The total enrollment for students in Abbott districts in New Jersey is greater than 300,000, 21% of the nearly 1.4 million total public school enrollment in the state. These students are educated in 411 schools, and the state has committed more than $6 billion to construction to alleviate the massive overcrowding that exists in most of these schools. In addition to overseeing the K–12 educational program, Abbott school administrators are also responsible for providing preschool programs to the 55,000 children who reside in these communities (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2006).

National educational policy has adopted an approach of benign neglect toward highly able gifted learners regardless of their socioeconomic background. Consequently, there exists a need to explore how administrators and teachers in these districts are serving the needs of their highly able gifted students. What makes the highly able gifted learners succeed although the instructional deck is stacked against them?
Purpose of the Study

The researcher became invested in this topic, visited a highly successful Abbott district high school and a highly successful J district high school, and spoke with building administrators to connect the previously described research to the culture in these schools. In the Abbott district high school, there is a countdown to HSPA campaign. On every bulletin board, hallway, and doorway, there are signs telling students how many days to the test. Interestingly, these signs were designed and hung by students. The students took a picture of a beloved math teacher and placed his image on each of the signs as a "watch dog." In this same school, each morning, a group of young teachers goes to the homes of students who are not in school and talks to them about the importance of good attendance, and if the students are well enough to be in school, the teachers make sure that the students get there. In the hallways of both schools, students and teachers are often engaged in conversation, discussing topics such as a recent athletic event, their family life, or the previous night's episode of a favorite television show. Both schools have highly successful mentoring programs and enjoy record numbers of student participation in athletic and co-curricular activities. Both schools have recently completed a reevaluation of their curricula across all content areas resulting in more rigorous academic standards and an expansion of the number of Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses offered.

The purpose of this study is to explore the academic and school culture factors that influence successful, highly able/gifted students in a representative Abbott and a representative J district as perceived by their teachers and administrators. By controlling for socioeconomic status, the research hopes to identify academic and school culture
factors that transcend socioeconomic limitations. Teachers and administrators from both
districts will be surveyed and interviewed regarding their attitudes toward curriculum,
high-stakes testing, and school culture.

This study will attempt to characterize the school culture that exists in these two
districts, explore the perception that teachers and administrators have regarding
curriculum, and describe how the presence of high-stakes testing affects these perceptions
and attitudes.

**Research Questions**

**Research question 1.** How do administrators and teachers in a highly successful
selected A district and a highly successful selected J district describe the culture in their
school and the levels of professional collaboration, collegiality, and self-
determination/efficacy?

**Research question 2.** How do school administrators and teachers in selected,
highly successful Abbott and J districts use high-stakes test results?

**Research question 3.** What provisions do administrators and teachers in selected,
highly successful Abbott and J districts make to address curricular areas not assessed by
NCLB-mandated examinations?

**Research question 4.** How do school administrators and teachers in selected,
highly successful Abbott and J districts demonstrate their commitment to an enriched
curriculum for highly able/gifted students?

**Research question 5.** How do administrators and teachers in a selected Abbott
district and a selected J district believe highly able/gifted students are affected by high-
stakes testing?
Research question 6. What, if any, impact does high-stakes testing have on the culture of a school?

Research question 7. What, if any, impact does high-stakes testing have on the curriculum for highly able/gifted students?

Table 1

Correlation of Research Questions, Instrument and Methodology

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<td>Mucci, Focus Group Discussion Questions for Administrators and Teachers questions 15</td>
<td>Focus group discussion following a script of previously established open-ended questions</td>
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<td>Mucci, Focus Group Discussion Questions for Administrators and Teachers questions 16 and 17</td>
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Importance of the Study

This study is vital because it will provide insights into administrative and teacher attitudes toward a group of students who have not been considered in the body of research regarding NCLB and high-stakes testing. Further, the mode of research, surveys and focus group interviews, will hopefully foster a connection among selected J district school administrators and selected Abbott district school administrators that does not currently exist. Administrators in both groups oversee the education of children from differing backgrounds, and although the administrators must adhere to the same mandates from the state, the administrators act in isolation without the benefit of the research and experience of their colleagues. Perhaps most importantly, this research will attempt to correlate the effects of an enriched curriculum on external measures of student achievement.

By probing into the connection between administrative and teacher perceptions of high-stakes testing and curricular decision making, the researcher will be able to collect data on instructional delivery of assessed and non-assessed areas. By exploring student and teacher attitudes toward high-stakes testing, the researcher will be able to gather information on the unintended consequences of NCLB in these two districts. The research will also provide insight into how areas outside Mathematics and Language Arts may be taught in the future.

Since this study focuses on two highly successful districts, information regarding their approach to providing an enriching curriculum for all of their students will likely be of interest to school administrators and teachers in districts throughout the state. Educators need to discuss the impact that high-stakes examinations are having in their
districts and develop a philosophy regarding the role that such examinations should play in curriculum planning.

**Definition of Terms**

**Abbott districts.** School districts in New Jersey are designated as Abbott districts based upon socioeconomic factors identified in U.S. census data. Abbott districts are those school districts with the lowest socioeconomic status. Factors such as adult education levels, poverty, unemployment rates, and median income are used to group districts with similar socioeconomic status. Currently, there are 31 Abbot districts in New Jersey.

**Accreditation for Growth (AFG).** An accreditation process established by the Middle States Association, in which:

- a non-governmental, voluntary organization of educational institutions, acting through their respective Commissions is committed to excellence in all levels across the continuum of education, whose purposes are to encourage, advance, assist and sustain the quality and integrity of education. In order to achieve these purposes in the public interest, the Association shall establish appropriate criteria and levels of educational excellence and effectiveness, and work with other organizations, agencies, and institutions to achieve cooperation and coordination between and among schools, colleges and universities. (Middle States Association, 2005)

**Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).** AYP is an individual state's measure of yearly progress toward achieving state academic standards. Adequate Yearly Progress is the
minimum level of improvement that states, school districts, and schools must achieve each year.

**Advanced Placement Program (AP).** AP is a College Board program that allows high school students to take collegiate-level courses while in high school and potentially earn college credit for successful completion of an AP exam (College Board, 2008).

**Enriched curriculum.** A curriculum that is responsive to individual student interests and abilities and extends beyond state-mandated courses of study to include educational opportunities in character education, the arts, technology, and world languages as well as advanced levels of study in a variety of content areas. In order to provide students with an in-depth study of diverse topics, enriched curricula must be delivered by a school district with a clear mission that is transparent to all stakeholders.

**Highly able/gifted students.**

Students who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (NCLB Title IX)

**High School Statewide Assessment (HSPA).** The HSPA is used to determine student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics as specified in the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards. First-time 11th-grade students who fail the HSPA in March of their junior year will have an opportunity to retest in October and March of their senior year (www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/hs/)

**J districts.** School districts in New Jersey are designated as J districts based upon socioeconomic factors identified in U.S. census data. J districts are those school districts
with the highest socioeconomic status. Factors such as adult education levels, poverty, unemployment rates, and median income are used to group districts with similar socioeconomic status. Currently, there are 12 K–8 and 3 K–12 J school districts in New Jersey.

*National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).* An independent benchmark, NAEP is a nationally representative and continuing assessment of student performance in various subject areas. Since 1969, the National Center for Education Statistics has conducted NAEP assessments in reading, mathematics, science, writing, U.S. history, geography, civics, and the arts.

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB).* NCLB is the most recent authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which is the principal federal law affecting K–12 educators. It requires that states develop annual measurable objectives for all student subgroups and states that all students should achieve proficiency by 2014.

*School culture and climate.*

School culture and climate refers to the sum of the values, cultures, safety practices, and organizational structures within a school that cause it to function and react in particular ways. Some schools are said to have a nurturing environment that recognizes children and treats them as individuals; others may have the feel of authoritarian structures where rules are strictly enforced and hierarchical control is strong. Teaching practices, diversity, and the relationships among administrators, teachers, parents, and students contribute to school climate. Although the two terms are somewhat interchangeable, school climate refers
mostly to the school's effects on students, while school culture refers more to the way teachers and other staff members work together. (McBrien, 1997)

Special Review Assessment (SRA). SRA is the process designated as an alternate assessment for the students who do not pass the HSPA. The SRA provides students with the opportunity to show their HSPA knowledge and skills in a familiar setting. The SRA is aligned to the HSPA test specifications to ensure that students who demonstrate proficiency through the SRA have demonstrated the same knowledge and skills as students who are proficient on the HSPA itself

(www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/hs/sra2/overview.htm).
Chapter 2: Literature and Research Review

The research in this chapter will focus on four areas: how high-stakes testing has narrowed the curriculum for all students, the structure and benefits of an enriched curriculum, an overview of the enriched curriculum that exists in selected Abbott and J districts, and analysis of the role school culture and climate play in supporting an enriched curriculum.

High-stakes Testing Narrows the Curriculum for All Students

Amrein and Berliner of Arizona State University (2002) conducted an extensive study of student performance on national normed tests in states with high school graduation exams. In Texas, high school teachers reported that although practice tests and classroom drills have raised the rate of passing for the reading section of the TAAS at their school, many of their students are unable to use those same skills for actual reading:

These students are passing the TAAS reading section by being able to select among the answers given. But they are not able to read assignments, to make meaning of literature, to complete reading assignments or apply readings to other parts of the course such as discussion and writing. (Amrein, 2002)

In Texas middle schools, students were unable to read a novel two years below grade level because preparation for the TAAS had so focused on reading short passages and answering questions that sustained reading suffered. Students become paralyzed when asked to read a short story or novel or translate their reading skills and strategies to an area outside that which is assessed on the state examination. Equally concerning is the fact that the extensive amount of time dedicated to test preparation has robbed the students of instructional time in non-assessed areas such as science and social studies.
Amrein and Berliner drew further conclusions based on their study of 18 states, finding that even when gains were made on high-stakes state tests, the gains were usually due to a curricular change that emphasized a large amount of instructional time being dedicated to test preparation. A study of the same student cohort’s performance on the ACT, SAT, NAEP, and AP national exams revealed that no transfer of knowledge had taken place and no performance gains were found with any level of consistency or reliability.

Because high-stakes testing is administered through state educational agencies, the state commissioner of education and governor create the state proficiency level for AYP that will meet the requirements of NCLB. These proficiency levels are often much lower than they should be to ensure that schools will meet the desired benchmark and federal funding will not be jeopardized. According to research from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, more than 15 states reported that they are on target for meeting the NCLB requirement for 100% student proficiency levels by 2014 are actually either making minimal or no gains on NAEP (Gross, 2005).

Unfortunately, this correlation is not only found on the elementary level. The AP data indicate that high-stakes high school graduation exams do not improve achievement as indicated by the percentage of students passing the various AP exams. When percentage rates were controlled, there was actually a decrease in the percentage of students who passed the AP examinations. Further, in states with high-stakes high school graduation exams, there was no increase in the number of students preparing to go to college as indicated by the percentage of students who chose to participate in AP programs from 1995 to 2000 (Amrein, 2002).
To ensure that students pass high-stakes tests, teachers often prescribe a remedy of grade retention. This has proved ineffective because, more than any other factor, grade retention leads to school dropout (Roderick, 1994). And which students are dropping out? Since the introduction of high-stakes testing, dropout rates have increased most dramatically among low-achieving students, generally minorities and students of lower socioeconomic status. A cursory review of testing results may indicate higher performance on mandated exit exams, but these data do not take into account those students who should be sitting for those exams but dropped out of school, in many cases because they believed or were told that they would not pass the high school exit examination (Heubert, 2002). Are such high-stakes tests serving students already at a disadvantage or in any way improving the quality of instruction in most classrooms? Certainly, politicians, legislators, and even some educators would like to have the public believe that since the introduction of NCLB there have been significant gains in the academic achievement of certain students. It is incumbent upon educational researchers to depoliticize high-stakes testing and determine its true impact on our students.

In 2005, the Center on Education Policy reported the impact high school exit exams had on schools in Virginia and Maryland. In both states, high school exit exams determine whether or not students will receive high school diplomas and what types of diplomas will be awarded. Students, teachers, and administrators immediately realized the impact that these exams had on instruction. The findings summarized that each group felt that instruction had become too focused on reviewing discrete facts, there was less time for in-depth study of topic areas, instructional pacing increased so much that many students were left behind, and non-tested content and skills, from literary analysis to
world languages, were virtually ignored. Teachers felt that not only high-achieving students were dissatisfied with the system. Teachers interviewed stated that students were begging their teachers to slow down the pace in classes. The teachers were unable to do so because of the prescriptive, highly regimented curricular timeline that accompanies the examinations. Many teachers felt that covering more material in less depth had narrowed curricular goals significantly (Gayler, 2005).

In Virginia, students are required to take a Standard of Learning (SOL) exam for each course; those passing an advanced series of SOLs receive an Advanced Studies Diploma. Enrollment of high-achieving students in advanced classes has decreased since the introduction of this program because of the widespread student anxiety and nervousness over the SOL examination procedure (Grogan, 2001).

A 2003 study of the impact of high-stakes, standardized testing programs on highly able/gifted education found that increased emphasis on test preparation skills limits the instructional time that students have to explore areas of the curriculum that interest them and interrupts the continuity of high-quality instruction. In the words of one highly able/gifted student, "With Shakespeare or The Odyssey, which we are reading now, our study is interrupted to do state test exercises. It has nothing to do with The Odyssey. It's confusing. It gets in the way of the time we have to be in class" (Moon, 2003).

Some politicians have posited that our inattention to our most highly able/gifted students will have far-reaching impacts. Former Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley stated in the 1993 U.S. Department of Education report, "National Excellence":


We are experiencing a quiet crisis in the education of our top students, these students have special needs that are seldom met and our neglect of these students makes it impossible for Americans to compete in a global economy demanding their skills. (Riley, 1993, p. 3)

Absurdly enough, the NCLB legislation that has incurred all of these negative, unintended consequences for our schools is asking educators and parents to believe that the nation's schoolchildren are pursuing an achievable goal. Achieving 100% proficiency by 2014 is nearly impossible:

Experience has shown that 100% proficiency rate is virtually impossible. For example, on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), no country has achieved a 100% pass rate at any reasonable level of achievement. In the 2003 results from the PISA test, not one country—even the highest performing countries of Finland, Korea and Canada—had all of its students pass the lowest standard in either math or reading. For American schools at current rates of improvement, it will take more than 100 years to reach 100% proficiency in all the NCLB content areas . . . NCLB's 100% proficiency requirement will ensure that education budgets will be greatly overburdened. This will cause initial gains made by schools labeled in need of improvement to be short-lived and, over the long term, the achievement of high performing schools to be diminished. Paradoxically, the market principles that underlie NCLB’S popularity as a policy also undermine its credibility and achievability. (Haas, 2005)

The high-stakes testing and negative consequences that are associated with NCLB continue to hurt the exact students that the legislation was intended to save, students
living in poverty attending poor-performing schools. An enormous amount of research supports the premise that there is a direct relationship between family and school resources and student success. According to Payne and Biddle’s (1999) research, there is a statistically significant negative relationship between academic performance and students living in poverty:

Our results suggest that level of school funding and child poverty have substantial and statistically significant net effects on average student achievement among the school districts of America and that these effects stand up even when juxtaposed with those of two crucial, district-level control variables. (Payne, 1999, p. 12)

An analysis of student scores on the Virginia SOL exams and student economic status conducted by Cunningham (2002) revealed "a significant relationship between SES and success on state standardized tests. There is an inverse relationship between the percentage of students receiving subsidized lunches and the adjusted pass rates on the test” (p. 17). This indicates that not only are the curricular measures, which the tests analyze, narrowed, but one could also argue the tests are merely an affirmation of a student’s SES.

**The Structure and Benefits of an Enriched Curriculum**

For purposes of this study, an enriched curriculum is defined as follows: a curriculum that is responsive to individual student interests and abilities and extends beyond state mandated courses of study to include educational opportunities in character education, the arts, technology and world languages as well as advanced levels of study in a variety of content areas. In order to provide students with an in-depth study of
diverse topics, enriched curricula must be delivered by a school district with a clear mission that is transparent to all stakeholders.

An enriched curriculum addresses the whole child rather than just emphasizing core content standards. Schools that value an enriched curricular experience for their students dedicate instructional time to the difficult questions with which people often wrestle. Instruction in this area is often codified in a character education program. According to the Character Education Partnership (CEP):

character education is a national movement creating schools that foster ethical, responsible, and caring young people by modeling and teaching good character through emphasis on universal values that we all share. It is the intentional, proactive effort by schools, districts, and states to instill in their students important core, ethical values such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for self and others.

Enriched curricula also value instruction in areas beyond literacy and mathematics. Interestingly, a covariant relationship exists between the arts and SAT scores. According to the SAT scores of those taking the test in 2005, students who took 4 years of arts coursework outperformed their peers who had 1 half-year or less of the arts coursework by 58 points on the verbal portion and 38 points on the math portion (www.menc.org/information/advocate/sat.html). Similar research abounds worldwide. A study led by Dr. Agnes S. Chan of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, published in July 2003 in the journal Neuropsychology, found that school-age students who had participated in music scored significantly higher on verbal memory tests than their classmates who had no such experience. A 1999 UCLA study showed that students who
participated in music programs three times a week scored an average of 40% higher in math, reading, history, and geography than those who were not enrolled in music programs (Prescott, 2005). A plethora of research links participation in music programs with enhanced brain development, higher performance in other academic courses, better socialization, and improved wellness. According to Paige (2006):

President Bush recognizes the important contribution of the arts to every child's education. He has said, "From music and dance to painting and sculpting, the arts allow us to explore new worlds and to view life from another perspective. In addition, they encourage individuals to sharpen their skills and abilities and to nurture their imagination and intellect."

Yet, despite President Bush's public stance on the importance of the arts in our schools, since the authorization of NCLB, we have seen a dramatic decrease in the instructional time reserved for the arts. As research from the National Center for Education Statistics revealed in 2003, arts programs are especially vulnerable to cuts in areas where 35% of the student population is at risk for academic failure. In these districts, arts programs are either ineffectively folded into existing curricular programs or eliminated as instructional arts time is replaced with test preparation drills.

Such basic skill drills deny students the opportunity to become actively engaged in the curricular material, a hallmark of an effective, enriched curriculum. Educational research has demonstrated that high levels of student engagement promote higher student achievement. High levels of student engagement are most often found in schools where there is a positive and caring learning climate, instructional questions are planned to sustain discourse around meaningful topics, independent learning is valued, grouping of
students is flexible, and attention is given to individual students' learning needs (Klem, 2004).

The United States has specified outcomes in the area of technology education, for example, “that every citizen should be technologically literate, able to use, manage, and understand technology. The framework for technology education is based on the universals of technology: knowledge, processes, and contexts” (Rasinen, 2003). In a district with an enriched curriculum, technology should permeate each subject area, and students should learn to employ technology as a tool for learning.

Just as technology is vital for citizens of our global community, so, too, are language skills. A study of college graduates from the Garvin School of International Management who were required to take at least four semesters concluded that graduates felt strongly that both their foreign language skills and cultural knowledge had benefited them in their professional lives (Grosse, 2004). A variety of research has indicated that skills in multiple languages are necessary in both domestic service and international businesses.

The quality of educational programs around the nation is measured by a variety of factors, including the number of AP courses that are offered for high school students. Currently, the College Board endorses 37 AP-level courses ranging from art history to microeconomics. The College Board grants college-level credits to students who perform well in these courses while in high school and describes the nature of AP courses as those that "broaden your intellectual horizons, allow you to explore the world from a variety of perspectives, study subjects in greater depth and detail and assume personal responsibility for reasoning, analyzing, and understanding material" (College Board, 2008). An
enriched curriculum gives students the opportunity to self-select advanced levels of study in a variety of areas.

To effectively deliver an enriched curriculum, districts must emphasize organizational factors and unite administration and faculty with a common vision for optimizing student learning. An aspect of such unity is curricular coherence. Fred Newmann conducted a study for the Consortium on Chicago School Research in 2001 and found three conditions must exist for a school to truly affect curricular progress rather than support a number of problematic "incoherent school programs, where diverse initiatives are set up to serve important needs, but lack the sustained attention of the majority of staff within the school, have no apparent effects on the goal of improving student achievement" (p. 10).

Newmann identified the three conditions for instructional program coherence as follows:

(1) A common instructional framework guides curriculum, teaching, assessment and learning climate. This framework combines specific expectations for student learning with specific strategies and materials to guide teaching and assessment.

(2) Staff working conditions support implementation of the framework. (3) The school allocates resources such as materials, time and staff assignments to advance the school's common instructional framework and to avoid diffuse, scattered improvement efforts.

A number of school districts in New Jersey deliver an enriched curriculum with impressive student achievement results. For the purposes of this study, the researcher has elected to focus on a representative Abbott district and a representative J district.
An Enriched Curriculum in Action

When the achievements of the 31 Abbott districts in New Jersey are reviewed, one consistently distinguishes itself, Union City. Union City, New Jersey, is a densely populated city approximately 10 minutes from New York City. The median household income is $30,642, and 80% of residents report Spanish as the primary language spoken at home. There are 11,569 students in the district's 11 schools. The district faced a state takeover in 1989 due to the abysmal academic achievement level of its students. A unique reform model in which teachers composed the majority of the reform committee changed the course of the district:

Test scores are the highest among New Jersey cities. Eighty percent of the district's students currently meet state standards, up from 30 percent. In one seven-year period, passing eighth-grade test scores jumped from 33 to 83 percent in reading, from 42 to 65 percent in writing, and from 50 to 84 percent in mathematics. (Curtis, 2003)

Moreover, graduates of the district high schools have seen a 100% increase in the number of students accepted into Ivy League universities.

According to the NCLB 2005 School Report Card, 2005 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) scores of the Union City elementary students, 74.9% were proficient or advanced proficient in Language Arts Literacy, nearly meeting the benchmark goal of 75% for AYP. In Mathematics, 82.8% of elementary students were proficient or advanced proficient, which far exceeds the state standard of 62% for AYP. According to the same source, middle school students in Union City are also making significant gains on the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA). In Language Arts
Literacy, 65.3% of students were proficient or advanced proficient, again just shy of the 66% state standard for AYP. In Mathematics, students again surpassed the 49% state standard for AYP with a district average of 64.8% of students reported as proficient or advanced proficient. On the high school standardized examination, the HSPA, Union City students did not meet the state standards for AYP in either Language Arts Literacy or Mathematics; however, scores have consistently improved on these examinations. In 2005, the average HSPA Language Arts Literacy proficiency level was 66.2%, short of the 79% benchmark score, and in Mathematics, the district average of 57.5% proficiency did not meet the state standard for AYP of 64% proficiency.

Each of the schools in the districts has received a prestigious New Jersey Best Practices Award for a variety of their high-quality educational programs, including a mathematics peer tutoring lunch program and a partnership with the Metropolitan Opera in which students create an original opera. Woodrow Wilson High School supports a wide array of co-curricular programs for its students, including a highly successful forensics team.

Each of the schools in the district has also received recognition and grants because of the outstanding quality of their educational programs. In 2006, the Jose Martí Middle School was identified as a Governor’s School of Excellence, the Hudson School was recognized nationally as a Title I Distinguished School, and Woodrow Wilson School was identified as a National Blue Ribbon School. Both district high schools also completed the rigorous Accreditation for Growth process that carries with it an endorsement from the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (www.union-city-nj.org, 10/08/06).
In contrast, Mountain Lakes, New Jersey, is a small suburban community approximately 30 miles west of New York City. The total population is 4,256, 1,350 of whom are students in the K–12 school district. The median household income is $141,757. Mountain Lakes is consistently one of the top-ranked districts in the state of New Jersey, with high SAT scores, impressive numbers of students moving on to attend highly competitive colleges and universities, and recognition from outside agencies for the strength and rigor of the district's academic, co curricular, and athletic programs.

According to the NCLB 2005 School Report Card, 2005 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) scores of Mountain Lakes elementary students, 96.3% were proficient or advanced proficient in Language Arts Literacy, far exceeding the benchmark goal of 75% for AYP. In Mathematics, 90.5% of elementary students were proficient or advanced proficient, which far exceeds the state standard of 62% for AYP. According to the same source, middle school students in Mountain Lakes are among the top in the state on the GEPA. In Language Arts Literacy, 96.5% of students were proficient or advanced proficient, again far ahead of the 66% state standard for AYP. In Mathematics, students again surpassed the 49% state standard for AYP with a district average of 91.9% of students reported as proficient or advanced proficient. On the high school standardized examination, the HSPA, unlike their peers in Union City, Mountain Lakes students fared better on the HSPA than the other standardized tests offered to elementary and middle school students. In 2005, the average HSPA Language Arts Literacy proficiency level was 97.4%, ahead of the 79% benchmark score, and in Mathematics, the district average of 92.4% proficiency exceeded the state standard for AYP of 64% proficiency.
Mountain Lakes High School (MLHS) completed the rigorous Accreditation for Growth (AFG) process as did both Union Hill and Emerson High Schools in Union City. In addition, MLHS is the only public high school in the state of New Jersey to have an Honor Code, and staff members were recognized nationally at the Association for Curriculum Development's spring conference for the progress that they have made in the area of ethics education. Teachers have been recipients of Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation grants, distinguished themselves as James Madison Graduate fellows, and led the field in the development of progressive, transition planning curriculum for students with special needs.

The researcher hypothesizes that both districts take a more conservative attitude toward preparation for standardized exams than their DFG counterparts in favor of concentrating on an enriched curriculum. It is hypothesized that this enriched curriculum correlates to the academic success of students on state examinations and beyond. In order for the enriched curriculum to be successful, it must be embedded in the school culture and climate.

Although Union City and Mountain Lakes vary in socioeconomics, they share many similarities. Union City is 1.4 square miles while Mountain Lakes is 2.7 miles; the small size of both areas allows for the strong sense of community that has evolved in each. Moreover, both Union City and Mountain Lakes pride themselves on the fact that a large number of residents were born and raised in the municipality and chose to return as adults and raise their own families there. In fact, both populations share young average ages, 32.5 in Union City and 39.4 in Mountain Lakes. Union City shares a strong cultural identity as 82.3% of residents are Hispanic and 58.7% were born in Spanish-speaking
countries. Mountain Lakes shares homogeneity as well: 91.8% of the population is White, and 76.1% of the residents over 25 have received a bachelor's degree. Both populations highly value the importance of education.

The middle school in Union City is named after Cuban writer and national hero Jose Martí. According to the school's website:

Jose Martí Middle School is a community school. Sharing space with the Union City Public Library affords community interaction on a daily basis. The Cultural Center will be the link to increased parental and community involvement, while preserving a place for heritage and cultural activities. The Health Center will afford parents an opportunity to have their children medically screened and inoculated.

Mountain Lakes, too, involves community members in the schools in many ways, including community representation on all school planning teams.

Most recently, *U.S. News and World Report* recognized both Mountain Lakes and Emerson High Schools among the top 8% of high-performing high schools in the nation. Mountain Lakes earned a silver medal of distinction and Emerson a bronze (Rotherman, 2007).

*The Role of School Culture and Climate in Supporting an Enriched Curriculum*

Teaching practices, diversity, and the relationships among administrators, teachers, parents, and students contribute to school climate. Although the two terms are somewhat interchangeable, school climate refers mostly to the school's effects on students, while school culture refers more to the way teachers and other staff members work together. (McBrien, 1997)
Both climate and culture play a vital role in supporting an enriched curriculum. The more supportive the school climate, the more likely the students are to take academic risks, and the more collaborative the culture, the more likely that teachers and administrators will work together to create a challenging, respectful curriculum for the school's highly able/gifted learners.

In an attempt to codify the manner in which the ubiquitous academic achievement discourse of NCLB has had on America's schools, Armstrong (2006) studied patterns in schools that had a positive culture and climate for learning. He found such schools made their focus human development discourse:

Human Development Discourse seeks to regard each individual student as a unique human being filled with his or her own particular way of negotiating the developmental challenges of life. Thus, there is a respect for each student's particular style and rate of learning, as well as an appreciation for the varied interests, aspirations, capacities, obstacles, temperaments, and backgrounds that serve as the framework within which each person grows. Rather than insisting on the student's mastery of a given body of information, Human Development Discourse is much more concerned with tailoring the curriculum around the specific needs of the student. Instead of mandating what all students must learn, Human Development Discourse involves creating learning environments that let a student make meaningful choices about what he will learn in the course of his school experiences to help develop into his own unique versions of a whole human being. (p. 41)
Roland Barth, a noted expert on the topic of school culture and climate explained how the model of curricular development and assessment favored by most schools does not promote a caring individualized learning environment; instead, it is what he terms the transmission of knowledge model:

The proper business of schools is to transmit as much of this knowledge to students as possible. The proper function of students is to learn as much of this knowledge as efficiently as possible between September and June and to display its acquisition upon demand of authorities usually through standardized tests. (Barth, 2001, p. 32)

If the school culture and climate are committed to the transmission of knowledge mode of instruction, the ability for highly able/gifted learners to fully develop their skills and talents beyond that of a benchmark standardized test measure is significantly reduced.

Movement away from the transmission of knowledge model to a more compassionate approach such as human development discourse can only come to fruition when the value of the relationships of individuals within the school is increased:

The biggest problem besetting schools is the primitive quality of human relationships among children, parents, teachers, and administrators. Many schools perpetuate infantilism. School boards infantilize superintendents; superintendents, principals; principals, teachers; teachers; children. This leads to children and adults who frequently behave like infants, complying with authority from fear or dependence... To the extent that teachers and principals together can make important decisions, they become colleagues. They become grown ups. They become professionals. (Barth, 1990, p. 36)
In an age of unprecedented educational accountability enforced via mandated public penalties, the momentum to move to curricula rich in test preparation as opposed to an enriched curriculum is almost oppressive in many districts.

According to Kent's recent research (2006) expanding upon the work of Deal and Kennedy (1988), students perceive culture as a shared commodity, rather than driven by authority figures in the school. Moreover, the influences of outside society on the school significantly impact the culture within the school. Schools are less self-contained entities than in the past. While leaders can influence culture, a combination of subculture, leadership, external culture, and culture change defines a school's culture and climate (Kent, 2006).

The body of research reviewed indicates that throughout the nation, high-stakes testing has significantly narrowed the curriculum, as evidenced by less instructional time spent on non-assessed areas and program cuts in the areas of the arts and technology. In schools that are committed to an enriched curriculum, instructional time is duly spent on language arts and mathematics but not at the expense of other areas. An enriched curriculum demonstrates a vibrant commitment to various areas of study, diverse co curricular offerings, and provisions for all students to be successful, 21st-century learners. A review of program offerings and student performance data indicates that both Emerson and Mountain Lakes High Schools have an enriched curriculum in action. For an enriched curriculum to be successful, it must be supported by a positive, collaborative school culture where all the stakeholders share the same vision for education.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The design of this study includes two teacher survey components of the Self-assessment: School Culture Triage designed by Wagner and adapted from Phillips's (1993) the School-classroom Culture Audit (Appendix A). The researcher also conducted a series of focus group discussions of administrators and teachers in each high school. Teachers and administrators responded to questions that correlated with the research questions of the study (Appendix B). In addition, the researcher conducted a number of observations of each of the sites and used field notes and interviews with administrative and teaching staff to triangulate the data. These observations and notes were recorded using the logs included in Self-assessment: School Culture Triage designed by Wagner and adapted from Phillips's School-classroom Culture Audit (1993). In addition, information found in the public domain such as standardized test scores, mission statements, school calendars, course descriptions, and other related information was included. This combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was chosen because the researcher believes that administrator and teacher attitudes toward high-stakes testing can be easily determined through the use of surveys and focus groups that follow a predetermined route of open-ended questions designed by the researcher (Krueger, 2000).

The focus group discussions took place in classrooms, school meeting rooms, and offices so that the participants felt comfortable speaking freely and sharing their perceptions. Administrative focus group discussions were facilitated by the researcher and followed a predetermined route of open-ended questions designed by the researcher to closely correlate with the research questions outlined in chapter 1. Krueger and Casey (2000) observed that focus groups where people share something in common and are
conducted in a comfortable, permissive environment by a skilled moderator provided a strong understanding of the way those individuals feel about a particular issue, in this case, school culture, curriculum, and high-stakes testing.

Since attitudes cannot be measured in a numeric fashion, a description of the collective attitude of each of the groups was composed. As noted in Appendix B, the researcher grouped the focus group questions that addressed the same research question together. The researcher then identified themes and collective attitudes by coding the focus group discussion transcripts.

Research question 1 was primarily analyzed using the results of the School Culture Survey. Since research question 2 sought to determine to what extent high-stakes test results are used and how valuable they are perceived to be, responses were coded in two ways: first by identifying and characterizing comments that reflected the frequency of use of testing data and second by identifying and characterizing comments that indicated the perceived level of importance of the testing results.

The focus group questions discussed in relation to research question 3 were posed to determine the perceived quality of the curriculum and programs in non-assessed areas. Remarks were coded by the level of attention and importance dedicated to non-assessed areas. Similar to research question 2, research question 4 attempted to determine the extent to which an enriched curriculum was considered and how important those considerations were. Responses were coded in two ways: first by identifying and characterizing comments that reflected the frequency of consideration of an enriched curriculum for highly able/gifted learners and second by identifying and characterizing comments that established the perceived level of importance of the testing results.
Research questions 5, 6, and 7 investigated the perceived effect of high-stakes testing on highly ablegifted students, school culture, and the curriculum for highly ablegifted students. Responses were coded first to determine if an effect existed and next to characterize the perceived effect as positive or negative.

**Research Design**

The researcher chose two districts, one an Abbott district and the other a J district. The Abbott school district is located in northeastern New Jersey in Hudson County and has a population of 67,088 (U.S. Census, 2000). The school district is composed of eight elementary school, one middle school, and two high schools with a total enrollment of more than 12,000 students (www.union-city-nj.org/modules/AMS/index.php?storytopic=14). The J district is located in northwestern New Jersey in Morris County and has a population of 4,336 (U.S. Census, 2000). The school district is composed of one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. The district is also home to a PK–12 program for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. The total school population is approximately 1,700 students.

The Abbott district has received local, state, and national recognition, including the following honors: 2004 NCLB Blue Ribbon School Award, 2005 Governor's School of Excellence Award, Benchmark School Awards sponsored by the New Jersey State Chamber of Commerce, Best Practice Awards, and Middle States Association accreditation. The J district has been recognized for outstanding academic achievement and is consistently rated among the top schools in the state according to *New Jersey Monthly* magazine; the district has received an Inclusive Education Award from the Department of Education and is considered one of the best-performing districts in Morris
County. At the high school level, the average SAT score is 1186, and 99% of the students graduate, with 95% going on to 4-year colleges. The high school also received Middle States Association accreditation. Based on this and other data, these two districts were selected as exemplary Abbott and J districts.

The researcher secured permission and board approval from both districts to conduct research on the premises. Explanatory letters of the purpose of the study were filed with the board offices in each district (Appendix C). The confidentiality of responses was explained to each participant. All participants were informed of the dates and times for arrival and the anticipated length of the focus group discussion before the meeting.

The faculty surveys were distributed with a letter of explanation from the researcher to randomly selected faculty from each school. The faculty members completed the surveys privately and returned them in a provided pre-stamped envelope.

The administrative focus group in each school was composed of the principal and additional building administrators with expertise in curriculum. Through a discussion with the building principal, the researcher determined the appropriate number of administrators to be included in the administrative focus group at each school. The teacher focus group in each school was composed of approximately 8 teachers from varied curricular areas. With the permission of the building principal, the researcher posted a request for faculty participation on the internal electronic bulletin board and in the faculty room and main office. Teachers were given 2 weeks to express interest to participate in the focus group. The researcher composed a focus group representing various curricular areas and time in district.
Focus groups are an excellent means to get to the heart of research questions quickly, and the results are highly valid, honest, and easy to understand (Marshall, 2006). In this case, the questions to guide the focus group discussion were derived from the research questions of this study. The questions appeared spontaneous in nature, were asked in a conversational manner, and were direct and simple, promoting the greatest level of discussion among participants (Krueger, 2000). Ground rules for the discussion were reviewed with all participants, including only one person speaking at a time, demonstrating respect for self and others, and following the guidelines established by the facilitator.

The researcher was responsible for establishing a comfortable atmosphere where participants felt at ease and informed all participants that while their identities would remain anonymous, an audio recording of each focus group discussion was made and participants identified themselves by assigned number rather than by name when responding to questions.

**Instrument Design**

Focus group discussions began with an opening question about the school to engage participants in the conversation immediately. The questions that drive the study were asked and pursued by the researcher using techniques to elicit complete responses. Participants had the opportunity to share their thoughts and impressions in a less structured, open forum for the last 5 minutes of the session, and each participant was provided with a stamped envelope addressed to the researcher in case a participant wished to change or add to any of his or her comments after the discussion was over and the participants had time to reflect.
Setting

In collaboration with the school principal, the researcher established a date and time for each focus group discussion outside the school day. The focus group conversations took place in a school conference room, classroom, and administrative offices. The locations selected were conducive to active listening and participation.

Role of the Researcher

This researcher has been employed by the J district included in this study for 12.5 years, first as a high school social studies teacher, then as an administrator in special services and the middle school, and currently as the district curriculum coordinator and vice principal of the middle school. Although this researcher evaluates staff, none of the staff the researcher evaluates were included in this study. Before conducting this research, this researcher had no connection with Union City public schools. As a professional and scholar, the researcher has both firsthand and academic experience with curriculum development, high-stakes testing, and school culture issues.

Data Collection

The responses of the two teacher survey components of the Self-assessment: School Culture Triage designed by Wagner and adapted from Phillips's School-classroom Culture Audit (1993) were scored as mandated by Waggtools (Appendix A). The audiotapes of the focus group interviews were transcribed by the researcher and reported in the study to capture the perceptions and attitudes of the teachers and administrators regarding their experiences in their respective high schools as those experiences pertain to curriculum, school climate, and high-stakes testing.
Validity and Reliability

The School Culture Audit designed by Wagner and Masden-Copas has undergone significant field-testing and is widely used to accurately assess school culture. The National Staff Development Council has endorsed the instrument. The teacher survey identifies the three main indicators of school culture and climate as perceived by teachers, normally, collaboration, collegiality, and efficacy, and presents questions specific to each area. Further, the tool is based on the research of educational researchers, including Cohen, Deal, Frieberg, Kohn, Levine, Lezotte, Peterson, Robbins, Sergiovanni, and Sizer. The survey tools were used for the recommended purpose and no other. The researcher followed the scoring protocols and guidelines that have been established by Wagner and Masden-Copas.

As previously outlined, the focus group questions followed the research questions of this study. The researcher created a welcoming, comfortable environment for these discussions. The researcher took careful notes as well as audio recordings of the focus group discussions. The researcher asked participants to clarify any ambiguities that arose from conversations and used skills as a trained group facilitator and mediator to ensure that the information gained was properly understood and accurately reported.

A jury of experts in the field reviewed the focus group questions. Three individuals reviewed the research questions and determined that the focus group questions as prepared by the researcher were closely connected to the research questions. Further, the jury of experts concurred that the questions would promote meaningful dialogue for qualitative research. There were no suggested revisions from this jury of experts (Appendix D).
The validity of this study is enhanced by the triangulating data sources of focus
groups, teacher surveys, and observations. The purpose of triangulation is to confirm
emerging findings through the use of multiple sources so that one viewpoint is not
dominant. Data triangulation employs two or more sources to ensure factual accuracy
(Krathwohl, 1998).

**Data Treatment**

Following the collection of the school culture surveys, the researcher recorded
each respondent's responses and tabulated the responses following the instrument
protocols. The researcher identified which school culture factors the stakeholders viewed
as important and how those factors were valued in the school. Gaps between what was
important to stakeholders and the perception of its value to the school were carefully
reviewed.

After transcribing each of the focus group conversations, the researcher
determined what the perceptions of the teacher and administrative groups indicated about
the research question being studied. The researcher grouped the responses of the teacher
and administrative groups by school to determine the perceptions' similarities and
differences in each group's experience.
Chapter 4: Presentation of Data

In this chapter, the researcher will present the data collected and identify how they are connected to the academic and school culture factors that influence successful, highly able/gifted students in a representative Abbot district and a representative J district as perceived by their teachers and administrators. Since this research study controlled for socioeconomic status, the academic and school culture factors identified transcend socioeconomic limitations. Teachers and administrators from both districts were surveyed and interviewed regarding their attitudes toward curriculum, high-stakes testing, and school culture.

The data collected provides information that will help to characterize the school culture that exists in these two districts, reveal the perceptions that teachers and administrators have regarding curriculum, and clarify how the presence of high-stakes testing affects these perceptions and attitudes.

As explained in chapter 1, the researcher collected data that are intended to address each of the research questions with quantitative data, qualitative data, or a combination of both forms of data. Following is a description of each of the research questions and the associated data. To most clearly disseminate the data, only excerpts of focus group discussions are provided in this chapter. The full transcripts of the focus group discussions can be found in appendices E, F, G, and H.

The series of research questions begin with an analysis of school culture data. While school culture is not the primary focus of this study, the researcher posits that a positive, collegial school culture is necessary for an enriched curriculum to flourish. The
The purpose of these data is to identify whether or not the culture in the high schools researched is generally positive.

Table 2

Data Correlation with Research Question 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question # 1</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do administrators and teachers in a highly successful selected A and a highly successful selected J district describe the culture in their school, the levels of professional collaboration, collegiality and self-determination/efficacy?</td>
<td>Masden-Copas, Self-Assessment: School Culture, all questions 1-18</td>
<td>Data gathering survey on Likert Scale</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wagner, School Culture Survey, all questions 1-13</td>
<td>Data gathering survey on Likert Scale</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mucci</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus Group Discussion Questions for Administrators and Teachers questions 1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>Focus group discussion following a script of previously established open-ended questions</td>
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</table>

The School Culture Triage offers a scoring guide that provides information and recommendations regarding the perceptions of school culture that exist. According to the Masden-Copas Self-assessment, the lowest score that can be earned is 17, and the highest is 85. A score in the range of 17 to 40 means "critical and immediate action is necessary," and the recommendation is to "conduct a full-scale assessment of your school's culture and invest all available resources in repairing and healing your school's culture." A score in the range of 41 to 60 means "modifications and improvements are necessary," and the recommendation is to "begin with a more intense assessment of your school's culture to determine which area is most in need of improvement." Both Mountain Lakes High School and Emerson High School earned scores in the range of 60 to 75. Mountain Lakes High School earned a score of 68, and Emerson High School earned a score of 64. These
scores indicate that the school should "monitor and continue to make positive adjustments" but does not indicate a need for in-depth analysis or prescriptive action in area of school culture. The final range of scores is 76 to 85; this range means "amazing," and the recommendation is "continue monitoring, though, with each school improvement planning cycle, or at least every two years, to be sure that you stay in top shape" (Masden-Copas, 1993, p. 2).

In the next portion of the School Culture Triage, the School Culture Survey, respondents were asked to rate 13 key indicators of a school's culture (i.e., participatory decision making, sense of community, goals, and expectations) twice, first in terms of its presence in their school and the next time in terms of its relative importance to the individual. In tabulating the results, the researcher must determine an average score for what is perceived to be present in the school and an average score for what is perceived to be important for each of the 13 key indicators. In reviewing the averages, the researcher identified what, if any, gaps in the two rating areas existed. According to the survey design, gaps of three or more should be addressed by the school administration.

In Mountain Lakes High School, the gaps between the presence of the 13 key indicators and the importance of these indicators to the individuals surveyed was less than three points in 12 out of the 13 areas, and a 3.1 gap existed in the area of collaborative instructional planning and collegial relationships (question 10). This indicates a positive school culture and a strong connection between what individuals in the school believe is important and their observations of these items.

In Emerson Lakes High School, the gaps between the presence of the 13 key indicators and the importance of these indicators to the individuals surveyed was less
than three points in 12 out of the 13 areas, and a 4.1 gap existed in the area of parental involvement, engagement, and support (question 6). Again, this indicates a positive school culture and a strong connection between what individuals in the school believe is important and their observations of these items.

During the focus group discussion, the researcher asked, "How would you describe the climate of your school?" In the Mountain Lakes administrative focus group, an administrator responded, "The climate of the school is collegial, the teachers work together, and the intentions of the staff are very well placed, and the students always come first." During the teacher focus group in Mountain Lakes, a participant noted:

The school is so safe. It is striking to me having taught in different systems how dedicated the students and teachers here are. There is a lot of involvement of all students here. There is something for everyone: sports, clubs, academics, music, theatre. Every student is involved in something.

In response to the same question, an Emerson High School administrator stated:

Students come first, and I like the students to feel that any of us would do whatever we can to help them with whatever they need. Everyone needs to feel safe here. We also have traditions that have been created by the students and faculty and are preserved each year. Holidays, pep rallies, and other school-wide events are very important here.

In addition, a teacher from an Emerson faculty member commented, "We are extremely collaborative, and we are extremely structured here."

Next, the researcher asked, "What expectations exist here regarding the teacher-student working relationship?" In the Mountain Lakes focus group, administrators noted
that it is expected that teachers go out of their way to demonstrate their dedication to their students by quickly responding to parental requests, being available at various times for additional instructional help, and consistently delivering high-quality instruction. The teachers at Mountain Lakes felt that the relationship between teacher and student was characterized by mutual respect.

In the Emerson High School focus groups, the themes of instructional preparedness and respect also emerged. In addition, the administrators emphasized that the students in Emerson know how much the teachers genuinely care about each of their students. The teacher comments also reflect this notion. A participant noted, "Teachers make themselves available; students need to know that they can talk to us about missing homework. I check essays and homework electronically, and I communicate with parents via email daily."

To address research question 2, the researcher asked a series of questions about HSPA: "Have you ever reviewed the HSPA performance of your students? If so, can you describe what you look for when reviewing those results? Do you feel these results are helpful to you as an educator?"

Table 3

Data Correlation with Research Question 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question # 2</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do school administrators and teachers in selected, highly successful Abbott and J districts use high stakes test results?</td>
<td>Mucci, Focus Group Discussion Questions for Administrators and Teachers questions 3, 4, and 5</td>
<td>Focus group discussion following a script of previously established open-ended questions</td>
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</table>
In the Mountain Lakes focus groups, the administrators agreed that the HSPA results for their students were truly exceptional. The administrators noted that they record grade-level performance, carefully study any test result that appears to be an anomaly, and review the students' writing samples to ensure that the students are performing at the highest possible level. The classroom teachers at Mountain Lakes believe the HSPA is not a concern for the vast majority of students that they teach, as one teacher commented:

By and large, our students pass the exam and do well on it. We make sure that students write in all academic areas but I can't say that the HSPA is on my mind when I am planning a lesson.

The response from the administrators at Emerson High School was much different. One of the administrators' main focus areas is the HSPA:

We carefully look at the HSPA results and closely examine the performance of students who are at risk. Prior to the HSPA, students who are on the cusp of passing are identified and given immediate, individual attention. Analysis of these results led us to provide a specialized program for those in need. The program is 8 weeks before the HSPA exam; 3 hours a week either 2 days after school or on Saturdays. It is offered in both Math and Language Arts. We have gone from having 232 students in the SRA process just 2 years ago to 102. In the same 2-year period, we have gone from 32% passing to 65% passing in Mathematics. The teachers' lessons are designed with the HSPA in mind, as one participant explained:

I constantly check it; I use it as a guide to help me with each student, to determine who is working to their potential and who is not. I compare student's written class
work with their test performance and make correlations that help me plan my
lessons.

Another teacher noted the school-wide commitment to incorporating student achievement
data effectively:

We have delayed openings where all of the student achievement data is presented
to us and we are given all of the performance indicators and learn about each
subgroup's performance on each indicator. We are expected to ask questions at
these workshops and each team has a coach who helps them wade through the
data and learn how to make the best lessons based on what we learn about the
student's performance.

Research question 3 focused on the impact that increased attention on testing may
have on non-assessed areas: "How would you describe your school's commitment to the
following areas: physical education, world languages, social studies, fine arts, and
practical arts, and in what ways are these programs supported in your school?"

Table 4

Data Correlation with Research Question 3

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<tr>
<th>Research Question # 3</th>
<th>Mucci, Focus Group Discussion Questions for Administrators and Teachers questions 6 and 7</th>
<th>Focus group discussion following a script of previously established open-ended questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What provisions do administrators and teachers in selected, highly successful Abbott and J districts make to address curricular areas not assessed by NCLB mandated examinations?</td>
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</table>
In the Mountain Lakes focus groups, administrators explained that they do not view the curricular areas as those that are assessed and those that are not:

I feel that in this school district the superintendent, the building principal, and the community all have a very lively interest in the arts and support them accordingly. We are not a meat-and-potatoes school. Our constituency knows how enriching and how important these fields are. The community through the Mountain Lakes Educational Foundation and Friends of the Arts is very serious about their support of these programs.

The teachers at Mountain Lakes offered a similar explanation:

For a small school, we have a huge commitment to these areas. For example, we have a rigorous world language program that begins in the middle school and sends the students to the high school with a high level of language competency. We have things that other schools do not have such as wood shop and home economics.

In Emerson High School, the value of these programs is at the forefront, as one administrator stated, "These programs are the heart of the experience for so many of our students. We have an outstanding fashion and design program where the students learn important practical skills." Another administrator concluded, "I don't feel that there is a difference between assessed and non-assessed areas within this building; we all have a job to do here."

The teachers at Emerson believe that while the non-assessed areas are emphasized in the high school, the same value for these areas does not exist in the elementary grades:
The major problem we now face at the high school level is that there is no longer a feeder program for advancement in vocational arts. The middle-school children are no longer exposed to the fine and practical arts because of the increased emphasis on preparing to pass the HSPA. Students are coming to the high school, and they have never learned to sew, for example.

In addition, another teacher explained:

There are no more practical or fine arts classes in the elementary setting. We are reintroducing programs in this area that are no longer available any earlier in the educational experience. Further, we have also seen a significant decrease in the number of freshman enrolled in our career exploration class; their schedule simply does not allow for it because they are in remedial classes.

The next research question asked respondents to consider their schools' commitment to an enriched curriculum specifically for highly able/gifted students. The questions discussed were as follows: "What are some of the most important student events in your school? Does your school provide character education? If so, in what programs/ways? How do you feel your school focuses on the individual learning needs of its students? What advanced courses of study are available to students in your school? How are students encouraged to take advantage of these courses? Are there opportunities for highly able/gifted students to be accelerated in your school?"
In the Mountain Lakes focus groups, administrators noted that many of the most important events that take place during the course of a year are highly academic, such as honor society inductions and awards assemblies. Further, the administrators noted that the highly able-gifted students in the school are expected to be leaders not only in academics but also in the areas of integrity and service to others. The school administration prides itself on the highly individualized educational programs that are offered and the increased number of Advanced Placement classes. There is also a strong emphasis on providing an adequate challenge for highly able-gifted learners in all classes. In the words of one administrator:

Within the classes, teachers offer an array of courses to challenge gifted and highly able students in areas that interest them. These projects are designed to push these learners beyond the confines of the curriculum. In our arts program, we have teachers who work with students to prepare for regional band or chorus. When students have the interest and the motivation, we certainly present ways for them to be accelerated and ensure that they are not limited.
The teaching staff at Mountain Lakes echoed many of the same ideas but also described the professional expectation that teachers be highly familiar with the IEPs and 504s of their students and that the teachers work with students at all levels of the educational continuum equally so that no student is left struggling or feeling bored. The complement of course offerings was cited by one teacher as exceptional: "There are not too many places where you can move all the way to BC Calculus or take three different AP history courses."

The most memorable, important events that occur in Emerson High School as identified by their administration are assemblies and school programs that instill a sense of pride in the community and dedication to one another. There are many ways that the administrators feel the school focuses on the individual learning needs of students. One administrator described a successful peer leadership program that has been recently instituted:

We adopted the peer leader program mentioned based on the research out of Rutgers that was particularly relevant for our students. You see, we lose a lot of students in the freshman year; they drop out, use alcohol, and begin skipping out of school. The program began by teaching refusal skills through a positive peer model, but for us it is much more now. Students are chosen by application; we select students from different social groups to show positive role models across the student populations and different types of successes. Each peer leader team has 12–14 students in their groups by addressing their social concerns and keeping them healthy, and in school we can be sure that we can meet their academic needs.
Through the introduction of Small Learning Communities and curricular evaluation teams, the school has increased course offerings that keep highly able/gifted students thoroughly engaged:

As a result of increasing the difficulty of material in our lower-level classes, we were able to increase the amount of challenging material and courses that we offer throughout the high school experience. We offer Advanced Placement courses in Calculus, Chemistry, Biology, US History, English Literature, AB and BC Calculus. Enrichment opportunities are provided for advanced students, including Hudson Community College, Bloomfield, NJIT collegiate-level courses, the Upward Bound program for freshman, summer research opportunities for American Chemistry Society, Governor's School Cardiac Classroom, Brainworks, and Moody's Mega Math Challenge. In Language Arts, we have also increased the number of electives that we have, and these courses are specifically designed for advanced learners. We have an honors program that is thriving, and students have enrolled in record numbers for Shakespeare, the American Novel, and Journalism.

The teachers in the Emerson focus groups mentioned many of the same school-wide programs that have focused on meeting the needs of individual learners and all levels:

I think the other thing that is important is that we also make sure that when a student is having difficulty that there is one member of the small learning community teacher team who will stand up for that student, be their advocate.
When the students know that you care, they try their best. Everybody here knows when a student is having an issue in school or at home.

The teachers also lauded the programs in place that allow high school students to take college courses for credit. The staff believed that these programs enabled students who are highly able but not on the AP course track to recognize their academic potential.

Next, the researcher wanted to consider to what extent, if any, highly able/gifted students were affected by the focus on high-stakes testing. To determine this, the researcher asked, "Have you ever used HSPA data to help you better serve students with special needs? Gifted students? Other subgroups? What has been your experience with gifted or highly able students and standardized tests?"

Table 6

**Data Correlation with Research Question 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question # 5</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do administrators and teachers in a selected A and a selected J district believe highly able/gifted students are affected by high stakes testing?</td>
<td>Mucci, Focus Group Discussion Questions for Administrators and Teachers questions 13 and 14</td>
<td>Focus group discussion following a script of previously established open-ended questions</td>
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</table>

The Mountain Lakes High School administration focus group indicated that the HSPA data have not been helpful to them in meeting the needs of specific subgroups. In fact, the administrators viewed the HSPA as an inconvenience to highly able/gifted students:
These students shouldn’t have the same requirements as other students who are not as successful. There should be some kind of a link between prior success on the SAT and the HSPA. We have students who take the SAT and earn a near-perfect score in math and then need to sit through the HSPA. I had one student who earned a 790 on the math SAT heading to take the HSPA, and he realized he forgot his calculator in his locker. He stopped and then said, "You know what? I don't need a calculator for this."

The teachers in the Mountain Lakes focus group have had similar experiences. One explained, "I have never used HSPA data at all." Their perceptions of the lack of value of these tests for highly able/gifted learners was equally emphatic:

Respondent 1: It is wasteful.

Respondent 2: It is beneath them.

Respondent 3: They take the test and do as we ask them.

Respondent 4: You're right. They are very cooperative. They do the right thing, and they score well on it. But academically, it is so non-challenging to them. I mean you are taking a kid out of, say, Pre Calculus Honors to test them on something that they have been able to do since eighth grade.

Respondent 5: We are lucky that they don't riot. In our building, average students have no trouble with this exam. It is a loss of time for us and for them.

Respondent 6: That means that it is also not respectful.

The administrators in the Emerson High School focus group do use HSPA data to inform curricular decision making for specific subgroups:
Respondent 1: We disaggregate the data so that each subgroup's results is closely examined and given exactly what they need to be successful.

Respondent 2: The subgroup that comes to my mind is those who have just recently arrived in the country, and their time in district is less than a year. These students who are placed in the port of entry program and travel together through all classes and stay together for 1 year. Students participate in a bilingual program and are supported as they assimilate to the culture. We have seen how this program assists students who have only been here for a short amount of time master the material that is presented on the HSPA.

Respondent 3: We found that all of our students regardless of their ability level were in need of more authentic experiences in writing. Recently, we invited Mary Ledbetter in to conduct a writing residency with the students. She also conducted workshops for the staff, and all the teachers, whether special education or honors, were able to integrate her strategies into their teaching. This improved students' writing, which has a direct effect on our HSPA results.

However, there also exists a fair amount of cynicism with regard to the experiences that highly able/gifted students have with these tests, as one administrator at Emerson High School summarized, "It is a shame that Shakespeare sometimes has to take a back seat to picture prompts so that we can get all the students well prepared for the exam."

The teachers at Emerson mentioned their dissatisfaction with the fact that NCLB and high-stakes testing have not translated into a more rigorous program for students with special needs:
While it is true that most of our students are doing well since the curriculum alignment in response to the testing, we are still not where we need to be in special education. Many of our special education classes are heavily modified and not inclusive. I would like to see us do more to use the pressure from NCLB to get these students in appropriately challenging classes with adequate supports.

Teachers also felt strongly that in order for gifted and highly able students to be as successful as possible, the staff must continually emphasize what pathways the students can follow after high school: "Our mission here is to have the students, especially those with great academic potential, see the world that exists beyond Union City. The students need to see high school tests as a necessary step toward the college experience."

The researcher next wanted the focus groups to consider the impact of these tests on school culture. Participants were asked to consider, "In what, if any, ways has the school culture changed in response to the current focus on high-stakes testing?"

Table 7

**Data Correlation with Research Question 6**

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<tr>
<th>Research Question # 6</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
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<tr>
<td>What, if any, impact does high stakes testing have on the culture of a school?</td>
<td>Mucci, Focus Group Discussion Questions for Administrators and Teachers question 15</td>
<td>Focus group discussion following a script of previously established open-ended questions</td>
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The Mountain Lakes High School administrators focus group views not the HSPA but the SAT and the AP exams as high-stakes testing. With regard to these exams, the administrators emphasized said exams have always been approached with a great deal of
seriousness and NCLB has not had any impact on that. The teachers in the Mountain Lakes focus groups explained that they review the HSPA areas to be sure that the curriculum is properly aligned.

At Emerson High School, the focus on high-stakes testing has made the HSPA a topic of conversation in many administrative areas:

Respondent 1: Unlike earlier years, we have the entire school focused on the performance, we are communicating clearly our school-wide goals, and the students are very involved in the process and in our success.

Respondent 2: At department meetings, we speak about the test, look at the student work, and discuss ways to improve our performance.

Respondent 3: It is a part of our daily conversations and planning to be sure.

According to Emerson High School teachers, "The Institute for Student Achievement and the Small Learning Communities have been responsible for our cultural changes and shifts in curriculum; both focus us on reaching each student and knowing each student's academic strengths and weaknesses."

The final research question asked focus group participants to share their perceptions on the connection between high-stakes testing and the curriculum for highly ablegifted students by responding to the following questions: "Have you changed your curriculum in response to the current focus on high-stakes testing? What, if any, impact do these changes have on highly ablegifted learners?"
Table 8

*Data Correlation with Research Question 7*

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<tr>
<th>Research Question # 7</th>
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<th>Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What, if any, impact does high stakes testing have on the curriculum for highly able/gifted students?</td>
<td>Mucci, Focus Group Discussion Questions for Administrators and Teachers questions 16 and 17</td>
<td>Focus group discussion following a script of previously established open-ended questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Mountain Lakes focus groups, the administration noted that responding to the state's high-stakes testing can sometimes have a negative effect on curricular decision-making:

For 5 or 6 years, we ensured that all of our students take Physics at a certain point in their career so that they would be prepared for the Physics portion of the HSPA, but that never came to pass, so were able to go back to a more realistic science course sequence for all of our students.

The administrators also explained that for many highly able/gifted students, the HSPA assesses material that they mastered many years prior. For this reason, highly able students "view the state testing as an interruption, they take it, but it is viewed as inconvenient."

Teachers in the Mountain Lakes focus groups also noted that the state assessment schedule and requirements can sometimes be limiting to highly able/gifted students:

It sometimes makes scheduling harder for highly able students because if they are required to take a class at a certain time then they cannot follow a sequence, say, to an AP level, unless they take two science classes at once.
colleges with the highest Hispanic population, like Texas A&M, are running at about 11% Hispanic.

**Summary**

An analysis of the focus group conversations demonstrated that, in both schools, a high level of commitment to success for all students exists. In all cases, the views presented in the administrative focus groups were similar in the corresponding teacher groups. The Emerson teachers viewed the HSPA as their most important high-stakes test while the Mountain Lakes teachers and administrators viewed the AP exams as their most important high-stakes test. Both groups were determined to ensure that their students were well prepared for high-stakes tests.

The results of the school culture triage and the insightful comments shared in all of the focus groups present a wealth of data to be analyzed in greater detail. Chapter 5 contains such analysis specifically identifying how the information gathered provides a greater understanding of the impact that high-stakes testing has on highly able/gifted learners in the two districts selected.
Chapter 5: Data Analysis, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Data Analysis

Research question 1 asks, "How do administrators and teachers in a highly successful selected Abbott district and a highly successful selected J district describe the culture in their school and the levels of professional collaboration, collegiality, and self-determination/efficacy?" Based on the results of the Self-assessment: School Culture, it can be determined that both Mountain Lakes High School and Emerson High School faculties rate their school cultures as stable and positive. The composite score of each set of faculty surveys indicates that professional collaboration, characterized by statements such as, "The student behavior code is a result of collaboration and consensus among staff," exists often or almost always in both schools. The composite score of each set of faculty surveys indicates that collegiality, characterized by statements such as, "Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by members of our school," exists often or almost always in both schools. The composite score of each set of faculty surveys indicates that self-determination/efficacy, characterized by statements such as, "People work here because they enjoy and choose to be here," exists almost always or always in both schools.

Further, according to the School Culture Survey, the teachers in both schools valued democratic decision making (question 1), strong leadership (question 2), staff stability (question 3), coordinated, research based curriculum (question 4), school-wide selected and agreed-upon staff development (question 5), school-wide recognition of success for students and staff (question 7), an effort to maximize active learning (question 8), district support for school improvement (question 9), sense of community (question
While longtime administrators at Emerson High School view the HSPA as the latest in a long series of high-stakes testing for which they are accountable, other believe it has had a definite, positive impact on curriculum. According to one focus group participant:

This test has made us really look at the curriculum and increase the quality and rigor of the math program. We found that students were taking a sequence of courses that were well below the skills that were needed to pass the HSPA. We realigned the course offerings to align with the NJCCS. Further, we held articulation meetings with middle school teachers. The middle school test scores are evaluated, and 40% of students are required to take an additional math class that deals with the clusters on the HSPA exam.

The Emerson administrative group agreed that the highly able/gifted students are so focused on college preparation that their curricula remains relatively unaffected by HSPA testing.

The teaching staff in Emerson who work with the students who are highly able/gifted seem to adopt a more global focus, as evidenced in one teacher's comment:

The tests are a tool we use to help them understand the steps they have to go through to move beyond Union City. For example, we took a group of kids to Swarthmore. Now, remember, we house 1,500 kids in one building, and I think Swarthmore has about 1,500 kids on 500 acres. Our students were really unnerved, they were like, "Where are all the people? I want to be somewhere like Union City where everyone speaks Spanish." We try to teach them that even the
clear goals and high expectations for students and staff (question 12), and order and discipline established through consensus (question 13). In both the Emerson and Mountain Lakes focus groups, teachers reported that the items listed above as important values were present in their respective schools.

The results of these faculty surveys are significant because they support the research that directly correlates a supportive school environment with student engagement and achievement. Schools that are noted for high academic standards, meaningful curriculum, professional development, and personalized learning environments are more likely to have students who are engaged in and connected to school. Students in these types of schools are also more likely to achieve academic success; these predictions have been proved regardless of socioeconomic status (Klem, 2004).

Students’ academic performance and commitment to school are enhanced when the student-teacher relationship is based on an emotional connection (Bryk, 1999). In the Mountain Lakes focus groups, both teachers and administrators emphasized that there was respect between students and teachers, that the teachers were committed to helping each student achieve success, and that teachers were available to students whenever a student needed them. In the Emerson High School focus groups, teachers and administrators emphasized the importance of the respectful nature of all student-staff interactions, teacher support and availability for students, and the protective nature that adults in the building assume for the students. A common perception held by teachers and administrators in both high schools was the obligation of teachers to bring their best lesson to the classroom every day to never compromise the academic rigor of their
courses, arguably, one of the most respectful actions that an educator can carry out in the classroom. Based on the analysis of the data collected, both high schools provide a supportive, caring learning environment that has led to greater student engagement and academic achievement.

Research question 2, "How do school administrators and teachers in selected, highly successful Abbott and J districts use high-stakes tests results?" was analyzed in terms of the frequency of use of test results and the perceived importance of test results.

Table 9

| Schools’ Use of High-stakes Test Results |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Always use/Very important               | Emerson High Administrators     | Emerson High Teachers  |
| Frequently use/Important                | Mountain Lakes Administrators   | Mountain Lakes Teachers|
| Occasionally use/Moderately important   |                                |                        |
| Rarely use/Of little importance         |                                |                        |
| Never use/Unimportant                   |                                |                        |

While the Emerson High School teachers and administrators view the HSPA as the high-stakes test for their student population, both groups refer to student performance data on a daily basis; the HSPA is used less frequently at Mountain Lakes. At Emerson High School, the test data not only inform instruction but also drive daily instructional decision-making. At Mountain Lakes, the administration uses the HSPA data, and the teachers do not. However, both the administrative and teacher groups at Mountain Lakes identified their high-stakes tests as the SATs and AP examinations. These data indicate
that the better the student performance is on high-stakes tests, the less likely it is to be used by the teachers and administrators in charge. Further, Emerson High School faculty and administration are aware that their student performance data will be closely analyzed by the New Jersey Department of Education due to the provisions of NCLB.

Research question 3, "What provisions do administrators and teachers in selected, highly successful Abbott and J districts make to address curricular areas not assessed by NCLB-mandated examinations?" was analyzed by the perceived quality of the curriculum and programs in non-assessed areas.

Table 10

Schools' Attention to Non-assessed Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Mountain Lakes Administrators</th>
<th>Mountain Lakes Teachers</th>
<th>Emerson High Administrators</th>
<th>Emerson High Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Above Average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Below Average</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extremely Poor</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The results of this data indicate the presence of an enriched curriculum and a commitment to preserving these programs in a time of increased focus on high-stakes testing. In both schools, for example, teachers and administrators perceive the fine and practical arts to be the heart of the educational experience for many students.

While the teachers and administrators in Emerson High School have noted a decline in the amount of instructional time dedicated to non-assessed areas in the K–8 curricular continuum, neither group believes that this is the case in the high school. In the Mountain Lakes focus groups, the administrators observed that the number of course
offerings and the number of students enrolled in those courses have actually increased since the introduction of NCLB. Thus, both district demonstrate a commitment to an enriched curriculum and a value of maintaining relevant study in non-assessed areas. This makes both high schools in the minority as identified by research that indicates 71% of schools have reduced instructional time in non-assessed areas since the introduction of NCLB (Stark-Rentner, 2006).

The perceptions of the teachers and administrators in both high schools indicate a belief in the presence of the three factors needed to maintain an enriched curriculum: a common framework, working conditions to implement the framework, and the resources and materials needed to maintain the framework (Newmann, 2001). Focus group participants from both high schools provided examples of the successful recognition of student participation in enriched curricular experiences such as musicals, band concerts, AP studio art displays, fashion shows, student government/social studies sponsored rallies, and CAD competitions.

Research question 4, "How do school administrators and teachers in selected, high successful Abbott and J districts demonstrate their commitment to an enriched curriculum for highly able/gifted learners?" was analyzed in terms of frequency of consideration of enriching the curriculum for highly able/gifted learners and the perceived importance of providing an enriched curriculum for highly able/gifted learners.
Table 11

_Schools' Provision of an Enriched Curriculum for Highly Able/Gifted Learners_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Always consider</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Mountain Lakes Administrators</th>
<th>Mountain Lakes Teachers</th>
<th>Emerson High Administrators</th>
<th>Emerson High Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequently consider</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally consider</td>
<td>Moderately important</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely consider</td>
<td>Of little importance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never consider</td>
<td>Unimportant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both focus groups' perceptions reflected a commitment to designing programs that would appeal to highly able/gifted students. The administrative groups from both schools and the teacher group from Mountain Lakes pointed to increased AP course offerings, collegiate-level challenge programs, independent study, acceleration of courses, and diverse student activities (including the Key Club, the National Honor Society, and Junior ROTC) to demonstrate the schools' commitment to meeting the needs of highly able/gifted students. While the teacher group at Emerson High School believed that a commitment to the enriching curriculum for highly able students is moderately important and an item participants consider on an occasional basis, the group participants perceived their greatest challenge in this area was to expose all students to the possibility of post high school educational options. The Emerson teachers seem to believe that there are many students in their classes who have not been identified as "highly able/gifted," but they may well be able to achieve at the same levels as students enrolled in the enrichment opportunities available for highly able/gifted students.
Common to all four groups is the characterization that programs such as Moody's Math Challenge at Emerson High School or the International Night Concert at Mountain Lakes High School is created to provide an avenue for a particular group of students to meet success in their area of giftedness. At both schools, there are opportunities for students outside the mandated curriculum. For example, at Emerson, students who need more than one math class are scheduled for two, and those who need a collegiate-level class are given that opportunity. At Mountain Lakes, students may take courses through independent study or enroll in online classes. Both schools are characterized by learning environments where student choice is valued. Thus, both schools have chosen human development discourse as an essential component of the school culture (Armstrong, 2006).

Research question 5 asked, "How do administrators and teachers in a selected Abbott district and a selected J district believe highly able/gifted students are affected by high-stakes testing"? This question was analyzed by determining first if an effect exists and then if existing effects are positive or negative.

Table 12

| Perceived Effect of High-stakes Testing on Highly Able/Gifted Students |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| No Effect                                       | Emerson High Administrators | Emerson High Teachers |
| Positive Effect                                  |                               |                  |
| Negative Effect                                  | Mountain Lakes Administrators | Mountain Lakes Teachers |

Both Emerson High School focus groups do not feel that the test has an effect on highly able/gifted students. The administrators acknowledged that it may sometimes slow instruction for these students, but they take the exam seriously. The teachers see the exam as a part of the process that helps them teach their students about the options that exist for them beyond Emerson High School. Alternatively, in Mountain Lakes, the HSPA exam is viewed as disrespectful and an intrusion on valuable instructional time.

Since the Emerson High School administrators and teachers perceive that the HSPA has not had an effect on highly able/gifted students, the administrators and teachers do not yet have to consider the caveats presented in the research on highly able/gifted students and standardized testing. The research suggests that external forces, such as state-mandated testing, can have a significant impact on the culture of a school, (Kent, 2006). Clearly, the negative perceptions of Mountain Lakes administrators and teachers regarding the HSPA exam could impact the learning environment of the school.

Research question 6 more specifically focused on this relationship: "What, if any, impact does high-stakes testing have on the culture of a school?" As with question 5, this question was analyzed by determining first if an effect exists and then if existing effects are positive or negative.

Table 13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Effect of High-stakes Testing on School Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain Lakes Administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Effect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As described in the analysis of the previous question, the Mountain Lakes focus groups did not perceive that high-stakes testing has had any effect on the culture of the high school. At Emerson High School, however, both groups believe that the high-stakes testing has promoted more professional dialogue about student achievement data, improved the rigor of the curriculum offered to students, and created a sense of pride among students and faculty as the school continues to improve. The perceptions of the teachers at Emerson regarding this research question affirms the Center on Education Policy’s broad conclusion that "although all school districts are affected by NCLB, urban districts are increasingly experiencing the greatest effects including increased student achievement and higher expectations for performance of subgroups" (Stark-Rentner, 2006).

The final research question, "What, if any, impact does high-stakes testing have on the curriculum for highly able/gifted learners?" was analyzed by determining if there is an impact and characterizing the impact as either positive or negative.

Table 14

Perceived Effect of High-stakes Testing on Curriculum for Highly Able/Gifted Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Effect</th>
<th>Mountain Lakes Administrators</th>
<th>Mountain Lakes Teachers</th>
<th>Emerson High Administrators</th>
<th>Emerson High Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Effect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain Lakes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Effect</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Mountain Lakes administrative focus group considered the AP and SAT tests when responding to this research question. They perceived that the curricular changes that have
been made, for example, including challenging authentic literature in all English classes, as a result of analyzing student performance on these tests to be positive. The teachers in the Mountain Lakes focus group focused specifically on the end-of-year tests and the new subject area exams being mandated by the state. The group perceived curricular changes made in response to these tests to be positive even though the communication from the state was not as clear as the participants would have hoped. Teachers believed that these end-of-course exams will cause courses to move more quickly, which will, in turn, benefit those highly able/gifted students.

Both the Emerson administrator and teacher focus groups believed that the increased focus on the HSPA exam has had positive effects on the curricula for highly able learners. The commonly held belief is that the emphasis on the test caused better alignment of course material, increased rigor at the middle-school level, and a truer representation of the appropriate content for courses. This resulted in highly able/gifted learners taking courses that were appropriately challenging to them and more accurate placing of all students.

In both districts, the perceived positive curricular impact that high-stakes testing has had on highly able/gifted learners contradicts much of the research that concludes high-stakes tests such as exit exams for high school students narrows the scope of the curriculum, causing specific harm to highly able/gifted students (Gayler, 2005).

**Conclusions**

The research indicates that the selected high schools are perceived by administrators to be positive, caring, student-centered learning environments. Both high schools also value high academic standards as a hallmark of their institutions. An
enriched curriculum is supported in both Mountain Lakes and Emerson High Schools. Although the schools differ in socioeconomic status, they both demonstrate tremendous budgetary support for courses in curricular areas that are not assessed by a high-stakes exam and for co-curricular programs in the fine and industrial arts. In both schools, curricular decision-making and program innovation stem from a focus on the needs of individual students.

While Emerson High School uses student achievement data from the HSPA more extensively than Mountain Lakes, both schools believe that curricular changes that have resulted from the HSPA, SAT, and AP exams have had a positive impact on the curriculum for all students including those who are highly able/gifted.

The teachers and administrators at Emerson High School perceive the effects of high-stakes testing on highly able/gifted students and their overall school climate positively. Conversely, at Mountain Lakes, the perception is that high-stakes testing has no impact on the culture of the school but does negatively impact highly able/gifted students.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the research, the researcher makes the following recommendations: a) A quantitative study of programs in urban schools aimed at increasing collegiate enrollment should be analyzed in terms of overall effectiveness and collegiate retention rates. This study would provide urban high schools with meaningful data to implement effective programs that could potentially lead to greater minority enrollment in colleges and universities. b) A quantitative study comparing New Jersey's HSPA exam with similar exams in other states for rigor and correlation to national standards would provide school
administrators with information relevant to curriculum planning. c) A qualitative study of the correlation between high schools that have undergone the AFG process and the existence of an enriched curriculum should be considered. This research would help school administrators determine if the AFG process will assist them in creating an engaging, enriched curriculum. d) A quantitative study of the effectiveness of Junior ROTC programs in terms of student attendance and academic achievement would provide worthwhile data for school administrators attempting to determine the value of this program. e) A qualitative study that evaluates teacher and administrative perceptions of the Character Counts program as compared with originally created, school-specific character education programs would assist school administrators in determining the best avenue to pursue when instituting a character education program. f) A quantitative study of the impact that six to eight curricular changes in prevocational education offerings have had on high school enrollment in vocational education courses should be considered. g) This study should be replicated with students who have been identified as highly able/gifted. It would inform instructional practice to gain a better understanding of highly able/gifted students' perceptions of high-stakes testing.

Recommendations for Educational Policy

The researcher makes the following recommendations: a) A streamlining of required high-stakes testing should be investigated. For example, juniors who perform exceptionally well on the PSAT should be exempt from taking the HSPA. b) Currently, there is no mechanism within the New Jersey Department of Education to truly evaluate curricula for correlation with the NJCCCS. School administrators should have access to an outside agency that can evaluate their curricular guides for alignment with the state
standards. c) When schools such as Emerson High School in Union City, an Abbott
district high school, make significant gains on the HSPA, they should not be penalized
financially or otherwise for not meeting AYP as long as they are continually improving.
d) With the next authorization of NCLB, the benefits of an enriched curriculum and
student mastery of traditionally non-assessed areas should be considered. Schools that
evidence a successful enriched curriculum should be featured in best practices as this
approach toward curriculum has been linked to greater success on high-stakes tests. e)
State and federal reporting guidelines on achievement for student subgroups should be
clearly established and consistent. State and federal educational agencies need to provide
greater support for students with disabilities as they work to master achievement
benchmarks.

**Recommendations for Educational Practice**

The researcher recommends the following: a) School administrators should
carefully monitor any changes in their school culture as a result of high-stakes testing. b)
School administrators should protect budgeting for courses and programs that contribute
to an enriched curriculum as this model of curricula is linked to greater student
engagement and achievement. c) School administrators should pursue alternative funding
sources such as grants and local educational foundations to support programs that are
responsive to student interests and promote a high level of student engagement in
learning. d) School administrators should balance mandated programs with those
programs created as a result of focusing on the education of the whole child. e)
Regardless of the perceptions that may exist about a particular high-stakes test, school
administrators should ensure that faculty are given all student performance data related to
the test and that teachers and administrators collectively discuss the data and make informed curricular decisions based on improving the achievement of all students.
References


Basken, P. (2006, March 29). States have more schools falling behind. Washington Post,


FairTest. (2005). The dangerous consequences of high-stakes standardized testing.


## SELF-ASSESSMENT: SCHOOL CULTURE TRIAGE

School culture requires consistent care. Determine the current condition of your culture. Do you need simply to monitor and maintain, or are you headed for intensive care?

**Instructions:** Copy and distribute this survey to teachers and instructional staff in the same school. Have them fill out the form completely, then tally individual scores. Add up individual scores and divide by the number in the group for an average. Compare that number with the Scoring Guide on the next page to determine the health of your culture.

### PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION

1. Teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.  
2. Teachers and staff work together to develop the school schedule.  
3. Teachers and staff are involved in the decision-making process with regard to materials and resources.  
4. The student behavior code is a result of collaboration and consensus among staff.  
5. The planning and organizational time allotted to teachers and staff is used to plan as collective units/teams rather than as separate individuals.

### AFFILIATIVE COLLEGIALITY

1. Teachers and staff tell stories of celebrations that support the school's values  
2. Teachers and staff visit/talk/meet outside of the school to enjoy each others’ company.  
3. Our school reflects a true "sense" of community.  
4. Our school schedule reflects frequent communication opportunities for teachers and staff.  
5. Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by members of our school.  
6. There is a rich and robust tradition of rituals and celebrations, including holidays, special events, and recognition of goal attainment.

### SELF-DETERMINATION/EFFICACY

1. When something is not working in our school, the faculty and staff predict and prevent rather than react and repair.  
2. School members are interdependent and value each other.  
3. Members of our school community seek alternatives to problems/issues rather than repeating what we have always done.  
4. Members of our school community seek to define the problem/issue rather than blame others.  
5. The school staff is empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting for supervisors to tell them what to do.  
6. People work here because they enjoy and choose to be here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always or almost always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teachers and staff work together to develop the school schedule.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teachers and staff are involved in the decision-making process with regard to materials and resources.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The student behavior code is a result of collaboration and consensus among staff.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The planning and organizational time allotted to teachers and staff is used to plan as collective units/teams rather than as separate individuals.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AFFILIATIVE COLLEGIALITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Teachers and staff tell stories of celebrations that support the school’s values</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teachers and staff visit/talk/meet outside of the school to enjoy each others’ company.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Our school reflects a true &quot;sense&quot; of community.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Our school schedule reflects frequent communication opportunities for teachers and staff.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by members of our school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. There is a rich and robust tradition of rituals and celebrations, including holidays, special events, and recognition of goal attainment.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SELF-DETERMINATION/EFFICACY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. When something is not working in our school, the faculty and staff predict and prevent rather than react and repair.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. School members are interdependent and value each other.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Members of our school community seek alternatives to problems/issues rather than repeating what we have always done.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Members of our school community seek to define the problem/issue rather than blame others.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The school staff is empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting for supervisors to tell them what to do.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. People work here because they enjoy and choose to be here.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Penelope Masden-Copas
The lowest triage score is 17 and the highest score is 85. After using the triage questions in several program evaluations, our data suggest the following:

17 – 40 = Critical and immediate attention necessary. Conduct a full-scale assessment of your school’s culture and invest all available resources in repairing and healing your school’s culture.

41 – 60 = Modifications and improvements are necessary. Begin with a more intense assessment of your school’s culture to determine which area is most in need of improvement.

60 – 75 = Monitor and continue to make positive adjustments.

76 – 85 = Amazing! We have never had a score higher than 75! Continue monitoring, though, with each school improvement planning cycle, or at least every two years, to be sure you stay in top shape.

Source: Penelope Masden-Copas
This school culture assessment has been used successfully in public schools of North Carolina, Florida, and Kentucky over the last decade. It can be used with one school or an entire district. It provides immediate feedback, is cost-effective, and recognizes both strengths and challenges.

What is a School Culture Audit?

What are we looking for in a School Culture Audit? An audit is not a "find a problem and fix it" process. Rather than asking, "What is wrong with this place?" cultural auditors ask, "What, in your opinion, would make this school the best it can be?" School culture is assessed by examining three types of behavior (Phillips, 1993):

- **Professional collaboration**
  Do teachers and staff meet and work together to solve instructional, organizational, or curricular issues?

- **Collegial relationships**
  Do people enjoy working together, support one another, and feel valued and included?

- **Efficacy/self-determination**
  Are people in this school because they want to be? Do they work to improve their skills as professionals, or do they see themselves as victims of a large and uncaring bureaucracy?

Each audit has five steps:
1. Interviews
2. Observations
3. Survey
4. Evaluation
5. Presentation

When combined, information obtained from these different vantage points produce a clear picture of the school's culture. The facilitators should not be from the school being audited.

**Directions**

**Step One: Interviews** — Designate days when the facilitators will interview staff, parents, students, classified staff, and administrators. See Page 47 for more detailed instructions for the interviews.

**Step Two: Observations** — Designate days when facilitators will make informal observations of the school. These observations include discussions with students, faculty, and other stakeholders. See Pages 48-49 for more detailed instructions for the interviews.

**Step Three: Survey** — Designate days when representatives of all school community groups will take the school culture survey. See Pages 50-51 for the survey and more detailed instructions about administering the survey.

**Step Four: Evaluation** — Evaluate what has been learned during the School Culture Audit. See Page 52 for more detailed instructions about evaluating the results.

**Step Five: Presentation** — Present the findings of the School Culture Audit to the community. See Page 53 for more detailed instructions about the presentation.

*Source: Christopher Wagner*
STEP ONE: INTERVIEWS

Directions to the facilitators

1. Ask the school principal for a designated space for the interviews – a conference room, designated classroom, corner of the media center, or faculty lounge to conduct interviews. Make sure there are beverages and snacks available since most professional staff will be giving up their preparation period.

2. Randomly select groups of five to eight each of faculty members, parents, students, classified staff, and administrators to be interviewed. Interview the various groups separately.

3. Assign at least two facilitators to each group. Explain the process you will be using and how the information that you collect will be used. Tell interviewees that they are not required to answer any question. Do not use a tape recorder – nothing shuts down an interview quite as fast, and you want open, candid responses.

4. Ask each group a series of questions relating to the school’s culture. Decide in advance which questions each facilitator will ask. Both facilitators ask questions, take notes, and record direct quotes.

5. Ask vision questions to encourage a positive picture of the future. Instead of asking "what is?," ask "what ought to be?" Keep the group’s focus positive and avoid falling into a “woe is me” whining syndrome. Pay attention to the dominant emotions elicited from these “vision” questions:
   - When you awoke this morning and thought about another day in this school (as a teacher, student, custodian, etc.), what was the dominant feeling or emotion you experienced?
   - What factors caused you to feel that way?
   - Think of the previous week in terms of emotional peaks and valleys. Identify some peaks of bliss. Identify some valleys of despair.
   - Imagine a peak of emotional bliss next week as a teacher (student, administrator, etc.). How would you set it up for yourself? Who could you get to help?

The responses to these questions will begin to yield the emotional status of each group. Facilitators identify sources of dominant emotions and hints for improvement from the "imagined bliss" question.

6. Identify what is important to the group and how people improve. Look for whether their responses reflect the formal curriculum and stated professional development goals. Do improvement areas reflect the silent curriculum and unstated or spin-off outcomes? Note responses in which people say they are learning from each other or in more formal settings such as planned staff development sessions.
   - As a teacher (student, administrator, etc.), recall one way you have improved in the past year. What is something you are doing differently or better?
   - What were the major forces or who contributed to your improvement?
   - What is one way you would like to improve in the next 12 months? How could you make this happen?

7. Get to the heart of attitudes about differentiated instruction with a question and a follow-up. Typical responses to the first question detail the lack of study habits and poor parenting.
   - How have students changed over the past few years?
   - Since we all agree that students are not the same as they were a few years ago, how have you modified your teaching to reach every child?

Other questions might include:
   - If you had the power to make today the best day of teaching you ever had, what would you do?
   - How could we make this staff come together in a unified, collective, and supportive manner?
   - What are some instructional highlights of your day and what can you do to experience them more often?
   - How can teachers make the classified staff feel more valued and respected?

8. Take a few minutes to debrief and compare notes after each interview.

9. Analyze notes for evidence of the presence or absence of professional collaboration, collegiality, and self-determination. This information will be included in the School Culture Audit report, which will be shared with school stakeholders.

Source: Christopher Wagner
Step Two: Observations

Facilitators make informal observations of the school. These observations include discussions with students, faculty, and other stakeholders.

Directions to the facilitators

1. Speak with a good cross-section of students and staff.

2. Separate and circulate throughout the school for best results.

3. Look for specific examples of 13 characteristics related to the three types of behavior being evaluated by the audit: professional collaboration (teachers planning together, sharing teaching modalities, teaming in their delivery, etc.), collegiality (friendly environment, emotional support, continuation of cherished rituals and traditions), and efficacy/self-determination. Make a note of each example and determine the degree to which each characteristic is present in the school. Share the notations in the profile presentation. Note both positive and negative examples.

Each of the 13 characteristics listed here is related to those three types of behavior. For example, 3, 4, 6, and 10 support professional collaboration; 1, 5, 7, 8, 11, 12, and 13 align with collegiality; and 2 and 9 represent efficacy.

Determine to what degree each of these characteristics is present in the school.

Examples:

- Facilitator observes shared and good-natured (as opposed to mean-spirited) humor in the faculty lounge as an example of characteristic #8.
- Facilitator observes mutual respect exhibited between teachers and secretarial staff prior to the beginning of the school day. A notation is made on characteristic #1: collegiality.
- Facilitator observes cooperative effort to secure reading grant and makes a notation regarding #4: experimentation and entrepreneurship, and #9: shared decision making.

4. After the observations, facilitators review notes in a debriefing session. Their notes are shaped and interpreted to more clearly specify the characteristics identified. The data are included in the School Culture Audit report to the staff and school community with all other collected data.

Characteristics

1. Collegiality. The way adults treat each other, i.e., respect and harmony vs. disrespect and discord.
2. Efficacy. Feeling of ownership or capacity to influence decisions; i.e., do people tend to live with or solve problems?
3. High expectations of self and others. Excellence is acknowledged; improvement is celebrated, supported, and shared.
4. Experimentation and entrepreneurship. New ideas abound and invention occurs.
5. Trust and confidence. Participants believe in the leaders and each other based on the match between creeds and deeds.
6. Tangible support. Improvement efforts are substantive with abundant resources made available by all.
7. Appreciation and recognition of improvement. People feel special and act special.
8. Humor. Caring is expressed through "kidding" or joking in tasteful ways.
9. Shared decision making by all participants. Those affected by a decision are involved in making and implementing the decision.
10. Shared vision. Participants understand what's important and avoid trivial tasks.
11. Traditions. The school has identifiable celebrations and rituals that are important to the school community.
12. Open and honest communication. Information flows throughout the organization in formal and informal channels. Everyone receives information on a "need-to-know" basis.
13. Metaphors and stories. There is evidence of behavior being communicated and influenced by internal imagery.

Source: Christopher Wagner
Observations

1. Collegiality. The way adults treat each other, i.e., respect and harmony vs. disrespect and discord.

2. Efficacy. Feeling of ownership or capacity to influence decisions; i.e., do people tend to live with or solve problems?

3. High expectations of self and others. Excellence is acknowledged; improvement is celebrated, supported, and shared.

4. Experimentation and entrepreneurship. New ideas abound and invention occurs.

5. Trust and confidence. Participants believe in the leaders and each other based on the match between creeds and deeds.

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12. Open and honest communication. Information flows throughout the organization in formal and informal channels. Everyone receives information on a "need-to-know" basis.

13. Metaphors and stories. There is evidence of behavior being communicated and influenced by internal imagery.

Source: Christopher Wagner
**Step Three: Survey**

**Directions to the facilitators**

- Ask representatives of all school community groups to take the School Culture Survey (see next page).
- Assure participants survey responses are anonymous.
- Surveys should be presented and collected in person – mailing is a waste of time and postage.
- Professional staff may complete the survey in 10 to 15 minutes in a faculty meeting. A faculty member collects the surveys at that time.
- The school secretary usually circulates and collects surveys from teaching assistants, other clerical staff, custodians, and bus drivers.
- Administer parent and student surveys immediately after their participation in the interview. Parent surveys also can be distributed during open house, parent/teacher conferences, or at a PTA/PTO meeting.
- A committee (formed for this purpose of an administrator, teacher, clerical staff member, etc., or the school improvement committee) tabulates the responses, creating separate scores for each subgroup to compare.

**Tabulating survey results**

A standing school committee (such as the school improvement committee) should tabulate the survey results, providing an average for what is perceived to be present and what is perceived to be important for each of the 13 questions.

The committee should then review the averages for gaps in the two numbers on each question. A general rule is that gaps of 3.0 or more need to be addressed.

**Example**

In the presence line for #1: Democratic decision making. Four people circle 2, eight people circle 3, two people circle 4, eight people circle 5, and two people circle 6. The sum of all rankings is 92. The mean, 92 divided by 24 (people) equals 3.8.

Then, in the importance line, two people circle 5, three people circle 6, 10 people circle 8, seven people circle 9, and two circle 10. The sum of all rankings is 191. The mean, 191 divided by 24 (people) equals 7.9.

The gap (difference) between importance and present equals 4.1. Conclusion: This school should address the issue of democratic decision making.

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**School Culture Survey**

**Background:** The 13 items in this survey have been identified as key indicators of a school's culture. Your opinion and ranking of these factors is important and will be valuable in assessing your school's culture. What is culture? For this survey, culture is defined as the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that characterize the school in terms of:

- How people treat and feel about each other;
- The extent to which people feel included and appreciated; and
- Rituals and traditions reflecting collaboration and collegiality.

**Directions:** Please rate each item twice. First, rate the item by circling an appropriate number reflecting its PRESENCE in your school. Second, rate the item by circling the appropriate number relative to its IMPORTANCE to you.

### I am a: (Please circle one)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Teacher aide</th>
<th>Custodian</th>
<th>Parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Bus driver</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 1. Democratic and participatory decision making.

| Not present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Always present |
| Not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Extremely important |

### 2. Strong leadership from administrators, teachers, or teams of both.

| Not present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Always present |
| Not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Extremely important |

### 3. Staff stability—low turnover from year to year.

| Not present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Always present |
| Not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Extremely important |

### 4. A planned, coordinated curriculum supported by research and faculty.

| Not present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Always present |
| Not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Extremely important |

### 5. Schoolwide selected and agreed-upon staff development.

| Not present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Always present |
| Not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Extremely important |

### 6. Parental involvement, engagement, and support.

| Not present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Always present |
| Not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Extremely important |

### 7. Schoolwide recognition of success for students and staff.

| Not present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Always present |
| Not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Extremely important |

### 8. An effort to maximize active learning in academic areas.

| Not present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Always present |
| Not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Extremely important |

### 9. District support for school improvement efforts.

| Not present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Always present |
| Not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Extremely important |

### 10. Collaborative instructional planning and collegial relationships.

| Not present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Always present |
| Not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Extremely important |

### 11. Sense of community, family, and team.

| Not present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Always present |
| Not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Extremely important |

### 12. Clear goals and high expectations for students and staff.

| Not present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Always present |
| Not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Extremely important |

### 13. Order and discipline established through consensus and consistent application.

| Not present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Always present |
| Not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Extremely important |

Please use the space below to make any additional comments about the items on this survey.

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**STEP FOUR: EVALUATION**

Directions to the facilitators

1. Analyze the data and identify strengths (presence of culture-rich examples) and weaknesses.

2. Organize the analyzed data into a written School Culture Profile answering questions such as:
   - What specific comments (quotes) were expressed about building professional collaboration in this school?
   - What did we observe that would lead us to believe there is a strong sense of collegiality here?
   - Which responses indicate the presence or lack of efficacy?
   - What gaps exist between what is present and what is important as revealed in the survey?
   - How do the survey results compare with information gathered in the interviews and observations?
   - What trends or common themes are revealed in the collected data?

3. If there are no specific examples of professional collaboration, collegiality, and efficacy/self-determination, then point to what is unhealthy about the culture and what is inhibiting improvement. Some examples:
   - When teachers say they feel isolated and want to spend more time with colleagues, there is an obvious lack of opportunity for collegial involvement.
   - If teachers cannot identify a source of help for an instructional dilemma, there is a problem with professional collaboration.
   - Constant complaints about red tape, central office policy and the ever-increasing demands made by the state department reveal the lack of self-determination and efficacy.

4. Present the written profile to the school improvement team and administration before making an oral presentation to the school community.

5. Many schools elect to do a School Culture Audit in the fall and again in the spring as a pre/post instrument.

*Source: Christopher Wagner*
**Step Five: Presentation**

**Directions to the facilitators**

1. Use an extended faculty meeting held immediately after school for the presentation, or better, report it at an evening PTA/PTO/School Council meeting. Since the meetings are always positive and extremely informative, schools typically make great efforts to invite the community.

2. Keep the presentation to an hour or less.

3. With two or more facilitators, one facilitator opens the meeting by sharing statements and direct quotes from the interviews. These statements are tied to the big three behaviors: professional collaboration, collegial relationships, efficacy/self-determination.

4. Another facilitator shares notes from the observation, including comments overheard or summaries of discussions. These comments answer the questions: How are people treating each other? What types of behaviors are staff members modeling for the children? How inviting does the school feel? What evidence is there of collaboration, collegiality, and efficacy?

5. Share information from the survey, noting any significant gaps between presence and importance.

6. Conclude with four or five recommendations for improvement. Facilitators also may agree to work with the school improvement team, site-based council, etc., to assist in planning and implementing improvements.

7. Facilitate a discussion among stakeholders about the findings. Addressing the following key questions provides a basis for sustained improvement that has the potential to involve and secure ownership from the entire school community:
   - What areas of our school's culture (professional collaboration, collegiality, efficacy/self-determination) appear to be strongest and why?
   - What can we do as a school community to maintain and/or improve these strengths?
   - What areas of our school's culture (professional collaboration, collegiality, efficacy/self-determination) present the greatest challenge for improvement?
   - What can we as a school community do to improve in these areas?

When presenting to the school community, take care to highlight school culture strengths. There is always something good to say.

A typical statement might be:

"During the interview, several people indicated a desire to develop thematic units with teachers in other disciplines. One teacher said, 'I respect my colleagues and would like the opportunity to just sit down and talk about what they teach. A few years ago, we worked together on a thematic unit. The kids liked it, we got a lot accomplished, and it gave us a chance to teach together. Many of us would like to do that again.' Another teacher reported an interest in learning more teaching strategies from her colleagues.

"Based on the data collected, one of the facilitator's recommendations for strengthening professional collaboration would involve planning time for several volunteers to develop a pilot thematic unit. Once the unit has been taught, the teachers involved could report their experiences to the entire faculty."

Source: Christopher Wagner
Appendix B

Mucci Focus Group Discussion Questions for Administrators and Teachers

Research Question 1: How do administrators and teachers in a highly successful selected Abbott district and a highly successful selected J district describe the culture in their school and the levels of professional collaboration, collegiality, and self-determination/efficacy?

1) How would you describe the climate of your school?

2) What expectations exist here regarding the teacher-student working relationship?

Research Question 2: How do school administrators and teachers in selected, highly successful Abbott and J districts use high-stakes test results?

3) Have you ever reviewed the HSPA performance of your students?

4) If so, can you describe what you look for when reviewing those results?

5) Do you feel these results are helpful to you as an educator?

Research Question 3: What provisions do administrators and teachers in selected, highly successful Abbott and J districts make to address curricular areas not assessed by NCLB-mandated examinations?

6) How would you describe your school's commitment to the following areas:

   Physical Education   World Languages   Social Studies
   Fine Arts            Practical Arts

7) In what ways are the above programs supported in your school?
Research Question 4: How do school administrators and teachers in selected, highly successful Abbott and J districts demonstrate their commitment to an enriched curriculum for gifted/highly able learners?

8) What are some of the most important student events in your school?

9) Does your school provide character education? If so, in what programs/ways?

10) How do you feel your school focuses on the individual learning needs of its students?

11) What advanced courses of study are available to students in your school? How are students encouraged to take advantage of these courses?

12) Are there opportunities for highly able/gifted students to be accelerated in your school?

Research Question 5: How do administrators and teachers in a selected A district and a selected J district believe highly able/gifted students are affected by high-stakes testing?

13) Have you ever used HSPA data to help you better serve students with special needs? Gifted students? Other subgroups?

14) What has been your experience with gifted or highly able students and standardized tests?

Research Question 6: What, if any, impact does high-stakes testing have on the culture of a school?

15) In what, if any, ways has the school culture changed in response to the current focus on high-stakes testing?
Research Question 7: What, if any, impact does high-stakes testing have on the curriculum for gifted/highly able learners?

16) Have you changed your curriculum in response to the current focus on high-stakes testing?

17) What, if any, impact do these changes have on gifted/highly able learners?
January 24, 2008

To Whom It May Concern:

Anne Mucci, Doctoral Candidate in the Seton Hall University, College of Education, School of Education Management, Leadership and Policy and Mountain Lakes Public Schools District Curriculum Supervisor has permission to conduct research for her dissertation at Mountain Lakes High School.

The scope of Ms. Mucci’s research includes the distribution of the School Culture Survey to high school faculty and a focus group discussion. Ms. Mucci has permission to use the district bulletin boards to request for faculty volunteers to participate in both of these research gathering exercises.

Sincerely,

Dr. John Kazmark
Superintendent of Schools

“only the educated are truly free”
Epictetus
March 27, 2008

To Whom It May Concern:

Anne Mucci, Doctoral Candidate in the Seton Hall University, College of Education, School of Education, Management, Leadership and Policy has permission to conduct research related to a dissertation at Emerson High School.

Mrs. Mucci’s research includes the distribution of the School Culture Survey to high school faculty and an administrative/faculty focus group discussion.

Sincerely,

Mr. Robert Fazio
Assistant Superintendent
Emerson High School Principal
January 28, 2008

To Members of the Seton Hall University Internal Review Board:

I have reviewed the attached research and focus group questions. It is my belief that each of the seventeen focus group questions is directly related to the questions of the researcher. I have no suggested revisions for the researcher. These questions should promote a meaningful dialogue among the professionals who participate.

Sincerely,

Dr. John Kazmark
Superintendent of Schools
January 24, 2008

To Whom It May Concern:

Mrs. Anne Mucci asked me to review the attached focus group questions and determine whether or not these questions were directly related to the research questions that she is studying. Based on my professional expertise, I believe that the researcher will be able to gather significant qualitative data with this instrument. The focus group questions will promote a high level of discussion and are directly connected to the research areas being analyzed. I have no suggested revisions for this instrument.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Constance Sakala  
Principal  
Briarcliff Middle School
January 23, 2008

To Whom It May Concern:

I have been asked to use my professional expertise to evaluate the effectiveness of the attached list of focus group questions. It is my belief that these questions are directly connected to the research questions stated and will yield significant qualitative data in the area of perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding high stakes testing and the academic performance of highly able students. I did not suggest any revisions to the researcher.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Susan Silverstein
Director of Special Services
Mountain Lakes Public Schools
1) How would you describe the climate of your school?

Respondent 1: Overall, very positive. Teachers have a lot of autonomy that is purposefully given to them. The majority of teachers appreciate it. For them, the more freedom that they are given, the more that they do for the good of the entire school. There is not a day that I don't think about the environment and the students and focus on what can keep that positive for everyone in the school.

Respondent 2: I agree.

Respondent 3: The climate is also very focused on academics. We accomplish our goal of having students here to grow and learn. Because of this focus, there is also a good deal of pressure on the students, and the students do have to work to surpass the expectations that are placed upon them. The climate of the school is collegial, the teachers work together, and the intentions of the staff are very well placed, and the students always come first.

2) What expectations exist here regarding the teacher-student working relationship?

Respondent 1: The expectation is that the teachers will go out of their way to help kids, whether that is extra help, answering an email, being available to be with them before and after school. The responsibility is also on the students, and they are encouraged to seek out a teacher whenever they need help understanding a concept.
Respondent 2: I agree. Again, I have worked in other districts, and what struck me most about being here is just how focused the teachers are on working with the students. They don't just meet with them before and after school; they are with the kids all day long, they pull up a chair and eat lunch with the students in the cafeteria. It is really is a wonderful thing to experience.

Respondent 3: Kids expect to learn when they are in the classroom. Kids are upset when they are not learning if a teacher is taking an easier road, or is absent for several days. Generally, our teachers are very forward thinking with the curriculum they present, and they connect that curriculum to real-world, relevant learning.

3) Have you ever reviewed the HSPA performance of your students?
4) If so, can you describe what you look for when reviewing those results?
5) Do you feel these results are helpful to you as an educator?

Respondent 1: I review the results on a school-wide level and track HSPA performance. Over the last 15 years, we have achieved anywhere from 97 to 100 proficiency levels. I pay particular attention to the advanced proficient levels and those students who are not proficient.

Respondent 2: It is true; we have a phenomenal result on the HSPA, usually. If that is not the case, we find out the reasons why that is the case. We carefully look at the data and discuss how we can be sure that it does not happen again. The results are generally not too helpful to me as an educator because we are so far above the HSPA mark.

Respondent 3: I agree. We rarely have a student who has to go through the SRA process. I look at the essay results to be sure that the students are performing at a level above the
4, or passing level. We are hoping that the students are taking compositional risks and using creativity. We get all of the essays; I share them with the teachers, specifically the Basic Skills teachers, who will look at the results of the students who may be struggling. HSPA asks that the students be able to create a main idea and support it. This is what our students are capable of doing in ninth grade; they know a guiding thought and a main idea. Even if they don't fully understand a thesis statement, they can write an idea and support it.

6) How would you describe your school's commitment to the following areas:

- Physical Education
- World Languages
- Social Studies
- Fine Arts
- Practical Arts

7) In what ways are the above programs supported in your school?

Respondent 1: I don't treat them any differently than any other area. All of these areas are very well supported. We have been adding new courses in each of these areas for many years. For example, in World Languages when we determined that more students would benefit from a fifth year of language as opposed to an AP level of study, we added those courses. In fact, in all areas, numerous courses have been added. I think that they get a lot of support from the administration.

Respondent 2: Yes, in all of these areas, these are well-subscribed courses. It does, in fact, relieve other academic stress for our students. When other districts are cutting back these programs and offerings, we are adding to them.

Respondent 3: I feel that in this school district from the superintendent, the building principal, and the community all have a very lively interest in the arts and support them
accordingly. We are not a meat-and-potatoes school. Our constituency knows how enriching and how important these fields are. The community, through the Educational Foundation and Friends of the Arts, is very serious about their support of these programs.

8) What are some of the most important student events in your school?

Respondent 1: The National Honor Society Induction is one of the highlights. We have always kept that during the day to emphasize to the entire student body how important it is. Moving Up Day is also very special to everyone here. In addition, we have 22 varsity teams and all of the events that go with that. For example, when a team makes it to the playoffs, it becomes a community event. The winter formal and the senior prom are important rites of passage that the students enjoy. Out Senior Week activities are very special; that week, we have the senior-to-senior luncheon, the senior trip, and the baccalaureate dinner.

Respondent 2: Absolutely. Other schools do a Moving Up Day, but not like here; it is a very emotional event. It is a difference that here it is entrenched in a tradition; we have wonderful customs and traditions here.

Respondent 3: We have a full complement of arts activities that are very important to the students. Our music and arts are constantly expanding, including an AP art exhibition that remained on display for many days so the entire student body could enjoy it, and what the AP students created amazed all the students. Our music director recently added World Music Night, at the request of students. In the Talent Show, we provide opportunities for students to display talents that might not fit in with the musical or the band, for example, step dancing, playing the didgeridoo, or ensemble bands that the students pursue outside
of school. We have an array of community service activities, and events that go above
and beyond our community service requirement. The Empty Bowls event is a **fundraiser**
that fully involves all members of the school population and a large segment of the
community as well.

9) Does your school provide character education? If so, in what **programs/ways**?
Respondent 1: The students should always know that they are a part of a larger
community and that they have a responsibility to serve that community. Nine years ago
when we began the AFG program, we looked at academic integrity, which the committee
then evolved into our current Honor Code system. We don’t have a canned program
character education program. We developed the Honor Code by ourselves, and only five
public high schools in the country have a modified Honor Code. I never felt a need to
bring in an outside program because what we have created directly relates to our long-
term goals for the school and individual honor.

Respondent 2: Our Honor Code permeates every class and every subject area.

Respondent 3: Yes, and we held town meetings to discuss the way that students should
interact with one another when academic assignments are given so that they know what
the expectations are and so forth. As we move into a new cycle of AFG, one of our
current goals deals with items that have been very widely discussed on the state level,
including respect for everyone and anti-bullying education programs. It will be exciting
to see how this goal evolves over time.

10) How do you feel your school focuses on the individual learning needs of its students?
Respondent 1: I think it goes back to the expectation that when a student needs help, a teacher is expected to provide it. Specifically, our English teachers are required to meet with students several times a year to conference about their writing and address each student's strengths and weaknesses in that area. Factor in also the IEP-driven instruction that takes place and the district's commitment to differentiation of instruction, we believe and understand that one size does not fit all.

Respondent 2: Toward that end in the sciences we have expanded the course offerings that we have tremendously to create more levels to serve more students.

Respondent 3: That has been the case in English as well, and our allied programs are designed to respond to the individual learning needs and requests of the student body.

11) What advanced courses of study are available to students in your school? How are students **encouraged** to take advantage of these courses?

Respondent 1: Our guidance counselors are highly involved in scheduling and advising our students according to their needs and abilities. We offer an extremely broad and varied curriculum, especially considering the small size of our school.

Respondent 2: Yes, and because we are so small, teachers take an individual interest in encouraging students to engage in higher level study of a particular area.

Respondent 3: Our students take the opportunity to speak with several of us when they are planning their schedules. We also plan information nights for parents and students when it is time to plan schedules. The guidance counselors visit students in their English classes and review all of the options that are available to them as they move through the high school.
12) Are there opportunities for highly able/gifted students to be accelerated in your school?

Respondent 1: One of the ways would be through independent study. The students often find a teacher who is interested in a particular area and can work with them to study an area beyond what is typically offered in the classroom. Recently, we have offered independent study in AP World History, Sign Language, and Marine Biology.

Respondent 2: In science, we have students who often double up and take more than one science course in a given year. The result is that students will then graduate with four or six years of science. In addition, students can study certain topics online in the summer so that they can be accelerated in their study.

Respondent 3: Within the classes, teachers offer an array of courses to challenge gifted and highly able students in areas that interest them. These projects are designed to push these learners beyond the confines of the curriculum. In our arts program, we have teachers who work with students to prepare for regional band or chorus. When students have the interest and the motivation, we certainly present ways for them to be accelerated and ensure that they are not limited.

13) Have you ever used HSPA data to help you better serve students with special needs? Gifted students? Other subgroups?

Respondent 1: Again, I look at these results overall and look for school-wide trends.

Respondent 2: The HSPA data is not going to help us serve specific subgroups better.
Respondent 3: All too often, our special education students are doing well on the HSPA, but the rigor of the college preparatory curriculum causes them difficulty.

In this focus group discussion, question 14 was grouped with question 17.

15) In what, if any, ways has the school culture changed in response to the current focus on high-stakes testing?

16) Have you changed your curriculum in response to the current focus on high-stakes testing?

Respondent 1: Our high-stakes testing is the SAT and the AP. Even though we don't consider HSPA high-stakes testing, we still take it very seriously. For example, for 5 or 6 years, we ensured that all of our students take Physics at a certain point in their career so that they would be prepared for the Physics portion of the HSPA, but that never came to pass, so were able to go back to a more realistic science course sequence for all of our students. When looking at the AP, we are not exclusive in terms of taking the test; we encourage all students to take the test so that everyone is exposed to what a college-level assessment is like, not just the students that we feel will earn a 4 or a 5 on the test.

Respondent 2: The HSPA is a nonissue here. There have been no major changes in our curriculum with regard to that test. Our program is responsive to the AP-level requirements.

Respondent 3: NCLB doesn't affect us. As mentioned, our high-stakes testing is not the HSPA; it is the SAT. In terms of curriculum, we prepare for that test by providing students with challenging, authentic literature that expands students' critical thinking and
vocabulary. We have to jump through more hoops, and lose more instructional time to administer state tests, but the students do that appropriately. Our students will do their best at anything that you put in front of them.

14) What has been your experience with gifted or highly able students and standardized tests?

17) What, if any, impact do these changes have on gifted/highly able learners?

Respondent 1: These students shouldn't have the same requirements as other students who are not as successful. There should be some kind of a link between prior success on the SAT and the HSPA. We have students who take the SAT and earn a near-perfect score in math and then need to sit through the HSPA. I had one student who earned a 790 on the math SAT heading to take the HSPA, and he realized he forgot his calculator in his locker. He stopped and then said, "You know what? I don't need a calculator for this."

Respondent 2: For a lot of our highly able students, the HSPA is testing what they were doing when they came into high school.

Respondent 3: I think also students view the state testing as an interruption. They take it, but it is viewed as inconvenient.
1) How would you describe the climate of your school?
Respondent 1: Very positive and very academic.
Respondent 2: Yes, academics come before all else. The students of all levels are expected to achieve. There are no cracks for students to slip through. The guidance counselors and the teachers all work to help the students feel welcome and cared for.
Respondent 3: It is very serious here, and the students expect a lot from their teachers.
Respondent 4: The school is highly academic, but there is an emphasis on the whole spectrum of kids; every student is considered and provided for.
Respondent 5: The school is so safe. It is striking to me, having taught in different systems, how dedicated the students and teachers here are. There is a lot of involvement of all students here. There is something for everyone: sports, clubs, academics, music, theatre. Every student is involved in something.
Respondent 6: It's positive. I love [to] come to work here. The students feel it is cool and acceptable to be achieving academically; they know that they are expected to achieve academically.

2) What expectations exist here regarding the teacher-student working relationship?
Respondent 1: There is a lot of mutual respect between students and staff here.
Respondent 2: Yes, students respect their teachers tremendously.
Respondent 3: Even with something like homework, when you give an assignment there is no complaining. Students know how much work is expected of them and how much they will be required to do to be successful in a given course.

Respondent 4: Students come to class expecting a lot from their teachers, and they know when a lesson is not working.

Respondent 5: Absolutely, students expect that teachers are fully prepared, and they talk about it and know when someone is not challenging them. By the same token, the teachers expect a lot from the kids here.

Respondent 6: I think also that the students find the faculty very approachable and believe that we put kids before all else, which makes all of the academics fall into place.

3) Have you ever reviewed the HSPA performance of your students?

Respondent 1: More of our students are proficient than not when it comes to the HSPA exam.

Respondent 2: Yes, but for our at-risk students, we address the fact that they may not be able to pass the test with remedial instruction.

Respondent 3: That is true, but it is a small portion of our students. I believe almost 40% of our students are in the advanced proficient range on testing.

Respondent 4: In contrast to the HSPA, it is absolutely important to review the progress of the AP scores. We don't live and die by the AP scores, but they are publicized, and the analysis from the College Board is very good so we spend a lot of time considering that. We don't teach to the test, but everyone knows what teachers teach what AP courses, and you want to make sure that your students do as well as they can on these exams.
Respondent 5: But not so much with the HSPA; it is just not a concern. By and large, our students pass the exam and do well on it. We make sure that students write in all academic areas, but I can't say that the HSPA is on my mind when I am planning a lesson.

Respondent 6: In my area, I have never considered the HSPA exam at all.

4) If so, can you describe what you look for when reviewing those results?

5) Do you feel these results are helpful to you as an educator?

Respondent 1: When looking at these results, I try to find patterns in student achievement or areas of weakness.

Respondent 2: The results are especially helpful when you speak of the analysis of the AP exam. It helps you plan instructional time. You can see if you are spending too much time on something, too little on something else. I rely heavily on these results.

Respondent 3: In terms of state testing, though, this year's biology exam has me apprehensive. We don't know what the state is going to test. I have been racking my brain trying to remember what I was tested on heavily in biology, and as a result, I have been putting a greater emphasis on genetics and environmental biology.

Respondent 4: And that is the issue here, the state keeps introducing new tests and new assessments. There is nothing to fall back on. It is a little unfair. Unlike New York, where the Regents exams are consistent, we work hard on one thing, and then only to find that the state changes its approach on the testing.

Respondent 5: The AP, however, is consistent. It is a well-designed, thought-out exam with reliable, and the data that we are provided with is extremely helpful to us.
Respondent 6: To me, the results are the most helpful when you are trying to determine how to assist a struggling student.

6) How would you describe your school's commitment to the following areas:

Physical Education  World Languages  Social Studies
Fine Arts  Practical Arts

7) In what ways are the above programs supported in your school?

Respondent 1: The tone of the school is everything is important; all the programs beyond AP are considered valuable.

Respondent 2: For a small school, we have a huge commitment to these areas. For example, we have a rigorous World Language program that begins in the middle school and sends the students to the high school with a high level of language competency. We have things that other schools do not have such as Wood Shop and Home Economics.

Respondent 3: And in the art department, for example, we have AP art and several levels of art classes available to the students.

Respondent 4: Look in the huge number of kids that we have in chorus and strings, too. These kids come before school every day to practice and participate, which is a testament to that program.

Respondent 5: I would be flabbergasted to see our administration cut [or] reduce any of these programs. I am surprised that history is not tested by the state, yet our emphasis on history here is very strong. Students take more than the required state standard in that area.
Respondent 6: For health and physical education, there is support for new curriculum and also gives teachers any resources they ask for to support these programs. We do a really good program. Because there are so many kids involved in athletics, we focus on lifetime sports and make it relevant to students, to encourage them to participate, which is unique. There are a lot of choices in our program also; we have one of the most extensive Project Adventure programs in the state, and that requires a lot of funding for equipment.

8) What are some of the most important student events in your school?
Respondent 1: The last few weeks of school are filled with many events. There is a college mentality about taking the final and AP exams and completing courses.
Respondent 2: Yes, we offer study time for AP exam week, and the classes do not meet so that the students can prepare at home and review for the exam alone or in groups. Besides testing, though, we have a lot of big events here that involve a lot of kids.
Respondent 3: I am thinking about our Empty Bowls event; every class participates. There is a sense of community and people working together.
Respondent 4: I also feel that the ceremonies, Moving Up Day, the National Honor Society Induction, are events that we have always kept during the day to show off what is important to us and publicly acknowledge with the entire student body how important our focus on academics is.
Respondent 5: What struck me when I came here was that close to a fourth of our student body is involved [in] the spring musical. And again, the music programs here are so outstanding; everything that they do is an important event.
Respondent 6: Another school-wide event is our volleyball mania tournament each winter; that invites a lot of excitement. As does any rivalry game for any sport, when you attend those games, you see everyone there, everyone participating.

9) Does your school provide character education? If so, in what programs/ways?

Respondent 1: Certainly through the Honor Code.

Respondent 2: Our sports programs have actually won awards for character, not just win-loss records, so it is a big part of our athletic programs.

Respondent 3: Yes, character education is off the field in the classroom, the way we treat each other.

Respondent 4: It has been that way here for a long time. For the last 7 years, the AFG committee studied the concept of academic integrity and created the Honor Code mentioned as a part of that process. I think the school does a good job of balancing the IQ and the EQ.

Respondent 5: That balance is integrated into every class. We have Key Club and a series of service learning that are required of our students, and we have a teacher here to facilitate all of those service-learning activities.

Respondent 6: And just to specify again the classroom aspect, in our health classes we introduce ethical questions and character education in our life skills unit.

10) How do you feel your school focuses on the individual learning needs of its students?

Respondent 1: Very well. Instruction is tailored to the needs of the students.
Respondent 2: In all the academic disciplines, we offer a variety of levels of classes so that children can be appropriately challenged. Students can move from level to level in classes as well.

Respondent 3: And any student needs are communicated to the teachers through their IEP or their 504s. We read those documents, and we learn how to work with the special education department so that we can provide the accommodations that a particular student may need.

Respondent 4: Yeah, it is certainly all there for us, in terms of student needs. We have to be sure to read all of that information.

Respondent 5: But there is a real culture of offering kids extra help here. We expect that from ourselves that we are going to work with a kid until he gets that we will help him figure out how to work through a concept.

Respondent 6: And we have the PAT afterschool help sessions, where kids who are struggling can go to get extra help on their assignments.

11) What advanced courses of study are available to students in your school? How are students encouraged to take advantage of these courses?

12) Are there opportunities for highly able/gifted students to be accelerated in your school?

Respondent 1: We offer so many courses on so many levels here.

Respondent 2: Students plan their selections with their parents and their guidance counselors.
Respondent 3: And I think that they know where they want to be at the end of their senior year.

Respondent 4: Yes, how many AP classes, how many years of science and so forth.

Respondent 5: There are not too many places where you can move all the way to BC Calculus or take three different AP History courses.

Respondent 6: The students set high goals, and we meet them. We have tons of honors and AP courses to challenge the students and accelerate them as they need it.

13) Have you ever used HSPA data to help you better serve students with special needs? Gifted students? Other subgroups?

Respondent 1: A lot of the ways the state testing comes to us, it is not helpful at all for these subgroups. We maybe get a ranking, but that is it.

Respondent 2: I have never used HSPA data at all.

Respondent 3: Our administrators look at that and determine who is at risk of failing, and then they get a special class to assist them.

Respondent 4: I don't know what the HSPA says about those students.

Respondent 5: Nor do I.

Respondent 6: I have never seen if it breaks down kids by group, either.

14) What has been your experience with gifted or highly able students and standardized tests?

Respondent 1: It is wasteful.

Respondent 2: It is beneath them.
Respondent 3: They take the test and do as we ask them.

Respondent 4: You're right. They are very cooperative. They do the right thing, and they score well on it. But, academically, it is so non-challenging to them. I mean you are taking a kid out of, say, Pre Calculus Honors to test them on something that they have been able to do since eighth grade.

Respondent 5: We are lucky that they don't riot. In our building, average students have no trouble with this exam. It is a loss of time for us and for them.

Respondent 6: That means that it is also not respectful.

15) In what, if any, ways has the school culture changed in response to the current focus on high-stakes testing?

16) Have you changed your curriculum in response to the current focus on high-stakes testing?

Respondent 1: The Biology exam that we mentioned is something that we have been looking at carefully.

Respondent 2: But I believe that we are consistent overall with our curricular approach. We don't change things, and even though right now, the Biology exam is a field test. We are looking at it very carefully and taking it seriously, as you stated.

Respondent 3: Exactly, we are traditional in that regard.

Respondent 4: When it comes to curriculum planning and testing, we look over the topics. Anything less would be foolish, but we don't go over it again and again. Our kids are proficient or advanced proficient on these tests. The end-of-course Algebra II exam
was something that we were well prepared for here. Nearly all of our kids have that coursework done before the HSPA exam rolls around.

Respondent 5: Physics is no longer on the HSPA; that came at us and went away. When we were preparing kids for that, we limited students’ science choices to make sure they got the Physics in time for HSPA. Now with the Biology, it is annoying as hell to try and second-guess the state people, will may make changes in curriculum for that test, but we just don't know yet to what extent.

Respondent 6: To be responsible and fair to the students, you need to factor the state testing objectives into the curriculum choices.

17) What, if any, impact do these changes have on gifted/ highly able learners?

Respondent 1: I don't think these changes affected gifted kids.

Respondent 2: It sometimes makes scheduling harder for highly able students because if they are required to take a class at a certain time then they cannot follow a sequence, say, to an AP level, unless they take two science classes at once.

Respondent 3: Aside from that scheduling issue here, I don't think there is any impact on those gifted kids, either.

Respondent 4: Lower-level learners are more likely to be affected by any curricular changes.

Respondent 5: When you are a smaller school, and you are trying to get the kids all they need, the state exams can be confining.

Respondent 6: But not to a degree that is incredibly significant.
1) How would you describe the climate of your school?

Respondent 1: Students come first, and I like the students to feel that any of us would do whatever we can to help them with whatever they need. Everyone needs to feel safe here. We also have traditions that have been created by the students and faculty, and are preserved each year. Holidays, pep rallies, and other school-wide events are very important here.

Respondent 2: It is safe and welcoming.

Respondent 3: I have been here for a long time, and from the principal down, this is a place where everyone makes sure that students feel safe and supported.

2) What expectations exist here regarding the teacher-student working relationship?

Respondent 1: The expectation is that everyone is here for each other and brings their best to the table each day. Our teachers do all that they can to make the learning exciting and make school a place that students want to be. We want the students to feel like they are missing something if they are not here.

Respondent 2: It is a respectful relationship; the students and teachers work together and understand the importance of each person’s work. I think you can tell the students really care for their teachers.
Respondent 3: And we watch out for all of our students, we conference to better meet the needs of individual students often, we are connected to what is happening in their lives. Students who must work to assist the family with financial support are closely observed, and a variety of adult education programs, including evening classes, are offered to students to ensure that they receive their high school degrees.

3) Have you ever reviewed the HSPA performance of your students?
4) If so, can you describe what you look for when reviewing those results?
5) Do you feel these results are helpful to you as an educator?
Respondent 1: If the students are here and learning, they will do well on the test. Throughout the school, I have graphs charting student attendance and test performance. We also have [a] countdown to [the] HSPA that is featured throughout the building. We examine the results. We see who is not passing, and we focus hard on those students. If there are juniors who are not in school during HSPA preparation time, we go to their homes and get them and bring them to school. The results keep us focused on an achievable goal, we make the goal visible to everyone in the building, and we never give up on it.

Respondent 2: We carefully look at the HSPA results and closely examine the performance of students who are at risk. Prior to the HSPA, students who are on the cusp of passing are identified and given immediate, individual attention. Analysis of these results led us to provide a specialized program for those in need. The program is 8 weeks before exam 3 hours a week, either 2 days after school or Saturday. It is offered in both Math and Language Arts. Parents were included in the kickoff of the program. It was
described in a breakfast program with great attendance. Students continue to attend in high numbers, and those who do not attend cannot receive preferential choice of SRA times if necessary) and are excluded from school programs that are considered a privilege. We have gone from having 232 students in the SRA process just 2 years ago to 102. In the same 2-year period, we have gone from 32% passing to 65% passing in Mathematics.

Respondent 3: We have seen similar improvements in Language Arts as a result of the program described. We also made sure to have all of the teachers trained in the New Jersey Holistic Scoring Guide. This was helpful because the teachers are now able to articulate clearly to the students all of the HSPA writing expectations. We look for students who are not scoring in the proficient range on the scoring guide, and the teachers work with them on the areas where they are weak. The data is helpful to us in identifying specific areas of weakness. The results are helpful to us because they have enabled us to push more students forward and pass that exam.

6) How would you describe your school's commitment to the following areas:

Physical Education World Languages Social Studies
Fine Arts Practical Arts

7) In what ways are the above programs supported in your school?

Respondent 1: These programs are the heart of the experience for so many of our students. We have an outstanding fashion and design program where the students learn important practical skills. Our students have designed the banners throughout the building
in their arts classes. Fifty-six percent of our students are bilingual so language is a focus
in all instructional areas.

Respondent 2: The project-based learning opportunities in these classes become a part of
the fiber of the school. Students readily share what they have learned and created with the
entire school population.

Respondent 3: I don't feel that there is a difference between assessed and non-assessed
areas in within this building; we all have a job to do here.

8) What are some of the most important student events in your school?
Respondent 1: There are so many events tied to what the peer leaders, student
government, and our Junior ROTC program. Our students love assemblies; it was
important to me to have a place where we could bring together all of our students.
Recently, we sponsored an all-girls assembly where members of the staff who are breast
cancer survivors spoke to the girls, and a public health nurse also spoke to all the girls
about healthy lifestyle choices and early detection of breast cancer. The teachers who
spoke said that the girls were grateful to them and were genuinely concerned for their
teachers in a very touching away.

Respondent 2: In our school, pep rallies and field trips are among the events that the
students look forward to the most throughout the year.

Respondent 3: And there are so many clubs that sponsor important school-wide events
that the students enjoy. The Pan American Club, Dancing Team, Band, Chorus, and all
the CASTLE (student government) bring the school together in a positive way.
9) Does your school provide character education? If so, in what programs/ways?

Respondent 1: I believe in character education, not metal detectors. We joined the Character Education Partnership (CEP). The students created banners that hang in the front hall addressing each of the 11 principles of character. We introduced the banners at school-wide assemblies.

Respondent 2: The connection between the school and the community is very important here also.

Respondent 3: Yes, the "community bulldogs" (student service organization named after the school mascot) have cleaned up the areas around the school and participated in school-wide events to help improve the quality of life for everyone in the area.

10) How do you feel your school focuses on the individual learning needs of its students?

Respondent 1: We adopted the peer leader program mentioned based on the research out of Rutgers that was particularly relevant for our students. You see, we lose a lot of students in the freshman year; they drop out, use alcohol, and begin skipping out of school. The program began by teaching refusal skills through a positive peer model, but for us, it is much more now. Students are chosen by application; we choose students from different social groups to show positive role models across the student populations and different types of successes. Each peer leader team has 12–14 students in their groups. By addressing their social concerns and keeping them healthy and in school, we can be sure that we can meet their academic needs.

Respondent 2: And the Small Learning Communities (SLC) that have been created allow the students to travel together through their classes with the same groups of students
taught by the same teachers. This allows for us to know the students better and address their individual needs more readily.

Respondent 3: Each SLC also has a social worker assigned to them in addition to the guidance counselors. And the social workers have offices in the building so that students can come and see them and talk about things that they need in and outside of school.

11) What advanced courses of study are available to students in your school? How are students encouraged to take advantage of these courses?

12) Are there opportunities for highly able/gifted students to be accelerated in your school?

Respondent 1: There are courses here for students to pursue to the highest level in all areas, and we do not limit students moving into the upper-level classes simply because of their grade level. If students demonstrate the ability, they are appropriately challenged.

Respondent 2: As a result of increasing the difficulty of material in our lower-level classes, we were able to increase the amount of challenging material and courses that we offer throughout the high school experience. We offer Advanced Placement courses in Calculus, Chemistry, Biology, US History, English Literature, AB and BC Calculus. Enrichment opportunities are provided for advanced students, including Hudson Community College, Bloomfield, NJIT collegiate level courses, the Upward Bound program for freshman, summer research opportunities for American Chemistry Society, Governor's School Cardiac Classroom, Brainworks, and Moody's Mega Math Challenge.

Respondent 3: In Language Arts, we have also increased the number of electives that we have, and these courses are specifically designed for advanced learners. We have an
honors program that is thriving, and students have enrolled in record numbers for Shakespeare, the American Novel, and Journalism.

13) Have you ever used HSPA data to help you better serve students with special needs? Gifted students? Other subgroups?
Respondent 1: We disaggregate the data so that each subgroup's results is closely examined and given exactly what they need to be successful.
Respondent 2: The subgroup that comes to my mind is those who have just recently arrived in the country, and their time in district is less than a year. These students who are placed in the port of entry program and travel together through all classes and stay together for 1 year. Students participate in a bilingual program and are supported as they assimilate to the culture. We have seen how this program assists students who have only been here for a short amount of time master the material that is presented on the HSPA.
Respondent 3: We found that all of our students regardless of their ability level were in need of more authentic experiences in writing. Recently, we invited Mary Ledbetter in to conduct a writing residency with the students. She also conducted workshops for the staff, and all the teachers, whether special education or honors, were able to integrate her strategies into their teaching. This improved students' writing, which has a direct effect on our HSPA results.

14) What has been your experience with gifted or highly able students and standardized tests?
Respondent 1: Our most motivated students take the exam seriously.
Respondent 2: Even if they know that they are well above what the exam is testing.

Respondent 3: It is a shame that Shakespeare sometimes has to take a back seat to picture prompts so that we can get all the students well prepared for the exam.

15) In what, if any, ways has the school culture changed in response to the current focus on high-stakes testing?
Respondent 1: Unlike earlier years, we have the entire school focused on the performance, we are communicating clearly our school-wide goals, and the students are very involved in the process and in our success.
Respondent 2: At department meetings, we speak about the test, look at the student work, and discuss ways to improve our performance.
Respondent 3: It is a part of our daily conversations and planning, to be sure.

16) Have you changed your curriculum in response to the current focus on high-stakes testing?
Respondent 1: There has always been a high-stakes test that we have been accountable to. HSPA is just the latest one, and the stakes seem to be higher than they were in the past because of NCLB.
Respondent 2: This test has made us really look at the curriculum and increase the quality and rigor of the math program. We found that students were taking a sequence of courses that were well below the skills that were needed to pass the HSPA. We realigned the course offerings to align with the NJCCS. Further, we held articulation meetings with middle school teachers. The middle school test scores are evaluated, and 40% of students
are required to take an additional math class that deals with the clusters on the HSPA exam.

Respondent 3: Very simply, the new Language Arts HSPA drives our curriculum.

17) What, if any, impact do these changes have on gifted/highly able learners?

Respondent 1: It starts having those learners think about the importance of tests and why performing consistently is important.

Respondent 2: At the same time, they focus more of their energy and attention on the AP exam and the college application process.

Respondent 3: That is right. There is little change for these students because they are still focusing on the college-level tests.
Appendix H

Mucci Focus Group Discussion Questions for Administrators and Teachers

Emerson High School Teacher Focus Group Transcript

1) How would you describe the climate of your school?
2) What expectations exist here regarding the teacher-student working relationship?

Respondent 1: The basis of the student teacher relationship is the Character Counts Initiative. The teachers have the rules posted in the front of the room, and the students know and respect them. Teachers are always prepared and demand a good deal from the students. Teachers are expected to begin all the classes with a Do Now activity and keep the students engaged on a learning objective that is clear to them.

Respondent 2: We also focus on the Habits of Mind: persistence, commitment, organization and time management, following directions. Our school culture is one of hard work, honesty, and respect.

Respondent 3: And that begins the first month of school. We focus on appropriately using your time, organizing for serious study, and learning how to be a good student. There is a partnership between students, family, and teachers that exists here.

Respondent 4: Yes, definitely. We are extremely collaborative, and we are extremely structured here.

Respondent 5: The grant that we received for the Home School Connection (an Internet connection placed in homes to promote electronic communication with the school) has been helpful in the area of keeping the climate positive and focused on children. Teachers make themselves available; students need to know that they can talk to us about missing
homework. I check essays and homework electronically, and I communicate with parents via email daily.

3) Have you ever reviewed the HSPA performance of your students?
4) If so, can you describe what you look for when reviewing those results?
5) Do you feel these results are helpful to you as an educator?

Respondent 1: I constantly check it; I use it as a guide to help me with each student, to determine who is working to their potential and who is not. I compare students' written class work with their test performance and make correlations that help me plan my lessons.

Respondent 2: We look for patterns in student achievement; we work with each class based on what we have learned about their performance on the state tests. We look all the way back to their data from seventh and eighth grades to make sure that the students are progressing.

Respondent 3: We have delayed openings where all of the student achievement data is presented to us, and we are given all of the performance indicators and learn about each subgroup's performance on each indicator. We are expected to ask questions at these workshops, and each team has a coach who helps them wade through the data and learn how to make the best lessons based on what we learn about the students' performance.

Respondent 4: We have partnered with the Institute for Student Achievement to establish and support our small learning communities; they do so much with our data, and they present it in ways that are extremely useful for the teachers.
Respondent 5: I agree. The district support of Small Learning Communities has allowed us to have team meetings about students, scrutinizing performance data, not just the beginning of the year but consistently and throughout the year.

6) How would you describe your school’s commitment to the following areas:

Physical Education          World Languages          Social Studies
Fine Arts                   Practical Arts

7) In what ways are the above programs supported in your school?

Respondent 1: The major problem we now face at the high-school level is that there is no longer a feeder program for advancement in vocational arts. The middle school children are no longer exposed to the fine and practical arts because of the increased emphasis on preparing to pass the HSPA. Students are coming to the high school, and they have never learned to sew, for example.

Respondent 2: Yes, I have seen that. The students in the fashion and design program more and more are seniors and juniors enrolling in beginning classes. It is simply the first opportunity that the students have to take an elective course because so many of them are doubling up in math and English classes.

Respondent 3: The AutoCAD program has never had a feeder program. I feel that the school supports our program a great deal as far as organizing and developing the program and always finding financial support for the software and equipment. Our administration not only supports this program with the school-wide budget but also by pursuing grants that could be helpful for us.
Respondent 4: There are no more practical or fine arts classes in the elementary setting. We are reintroducing programs in this area that are no longer available any earlier in the educational experience. Further, we have also seen a significant decrease in the number of freshman enrolled in our career exploration class; their schedule simply does not allow for it because they are in remedial classes.

Respondent 5: I think we all feel that the programs are supported here but not supported earlier. And we have to remember that even with all these constraints, our students are excelling in this area. For example, we have a school-wide fashion show with showcasing the designs students have created. Our students in the vocational arts are gaining scholarships to attend FIT, and they are winning high school competitions in many areas.

Respondent 6: I agree with what you are saying. There is a lot of support at Emerson for programs that are not associated with the high-stakes testing, but it is not the same throughout the district.

8) What are some of the most important student events in your school?

Respondent 1: Our students love the assemblies and pep rallies that we plan for them.

Respondent 2: I think some of the most successful and important assemblies are the ones where we display the banners created by the students to evidence the Pillars of Character. The teachers and administrators talk to the students about those pillars, and I think that it is well received.

Respondent 3: I agree. I also feel that every day, the open campus feeling for the lunch hour is important to the students, they get to connect with a group or club, meet with teachers, or go home and spend lunch with members of their families.
Respondent 4: I believe the programs in the Career Academy Small Learning Community are very important events. Our students like to show their work, whether it is at a debate or an engineering show.

Respondent 5: Also athletic events, Junior ROTC programs, and all the field trips are very important to the students. And don't forget the prom.

9) Does your school provide character education? If so, in what programs/ways?

Respondent 1: Everything we do is based on character education.

Respondent 2: Absolutely, and the reason that the Character Counts works so well is because we all believe in the values, respect for everyone.

Respondent 3: I also think that the students have responded well to the Character Counts program.

Respondent 4: Yes, they realize the importance of Project Bulldog and the uniforms. I can't believe how well they took to that.

Respondent 5: Because the kids know that we are here for them, they respect the rules, and they also help to make sure that everyone follows them. They are instrumental in crafting the reminder signs around the building and so forth.

10) How do you feel your school focuses on the individual learning needs of its students?

Respondent 1: Even with classes of 28, 32 kids, we always try to think about the individual when planning the lesson.

Respondent 2: Everybody here knows their students well, what they are experiencing academically and personally.
Respondent 3: Yes, and we talk to our students, and we share information with each other about what the kids are going through. All of this helps the learning.

Respondent 4: I think the other thing that is important is that we also make sure that when a student is having difficulty that there is one member of the small learning community teacher team who will stand up for that student, be their advocate.

Respondent 5: When the students know that you care, they try their best. Everybody here knows when a student is having an issue in school or at home.

11) What advanced courses of study are available to students in your school? How are students encouraged to take advantage of these courses?

12) Are there opportunities for highly able/gifted students to be accelerated in your school?

Respondent 1: We have a full range of Advanced Placement courses here. The teachers encourage the students to take on as much as they can. We try and push them.

Respondent 2: We also encourage students to take courses through the local universities and receive college credit while in high school.

Respondent 3: Yes, I have taught those classes and had college students filling their core curriculum requirements along with students from Emerson.

Respondent 4: In my experience, the AP students do not need as much motivation as some of the students who are capable but haven’t found their way into that track of classes yet.

Respondent 5: That is why I believe the college credit programs are so important. When the Emerson students go to Bloomfield, Stevens, and Hudson Community, they
understand how they can advance. This shared study program has had a great impact here.

13) Have you ever used HSPA data to help you better serve students with special needs? Gifted students? Other subgroups?

Respondent 1: As we mentioned, we know that data inside and out, and we use it to serve the students.

Respondent 2: I don't know another district where you can find teachers able to discuss all of the subgroups; we can tell you about the ELL, the cusp groups, we know where each group is performance wise, and what they are doing in the classroom.

Respondent 3: Absolutely.

Respondent 4: The ISA program has certainly made sure that we are able to understand the data and use it in the classroom, we are given it in different forms, we share it with the students, and we make sure that we are all moving toward mastery of the same goals.

Respondent 5: While it is true that most of our students are doing well since the curriculum alignment in response to the testing, we are still not where we need to be in special education. Many of our special education classes are heavily modified and not inclusive. I would like to see us do more to use the pressure from NCLB to get these students in appropriately challenging classes with adequate supports.

14) What has been your experience with gifted or highly able students and standardized tests? (For this focus group, this question was paired with question 17.)

17) What, if any, impact do these changes have on gifted/highly able learners?
Respondent 1: Here, it is more being held back by a difficult home situation rather than the pressure from testing. We have a high mobility rate because the students return to their home countries for weeks in the middle of a semester.

Respondent 2: That's right. So our mission here is to have the students, especially those with great academic potential, see the world that exists beyond Union City. The students see high school tests as a necessary step toward the college experience.

Respondent 3: Yes, and their experience is so narrow. I was telling the students how I had been to 61 countries, and they didn't believe me. Understanding that not everyone speaks Spanish and not every street has a bodega where they can go in and carry on a conversation in Spanish is very hard for them.

Respondent 4: I know. The kids asked me if you were lying about the 61 countries.

Respondent 5: The tests are a tool we use to help them understand the steps they have to go through to move beyond Union City. For example, we took a group of kids to Swarthmore. Now, remember, we house 1,500 kids in one building, and I think Swarthmore has about 1,500 kids on 500 acres. Our students were really unnerved. They were like, "Where are all the people? I want to be somewhere like Union City where there are lots of people who speak Spanish." We try to teach them that even the colleges with the highest Hispanic population, like Texas A&M, are running at about 11% Hispanic.

15) In what, if any, ways has the school culture changed in response to the current focus on high-stakes testing?
16) Have you changed your curriculum in response to the current focus on high-stakes testing?

Respondent 1: In a way, I feel like there has always been some test that we are considering. The names change, but the pressure is always the same in urban education.

Respondent 2: I know. We have all mentioned the ISA and the small learning communities. Those initiatives have been responsible for our cultural changes and shifts in curriculum; both focus us on reaching each student and knowing each student's academic strengths and weaknesses.

Respondent 3: I like what we have done with the math curriculum as a result of looking at the tests. We really upped the rigor in that area especially.

Respondent 4: Well, now many of the kids are doubling up. They are taking a remedial class and a class on grade level in both math and English. That is in response to the testing, but I think it also affects the culture of the school. It's like here is what you have to learn to pass the test, and here is what you should know as an English scholar.

Respondent 5: We are constantly improving our curriculum and considering the tests as we do so. We receive a good deal of professional development to work on curriculum and look at testing data, and overall, I think that is very helpful.