

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to study what the A+ Plan, Florida's school accountability system, meant to tenth grade mathematics teachers and school administrators and how this plan was perceived by school administrators and tenth grade teachers who taught at schools that differed in school performance grade level; by mathematics tenth grade teachers who differed in their teaching assignment course level; and by mathematics tenth grade teachers who differed in race or ethnic composition. The research questions that guided this dissertation were:

1. What does the A+ Plan, Florida's school accountability system, mean to tenth grade mathematics teachers?
2. How do tenth grade mathematics teachers who work at schools with different levels of school performance perceive the A+ Plan?
3. How do tenth grade mathematics teachers who teach different levels of mathematics courses perceive the A+ Plan?
4. How do tenth grade mathematics teachers who differ in race and/or ethnicity perceive the A+ Plan?
5. How do school administrators who work at schools with different levels of school performance perceive the A+ Plan?

The information gathered through this study's interviewing process was organized into meaningful units of analysis. Five common interrelated themes and twelve sub-themes that provided a better understanding of how the participants of this study

perceived the A+ Plan were found across teachers who differed in their schools' performance grade level, teaching assignment course level, and race or ethnicity. This means that the participants' school performance grade level, teaching assignment course level, and race or ethnicity were not a source of unevenness in their perceptions. These themes were:

1. Teachers' Beliefs About Students' Learning

- The Student Personal Motivation to Learn

- The Student Natural Ability

2. Accountability and the FCAT

- Teachers' Beliefs About Accountability

- The FCAT Versus a Pre/Post Assessment Model

- The School's FCAT Scores and the Student Population

- The FCAT and the Student Mathematics Course Level

- The FCAT and the ESOL Student Population

3. The Algebra Initiative Versus the Tracking System

4. School Grade Publicity

- Who Benefits

- The Effect on Hiring and Retention of Mathematics Teachers

- The Effect on Low Performing Schools Teachers' Morale

- The Effect on the Student Population

5. Teachers' Rewards.

Teachers' Beliefs About Students' Learning

This study found that among mathematics teachers and school administrators across the three schools, the high performing (BBA), and average performing (CCC), and the low performing (FDD), the A+ Plan's fundamental belief that "Every child can learn and no child should be left behind" was commonly perceived as a conditional value and not as an absolute value. When participants were asked in what way they agreed or disagreed with this belief, they unanimously and consistently expressed that variables such as the students' personal motivation and natural abilities are the ones that will determine not only what, but also the level that they will be able to learn and achieve.

The Student Personal Motivation to Learn

It is the participants' belief that at high school level the students' personal motivation to learn is the leading variable that will determine how much knowledge they will attain. "Motivation should come from the students," one of the mathematics teachers at the high performing school said. And then she added:

If the kid is motivated enough to want to learn something, even Calculus, I firmly believe he or she will. Maybe not to the depth that we would like him or her to, but yes he or she will learn it.

A young, but very skilled African American teacher at the average performing school stated that certainly students will learn "...if they want to learn, if they practice, if they do their homework, if they pay attention, if they look at the board when I am showing them how to do it." She then shared her own personal experience as a student:

My motivation was what kept me in school. I had a working mom that could not help. My motivation was that I wanted to be different; I wanted to be there for

my kids and help them in school. I did not want to work all my life at Burger King.

The head of the mathematics department at the low performing school, who has been teaching for more than two decades at this school site, also expressed his conviction about the role that student personal motivation plays in the learning process. He said:

No matter what you do, you can stand on your head, sing and dance, if the kids are not interested in learning, they will not learn. At the high school level things are different. Kids need to do their part; they have to be willing to learn and they have to be making an effort too. It is not just the teacher.

The head of the mathematics department at the high performing school, also a former teacher at the low performing school, stated that not every student comes to school for the ideal of learning, ready to learn, or motivated to learn. Some students come to school because of a meal, for a free breakfast or for a free lunch. "Maybe it is the only hot meal that they might get in the day," he said; then added: "Getting an education is secondary to a kid who is hungry." He used the following analogy in an effort to get his view across.

School is not an industry. We deal with many factors that industries don't have to deal with. It is not like dealing with a product that stays constant, like in industry. If you are making books and you notice that the book covers are not cut straight, you will say to the cover provider, 'wait a minute, I can't do this, these books are not coming up right because you are providing me with an inferior product.' Teachers deal with a lot of factors that industry does not understand. At the high school level kids are not motivated to perform better to improve the school grade. Elementary schools are different. You can really get more kids involved and motivated in improving their school grade than in high school. The school grade is not a big deal at the high school level.

The participants expressed their certainty that the student level of personal motivation to learn varies according to the mathematics course level in which he or she is enrolled, that is, students at higher levels of mathematics are more motivated

to learn and achieve than students enrolled in lower levels of mathematics courses.

"But I know by experience that the kids that are sitting, for example in an Explorations in Mathematics (low level math) class, don't care about the FCAT," said a young African American teacher at the low performing school. And then she added, "Kids at lower levels of mathematics care less about their grades. The school grade is not a motivator. And the school grade is not an embarrassment either." In reference to the lack of student motivation in lower level mathematics courses, another teacher at the high performing school said:

Students at the lower course levels are not so motivated to learn. I see more motivation for success in honor classes than in regular classes. So, there is more stress on me with low-level math classes. There seem to be more factors that impede these students' success.

The ESOL mathematics teachers confirmed that this lack of motivation is also common among ESOL students. Because of their language barrier these students are mostly enrolled in the low levels of mathematics courses. The ESOL mathematics teacher at the average performing school stated that many of his students were failing every subject they were taking this year. "They have straight F's. But they don't even try," he said. He believed that because many ESOL students live in poverty, they lack motivation to learn and perform and usually come to school just for a meal or simply to "hangout". In reference to this he said:

You see them wandering in the halls and calling each other names. Many of them have discipline problems. I have been teaching ESOL kids for five years and I like to teach. I love to help the ones that come to learn and help them assimilate the culture. But lately, they seem to come just to hangout and don't care anymore. School is not important to them.

The participants also expressed that students who attend schools of choice (magnet schools) are more motivated to learn and excel in the academics than those

who do not. "Kids in our school (average performing school) are less motivated to learn than those at the high performing high school," said a young African American teacher at the average performing school. And then she added, "Of course, it is a 100% magnet school. Those kids do their homework. There is competition in that school; they know they are expected to perform and they have to perform in order to stay there."

"I need to motivate them (students). I need to make them realize that they have talent, and tap into that. I need to help them understand that they are capable of doing whatever they want to do in life," the principal at the low performing school said, a popular and relatively young African American former football coach. "The general student body doesn't care about the school grade," said one of his mathematics teachers, another young African American teacher who mostly teaches honor classes at this school. Then the principal, using a football analogy, explained the part that students' motivation had in improving their school grade from a D to a C when he said:

You have to understand that being a principal is like being a football coach. The same kids that lost tonight's game are going to be the same ones that will have to fight the battle next week. These same kids that had a D last year are the same ones that we had to motivate to get them into C this year.

Highly respected by his principal, the school faculty, and the student body an African American teacher at the low performing school, who has been in the teaching profession for more than three decades, stated that sports are the priority in his school because this is where the kids see success, especially African American boys. He believes that they don't realize that what they see on television is just a

small percentage of all the kids who practice and are very good in sports, and that just because they are good athletes in school, does not mean that they will play on the NFL. With the use of metaphors, this experienced teacher explained their challenge of getting their students motivated to learn when he said:

Our principal has set a tone for the academics in this school and the teachers have bought into it. He created a climate for the academics. Now we have their bodies in the classrooms and not in the halls or some place else. We managed to have their bodies; but I believe we still don't have their minds. You can take the alligator out of the ocean into the canal and it will still be an alligator. You can take kids out of the halls and out of the streets into the classroom. You are not changing them; you are just changing their location. But the challenge now is to have our kids appreciate where we are and what we have. The question is how do we get their minds? How do we reach their minds to help them become the people that they don't even know they want to become? As a teacher I need, not just their bodies present, but also their minds as well. Life is like a buffet, not like a banquet. If I go to a buffet, but I don't get out of my seat, I will not eat. We have to wait on ourselves. Kids need to know what they are seeking in life. They also need to know where to seek.

The Student Natural Ability

It was the participants' belief that the student's natural ability to learn determines not only what the student will be able to learn, but also the level that he or she will be able to achieve. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the A+ Plan's belief that every child can learn and that no child should be left behind, teachers consistently expressed that they believed that every child can learn but only certain things and that no child should be left behind, but some will always stay behind. It was their view that the A+ Plan's belief places unrealistic demands on many children. "We are trying to equate them and make them all the same, when we know they are not. There are degrees to what a child can learn," said the principal at the average performing school. "I agree with the first part that every child can learn, but not with the part that no child should be left behind," said the co-head of the mathematics

department at the high performing school, a teacher who has been teaching for more than two decades and is co-author of district-wide prep-FCAT books. Then she said: "Kids come to us with vast differences of skills and abilities. The level that kids learn varies according to their abilities and skills. And yet we are expected to bring them up to the same level and at the same pace." She expressed her belief that it would be fair to expect teachers to bring all students to the same level and at the same pace if they all had the same skills and abilities. "Not every kid can learn Calculus even in 1000 years," she said, because there are some concepts that some students will never be able to master.

A mathematics teacher at the high performing school expressed her view that: "Every child can learn, but not every child is college bound. We want every child to go to college and that is unrealistic and unfair." This teacher believes that low academic achievers can be plumbers, garbage collectors, or any other job that does not require a college education and that society in general does not value jobs that do not require a college education.

Although all students should be given the opportunity to learn, "...that does not mean that all children will learn all subjects to the highest level all the time. Some students can do well in mathematics and some in English, depending on their capabilities," one of the teachers at the high performing school said. "There are levels in learning. I have been teaching for thirty years and I know that some kids can learn some things and other kids can learn others," said a veteran teacher who taught mostly honor classes at the average performing school and was waiting for retirement. Her extensive teaching experience has led her to believe that because

kids have different IQ's and abilities, not all of them will be able to learn mathematics, especially the higher levels of mathematics courses.

"Every child can learn, but not necessarily the same thing," an African American teacher who teaches mostly honor students at the low performing school said"; and this is because "...people have different aptitudes. Some can learn Calculus, but others will never rise to that level." This teacher expressed his belief that learning depends on the student's natural ability: "There are students inclined to be artistic. I know as a fact that I can't do things that requires artistic ability. I might learn an art, but just to a certain extent."

Accountability and The FCAT

This study found that mathematics teachers and school administrators across the three schools, although believing in accountability, did not feel that they should be held accountable for their students' performance on the FCAT. Without exception they said that the FCAT was an ineffective tool for measuring teacher performance because it did not utilize a pre-testing/ post-testing assessment model on the same group of students. Instead, it compared the present year's tenth grade student population with the previous year, students who may have had a different teacher and circumstances.

In addition, this test is being used to compare schools' populations that contrast greatly in demographics. Schools with large populations of students from families who are non-English speakers or low income are compared with schools without large numbers of these students.

Although the participants came from very different teaching scenarios, they consistently expressed the opinion that their students' performance on the FCAT mostly depends on the mathematics course level in which they are enrolled by the time they take the test. Tenth grade students enrolled in a class lower than Geometry were not prepared to pass the FCAT.

Albeit participants unfailingly stated that the mathematics course level students were enrolled was a predictor of their performance on the FCAT, they disagreed with the school district's mandate of eliminating all basic courses and enrolling all ninth grade students in a course not lower than Algebra 1, a step in the process of eliminating the tracking system from their district's mathematical curricular program.

Because the FCAT has been designed to assess high standards in Reading, Writing, and in mathematics, the participants believed that it was unrealistic to expect ESOL students to become proficient enough in English to pass this test during their high school career.

Teachers' Beliefs About Accountability

This study found that although teachers and school administrators believed in teacher accountability, even though they did not believe that they should be held accountable for their students' performance on the FCAT. "Teachers should be held accountable and measured as we administrators are also accountable and measured," said the assistant principal at the high performing school. "Accountability is good to make teachers responsible for teaching," the ESOL mathematics teacher at the average performing school said. "I believe in accountability because our school system has failed our students. Our system has not been able to meet their needs,"

the assistant principal at the average performing school said; but at the same time expressed: "... but not solely based on the FCAT."

Participants consistently expressed that it was unfair to use the FCAT as the measure for accountability. "I am accountable for what I teach and for how well I teach it," said one of the mathematics teachers interviewed at the high performing school. And then she added: "There is a point that it is not what I teach or how well I teach it, but how well kids are learning." She believed that there are other factors that definitely affect how well students learn and how well they perform on the FCAT, which are beyond her control. "It is unfair to be held accountable because these other factors," she said.

A mathematics teacher at the high performing school said:

We need to be accountable and that is the problem with the teachers. They have not been held accountable in the past. I am tired of seeing teachers doing so little when others are working so hard, and for the same pay. But I don't think that looking at the teachers' tenth grade students' scores is the way to make teachers accountable. Sure there has to be some accountability!

Participants expressed their belief that there are other factors that should be taken in consideration besides the students' performance on the FCAT, such as the students' attendance and their reading levels. High school students not only need to be in class in order to learn, but they also need to be at the proper reading level in order to perform well on the mathematics section of this test. In reference to this a teacher said:

I do believe in accountability, as long as they don't look just at the FCAT scores. Why should I be held accountable for a student's performance on a test if that student is hardly present in my class? What about kids that read at a fourth grade level? FCAT is not just about math, but is also about reading.

The FCAT versus a Pre/Post Assessment Model

It is the participants' belief that the FCAT is an unfair measure of school accountability because it compares schools with completely different populations. "It does not make sense to me whatsoever. I don't know who came up with that idea. Obviously, they were not thinking too hard," the principal at the average performing school said. Administrators and teachers all agreed that it is wrong to evaluate a school's performance comparing the present year tenth grade students' scores with the previous year tenth grade students' scores. This same principal also said: "Don't you think you need to compare the same kids? That is like comparing apples with oranges."

All the principals believed that a more effective way of measuring student achievement would be to use a pre/post model of assessment. In reference to this alternative type of assessment, the principal at the high performing school said:

The present system compares last year's tenth graders with this year's tenth graders. We all know that you cannot compare two different populations. They should at least compare last year's ninth graders with this year's tenth graders and next year's eleventh graders. Though at different years, they would at least be comparing the same population of kids. Have an entry and an exit test, a pre and a pos test. That would bring certain validity to the process.

The principal at the average performing school stated that a more valuable measure would be to test the students at the beginning of the school year and to test them again at the end to see if there has been progress. "How do you know if you have made some progress if they have not been tested at the beginning? she said. Then she added, "We should all be held accountable for what we do, either success or failure. But the FCAT is an artificial measure."

She then explained that at her school many students have made a lot of progress, "but maybe not to the level that the FCAT requires." There are a lot of students in her school, mostly ESOL students, who are at level one in reading and in mathematics. "Moving them to the next level, which is level two, I consider it a great achievement! Don't you think?" she said. She believed that the present system penalized the school for those students at level two because they needed to be at levels three and above. She also said: "We see improvement with the number of kids who move from level one to level two. It is not the FCAT level; therefore we are not recognized." This principal is not against the FCAT per se; she is not in favor of the way that it is used. It is her belief that the FCAT should be part of the school grading system, but not the only component. "We understand that there has to be an external measure, " she said, "So we agree with the FCAT, but not as the sole measure." The co-head of the mathematics department at the low performing school said:

They should look not only where my students are now, but also, where they were before they got to me. I should be able to show that there has been growth in a year's time. I don't want my principal to think I am the reason why my kids did not perform better.

The participants also expressed that during 2000-2001 school year the FCAT lacked credibility because it was administered without informing students and educators what the passing scores would be, or if the performance test items would count or not. In reference to this, the head of the mathematics department at the average performance school said: "As teachers, when we evaluate our students we should let them know ahead of time what will be tested, what will count and what the passing score will be, don't you think?" Referring to this, the principal at the average performing school said:

They (the state) are being so unfair putting our teachers' feet to the fire by not providing, on time, the necessary information. Through these things they are just showing lack of consistency and are losing credibility. We have learned important facts about the FCAT through the newspaper, and this is so unfair to the teachers who are the ones preparing these kids for the test. The students go to the test, which is now their graduation test, without not even knowing what is the performance criterion. This is inconsiderate and it speaks to the validity of the test.

The School's FCAT Scores and the Student Population

This study found that the challenges that participants at the three schools sites had to face in the process of preparing their students for the FCAT had many contrasts. While the low performing school teachers were faced with the challenge of getting a large number of their students able to read at the proper grade level, the average performance school teachers were faced with the challenge of teaching English language skills to a large number of ESOL students, many of whom were unschooled. Because the FCAT does not represent a challenge to the high performing school, their efforts were aimed at getting a high percentage of their students to pass dual enrollment and Advanced Placement tests.

The assistant principal at the low performing school stated their greatest challenge when she said:

For now, we just have to work with them (students), and with the experiences that they bring, even if that means teaching them how to read, in order to give them the best shot to have a productive life after high school.

She explained that their teachers are teaching ninth and tenth grade students how read.

The principal at the high performing school stated that their greatest challenge was not the FCAT, but getting their students to pass courses such as AP Calculus or

AP Physics and finding mathematics teachers that could teach their students courses such as Differential Equations, Matrix Theory or Calculus II and III.” She explained that they were very fortunate because they were a school of choice; students have to apply to be accepted. She also said that their students had high expectations for themselves, didn’t have discipline problems, and also were very bright. She added:

We receive calls from people throughout the country asking us what do we do to keep our FCAT scores so high. People don’t realize that we are totally a school of choice. Students have to apply to be accepted. Sure we have an advantage over other schools.

The principal at the average performing school stated their greatest challenge when she said: "Many of our students are completely unschooled." This principal also explained that not only do the teachers at her school have to work with a large number of their students' English skills, but they also have to work on their schooling skills. She said: "Many of our kids only went through third grade in their home countries. They have missed the social development that we learn through the elementary and middle school years."

Although participants stated that there was a need for some kind of “scale” to mark where their schools stand, and where they need to be, they disagreed with the way that the FCAT was being used. They expressed their belief that school accountability should be based on a multiplicity of instruments and that the state should take in consideration the school population and the demographics before they grade the school. One of the mathematics teachers at the average performing school said: "What I don't agree with is the way they are using the FCAT. It is so unfair to compare one school with another! Every school serves a different population." Also from this same school site another mathematics teacher said:

The schools that have an A are because of the population that they serve. Those kids come from higher income families. There is greater family involvement and a better situation for the kids. You already know what to expect before the school grades come in. Prominent areas will get the A's and the B's and the low-income areas will get the lower grades.

A young African American teacher at the high performing school, who graduated from this school, expressed her belief that the high performing grade that her school has is the result of the student population that it serves. She stated that teachers at her school were not concerned about the FCAT. In reference to her school student population she said: "We are cool here because we are a high performing school. In any other school we would be shaking in our boots. We get all the weeded out students. Students have to apply. We don't have the typical students."

The assistant principal at the average performing school, a high school that houses one of the district's magnet programs, stated that the school grade does not say anything about the school's teachers or administrators per se, because it is the reflection of the student population that it serves. "The school grade means nothing to me. The fact that our school is a C, which is considered by the general public as average, means nothing to me," this assistant principal said. She stated that the reason why her school is a "C", and not an "F" or a "D", is because of the pre-selected and high performing students that attend her school by choice. She commented that magnet school students usually score higher on the FCAT, which balances the low FCAT scores of the large number of high poverty, ESOL and minority students who also attend her school. In her own words:

We have a huge needy population here, but we also have a magnet computer program, which attracts high performing kids. This balances the situation and that is why we are a C. An A does not mean anything to me either. If your

school has an A does that mean that your school is an excellent school? Your school is an A school because you only have high performing kids.

A well known and highly respected African American teacher at the low performing school, who has been in the teaching profession for more than three decades, said that the reason why their students are not performing at the level that they should is because most of them come from single parent homes and many of their students' parents are unemployed. Trying briefly to describe his school population he said:

The parents can't help their children because they are not familiar with the academics in the first place. The people that live in these communities mostly work in the sugar mills. Once the season is over they have to migrate. There are no role models at home. Most of the parents only attended school through eighth or ninth grade. This school reading scores are low because parents can hardly read.

The FCAT and the Student Mathematics Course Level

It is the participants' belief that they should not be held accountable for their students' performance on the FCAT because high school students' mathematics FCAT scores are the result of the math course level in which they are enrolled at the time they take the test. "The kids that are sitting in an Algebra II, pre-Calculus or Calculus already have the knowledge and skills to pass the FCAT anyway, whether I am a good teacher or a bad teacher", said the head of the mathematics department at the low performing school. And then he added: "I could be an aloof math teacher and fall asleep during class and my kids (high level math students) will still pass the FCAT."

"The FCAT is not a good measure because some kids are not at the level they should be," said a young African American teacher at the low performing school. She

stated that in her Explorations in Mathematics class, a basic math course, she does not have any other choice than to teach concepts that her students should have learned when they were in fourth or fifth grade. In her Algebra I honor classes however, her students arrive with all the basic skills they need to be successful on the FCAT.

The teachers and school administrators expressed their belief in being held accountable for teaching what they are supposed to be teaching and following their curriculums in the way that they are supposed to be doing it. According to the assistant principal at the average performing, the reason why her students can't pass the FCAT is because they are being examined on material that they have not had the chance to learn. "What is the FCAT testing?" she said; then added: "the FCAT is testing things that the kids have not had the chance to learn; and, if that is true, then whoever wrote that test should be held accountable for including things that should not have been included."

A young African American mathematics teacher, who teaches mostly honor students at the low performing school, stated that improving his school grade (D) did not motivate him to improve his performance as a teacher because his students, who are honor students, "...will pass the FCAT anyway, no matter what he does or does not do in class. The course that I am teaching right now is above the FCAT," he said.

Mathematics teachers that teach low levels of mathematics such as Explorations in Mathematics, Intensive Mathematics, Algebra 1a, or Algebra 1b stated that their students don't even understand basic concepts in mathematics and the FCAT has been built to test high standards in mathematics, reading, and writing. One of the

mathematics teachers at the low performing school said: " How in the world do we expect them to understand the FCAT higher order of thinking word problems? I am teaching Algebra right now to kids that don't have the basics yet."

It was the participants' belief that because the FCAT assesses Algebra and Geometry standards, any student enrolled in a math course lower than Geometry has not had the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to pass the test. It is for this reason that mathematics teachers who teach courses lower than Geometry, such as Explorations in Mathematics, Intensive Mathematics, Algebra Ia or Ib, have to stop teaching their own curriculum to teach concepts that are measured on the FCAT. A teacher who felt that she was mostly teaching for the test said:

I find myself teaching for the test, not for the curriculum, like I am supposed to. The FCAT is not basic skills. I don't think it is a fair measure because my kids have not taken Geometry yet, I teach them Algebra. How are they going to be tested on something they have not learned yet? I have to stop teaching my curriculum to teach Geometry. I have to rush it to them, going so fast that it flies over their heads.

Mathematics teachers that teach Algebra 1a, Algebra 1b, and Regular Algebra 1 faced a greater challenge because not only they were held accountable for their students' performance on the FCAT, but also for their students' performance on the end of semester county exams. "For example, in the Algebra course you have to stop teaching your curriculum to teach Geometry; then, you are held accountable for your students performance on the county exam," said one of the mathematics teachers at the average performing school. A mathematics teacher at the high performing school said:

The test should coincide with the material that has been taught to that point. It is ridiculous for me to stop teaching my Algebra curriculum to teach Geometry, just because they have not gotten to that point in their education yet. Even a tenth grader that is taking Geometry has not learned all they need to learn about Geometry by the time they have to take the FCAT. For many tenth graders the situation is even worse because they have not even had the chance to take Geometry yet. So I take two weeks out of my Algebra class, stop teaching the Algebra curriculum to teach Geometry, and then be held accountable for the Algebra county exam. No matter what other interruptions might occur, I am responsible for covering the entire curriculum. I don't have the flexibility to leave some topics out. It will not be ok because they will be on the county exam.

The assistant principal at the average performing school asked, "But does the format of the FCAT, the coding of the answers, and the time of the year the test is given match that curriculum?"

The FCAT and the ESOL Student Population

The low and the average performing schools' mathematics teachers and administrators believed that it was unrealistic to expect high school ESOL students to become proficient enough in English to pass the FCAT during their high school career. The FCAT is designed to assess high standards, not basic skills like the previous high school graduation test, the High School Competency Test (HSCT).

The situation was aggravated by a large number of high school ESOL students who were enrolled at her high school because of their age. These students are not proficient in their home language, lack schooling skills, and have missed the social development that they should had acquired in elementary and middle school years. The principal at the average performing school was convinced that students for whom English is not their first language can never perform as well as if it were; and even if the students score high, they could had scored even higher if English were

their first language. She also said: "Asking high school kids that had only been in United States for two years to pass the FCAT is unbelievable."

It was the participants' conviction that ESOL students' inefficiency and lack of experience in English represented a barrier to not only passing the communication portion of the test, but also the mathematics. Students' lack of adequate reading comprehension skills in English will lowered their scores on the mathematics portion of this test. The FCAT problems are presented and some answers are expected in a form that requires English language skills that ESOL students may have not yet achieved. "ESOL kids can't pass the FCAT," the co-head of the mathematics department at the low performing school said; and added; "Two years in United States is not enough to pass the FCAT. Even kids who have been here all their lives struggle with the test. I hear them say: 'This is my diploma gone'. I truly feel for those kids (ESOL students)."

Concerned about being held accountable for his students' performance on the FCAT, an experienced math ESOL teacher stated: "I have a rough time trying to teach 35 ESOL level 1 students. The language is a problem. There is an additional problem if I am held accountable or expected to have 35 ESOL level 1 students pass the FCAT." Using the following real life example this teacher explained how ESOL students see the FCAT as an "impossible" barrier to overcome:

My ESOL kids see the FCAT as an impossible! A pretty smart student that I have, a student that I feel doesn't even belong to my class, asked me for some materials to prepare herself for the FCAT. She, as an exception to the rule, was really concerned about the test. I gave her some material, which she took home. She came back to me so exasperated! She could not understand the questions. She could not even understand what they were asking her to do. The reading level was too high for her. The questions were written in a paragraph form.

Referring to all ESOL students he said, “They lose their hopes for graduation. They find it unfair as a graduation requirement.”

The participants stated that the reason why the FCAT is was so difficult for the ESOL students was because this test consists of reasoning and critical thinking questions which require students not only to read and comprehend, but to also show and explain in words the steps used in problem solving process.

The co-head of the mathematics department at the low performing school said that before the FCAT teachers used to avoid word problems; everything was drill and practice. “Word problems are not so much about math, but about being able to read and comprehend,” she said. This teacher stated that since the FCAT, “ Bloom’s taxonomy has been revived!” and also, teachers have been more conscious about the level of mathematics questions they asked their students on a given test. She said, “ Now we are spending more time on higher levels of thinking problems.”

The Algebra Initiative Versus the Tracking System

The school district’s Algebra Initiative was perceived by the participants as unrealistic and as unfair. This initiative mandates all ninth grade students to be enrolled in at least an Algebra I course with the dual purpose of aligning the students' mathematics curriculums with the FCAT and eliminating the old mathematics curriculum tracking system that allowed teachers and counselors to enroll students in different mathematics course levels, depending on their grades, language proficiency, and previous standardized tests scores.

Almost all the mathematics teachers and school administrators deemed this initiative unreasonable for two reasons. First, it creates an environment where many

students, especially minorities, are unprepared to succeed. The majority of the students enrolled in mathematics courses lower than Algebra I are African Americans, Hispanic or Haitians. The second reason was that it could hurt students who are prepared for Algebra. Teachers with wide ranging heterogeneous (low and high performing students in each class) classes may be forced to "water down" the course to reduce failure rates.

Concerned about students who don't have the necessary skills to succeed in an Algebra course, the co-head of the mathematics department at the high performing school said: "What is a circle? Many of these kids don't even know what a circle is. And these are the same kids that I am supposed to teach how to factorize a quadratic equation in an Algebra class." It is this mathematics teacher's belief that many students can't even understand the common and ordinary math vocabulary and therefore can't transfer those concepts to more sophisticated Algebra problems. She is convinced that they don't possess the necessary skills to pass this course: "The concepts are just not there. Even if I give them the radius, they can't find the diameter."

It is the participants' view that the Algebra Initiative is based on a "wrong" assumption that all students have to, or need to, go to college, and that Algebra is a "gateway". A mathematics teacher at the high performing school stated her opinion about this initiative: "But when we look at some of these kids (low performers) we should ask ourselves, is that the door that we see them going through. I would rather see them learning how to balance a checking account. That would make more sense, don't you think?"

"The Algebra Initiative worries me. Kids have different IQ's, abilities and preparations. It is not realistic to expect that every child will take and pass Algebra I by ninth grade," one of the mathematics teachers at the average performing school said, a teacher who has been in the teaching profession for more than thirty years. The assistant principal at this school said: "Every child passing Algebra by ninth grade is unrealistic. A general goal applied to everybody is not realistic."

Out of all the interviewees, only one, a young African American mathematics teacher at the high performing school who teaches both low and high performing students stated her support for the Algebra Initiative. Her belief was that taking Algebra at the ninth grade level was a "matter of opportunities." She believed that ninth graders are not mature enough to decide whether they are going to college or not; and educators should not be making that decision for them, either. She expressed her support when she said:

I believe that everybody should learn Algebra. I don't believe that we should give a child the choice to learn it or not at a ninth grade level. What about later in life when they realize and wished that they had learned it? At their junior or senior year you might realize that they are not going to college and did not have the need to stay in your Algebra class. But we should not tell kids what they are going to do after graduation when they are in ninth grade. We should give them all the opportunity to learn. I would rather prepare them for something they are not going to use than not prepare them for something they will need to use, cutting off their hopes for further achievement.

School Grade Publicity

This study found that participants across the three schools believed that the school grade publicity helped families financially empowered decide where to buy property; made the hiring and retention of qualified mathematics teachers at low performing schools more difficult; inaccurately and unfairly damage the professional

reputation and esteem of teachers who teach at schools with large number of students with low FCAT scores; and did not motivate high school students to improve their performance on the FCAT.

Who Benefits

It was the participants' belief that the school grade publicity provided information to families, who are financially empowered to buy property, so they can select a neighborhood that was served by a high performing school. It was their belief that this publicity was creating a greater disparity among the district's high schools. High performing schools, which usually have large number of middle and upper middle students were attracting more affluent families and low performing schools, which usually have large number of low-economic students were growing in their percentages of impoverished families. "Publicity is good for parents because they can chose what school their children will be attending," the head of the mathematics department at the high performing school said. "The publicity is fair for the parents. Parents need to know what kind of a school their kids are attending or going to attend. That way they can chose where to live," a young African American teacher at the average performing school said. The assistant principal at the average performing school said:

People outside interpret an A as excellent and a C as average. Making the school grade public only helps families who have the means to buy a property, that is, non impoverished families, decide where to live. Nobody wants to live in an area which school is a D or an F.

The Effect on Hiring and Retention of Math Teachers

It was the participants' belief that the school grade publicity was making the hiring and retention of mathematics teachers more difficult. This was especially true of mathematics teachers working at high minority, high poverty high schools who were also teaching low performing and ESOL students. The participants believed that the pressure they felt by being held accountable for their students' performance on the FCAT was also making the teaching profession less attractive to potential teacher candidates.

The participants stated that the community at large has a negative attitude towards a school that has a "bad school grade" (D or F). Teachers in general tend to see a negative school grade as a sign of a "battle" or "up hill struggle". Teachers know that it is easier to teach at a high performing school than at a low performing school. So, "why bother to teach in our school when there are many others to choose from," said the head of the mathematics department at the low performing school.

The principal at the high performing school stated that the publicity of a negative school grade placed a stigma on the school that made the hiring and retention of teachers, especially mathematics teachers harder. She used the following analogy to get her point across:

A school grade is like a personality grade," she said. "If you have a D personality, nobody will want to be with you, or, hang out with you. But if you have an A personality, every body wants to be with you, and hang out with you. What do you want to be as a person, an A, a D or an F?"

It was the participants' belief that college students don't see a future for themselves in the teaching profession. "I see so many bright young people and I say to myself, 'If they would only get into the teaching profession'," the assistant principal

at the high performing school said; and then she added: "But when I ask, 'how many of you would like to be teachers', their hands are not raised." The participants stated that low teachers' salaries compounded by the high demands and accountability placed on educators, is making the teaching profession less attractive to prospective teachers, especially in mathematics and science.

The Effect on Low Performing Schools Teachers' Morale

It was the participants' opinion that the A+ Plan creates an environment where teachers perceive their work as more stressful and less rewarding because of what they view as unfair or unrealistic accountability standards. "We get A's and B's, which is great. But my friends at the low performing school are working their butts off," said an African American mathematics teacher at the high performing school. She had witnessed many of her colleagues at the low performing school stressed out because they can't repeat a D again. She has seen her friends who teach at low performing schools work hard, above and beyond what they need to do. She felt that is not fair that they are judged based on their school grade. "The effect of the publicity is a low morale in the school," she said. She believed that school grade publicity makes teachers who teach at low performing schools feel that they go to a worthless school. This mathematics teacher said: " This publicity is taking away what got them into teaching in the first place. They started teaching for a reason and that reason is because they love to teach. This publicity is taking the joy out of the teaching profession."

It is the participants' belief that the state's goal should be to tell teachers and administrators, the people who need to know, how well they are doing; and to make

each individual school aware of how well it is doing and where improvement is needed. "The FCAT results should serve that purpose," a mathematics teacher at the high performing school said. But, if they intend to use the students' score to embarrass teachers or to embarrass an entire school, she said: "then they are successfully doing just that." In reference to this point the co-head of the mathematics department at the high performing school said:

I feel sorry for those schools that are classified as D's or F's schools. I think is a 'bag of wrap' to be classified in that manner, to be in the newspaper, and just based on a test. It is an embarrassment! You know what? This publicity just causes teachers to be really, really angry as far as they would say: ' I did my best. I can't help it if they don't pass the test. It is not my fault that they come from a background that...'

It was the participants' belief that teachers who teach at low performing schools don't feel they are doing a bad job; but when parents see that their students' FCAT scores are low, they believe that their children's teachers must be doing a terrible job. "I really don't care about the school grade," said one of the mathematics teachers at the average performing school; and then she added: "But the school grade publicity tends to distort what the school, the teachers, and the student are really doing." The principal at the high performing school stated that:

"This publicity hurts teachers! Schools that have an F don't have F teachers. And schools that have a C don't have C teachers. The school grade does not say anything about the teachers or the faculty. I have friends and I know principals from other schools. And I know it hurts. I know how hard they work. Those teachers and those principals are not D or F.

"The school grade does not affect my performance as a teacher," said the head of the mathematics department at the low performing school, who has been teaching at this school site for more than twenty years. But he also understood that it affected other people's perceptions about him and the school. He is convinced that the school

grade publicity has really hurt the mathematics teachers who teach at his school site. He also stated that people outside of his school community think that the teachers who are teaching in his school are there because they are not good enough to teach in any other place. He said:

The perception that the people have about our school is completely different from our perception. I know where we come from. But when the people learn where I teach they say: 'Oh, my God'; or they ask: 'What are you doing there?' They don't say 'Fantastic'. We are known as a school of low achievers. We have been at the low end of the schools too many years, but we have been also busting our butts to improve that. If people would pay more attention to our improvement, from the beginning to the end, rather than the FCAT scores, we would be at a higher position than many schools with better FCAT scores.

The participants stated that the community at large did not appreciate them; that their opinions did not even count. They expressed that what the public "think they know" about teachers, about teaching or about what goes in the classroom is what they have heard through the media, which has always been negative. The ESOL mathematics teacher at the average performing school said: "Many people don't understand how difficult it is to be a teacher. They think we are greedy. They just know what they read in the newspaper, the tests scores, or what they hear in television." One of the mathematics teachers at the average performing school stated:

I will not last 30 years in this profession. There is too much pressure in this profession. There is too much pressure from the school to perform to certain standards. All we hear in the news is bad. That's all that the people hear about teachers, bad.

The Effect on the Student Population

It was the participants' belief that the student body in general doesn't care about the school wide grade. They felt that, at the high school level, students are so

personal about themselves that improving their school wide grade did not motivate them to improve their performance on the FCAT. The co-head of the mathematics department at the low performing school said that her school was an "F" in 1999, and then became a "D" in 2000 and this, "...did not have any effect on them. The school grade is no motivation for kids to do better. "

One of the mathematics teachers at the low performing said: "Kids at lower levels of mathematics don't care about the school grade because they 'care less' about their own grades anyway. The school grade is not a motivator! And the school grade is not an embarrassment either."

It was the participants' view that students who are enrolled in higher levels of mathematics don't care about their school grade either. A teacher who teaches mostly honor classes at the low performing school said that this indifferent attitude towards the school grade was the same among high performing students. "The students who are in advanced classes don't care about the school grade because they don't think of themselves as low performers," this teacher said.

Although passing the FCAT in order to graduate gave principals and teachers certain "leverage", it was not enough, according to the teachers at the low performing school. The mathematics teachers stated that because students enrolled in low levels of mathematics already know that they have several opportunities to pass the FCAT, for graduation purposes, they did not feel that they needed to pass it in the "first round." In reference to this student attitude, the head of the mathematics department at this school site said: "Kids who are sitting in an Intensive Mathematics

class (a low level math) don't care because they are not college material anyway. Grades don't mean anything to them."

Teachers believed that students, especially low performing students who lack motivation to learn or to perform well on tests, are growing tired of the FCAT. In reference to this, the assistant principal at the average performing school said:

There are some kids who come here (to school) to learn and they learn. But on the other hand, there are others who come for something else, and those will not learn. They don't care if they don't perform their best on the test.

Several teachers stated that they have seen low performing students drawing "Christmas trees" on these tests. "They don't really care about the school grade, for the most part," a mathematics teacher at the average performing school said.

According to teachers, low performing students are complaining about "getting the FCAT in every class" and they feel that they are not learning what they are supposed to be learning.

Teachers' Rewards

This study found that mathematics teachers and school administrators across the three schools believed that rewarding teachers based on their students' performance on the FCAT was unfair. They are convinced that their students' scores on the FCAT is the product of prior mathematical knowledge and that the mathematics content tested on this test is the accumulation of many years of learning.

The head of the mathematics department at the low performing school stated that he is convinced that the day mathematics teachers are financially rewarded for their students' performance on the FCAT, will be the day that mathematics teachers in every school will resist teaching low levels of mathematics, such as Explorations in

Mathematics, Intensive Mathematics, Algebra 1a, or 1b. Referring to himself he said: "When that day comes, I will teach only higher levels of mathematics."

Teacher participants felt that teachers should not be financially rewarded because teachers assigned to teach higher levels of mathematics have their students come to them with the knowledge and skills necessary to perform well on test. Referring to mathematics teachers that teach high performing students, the head of the mathematics department at the low performing school said: "Should they be rewarded? Should they be rewarded when their students came to them with those skills (FCAT skills) already perfected?"

The teachers stated that mathematics teachers that teach higher levels of mathematics courses don't even need to stop teaching their course curriculums to prepare their students for the FCAT. "I teach Honors Algebra I, so I don't worry about the FCAT," a mathematics teacher at the low performing school said; and then he added:

If I stop teaching my curriculum to prepare my students for the FCAT, I would be doing them a disservice. I expect all of them to pass the FCAT without any preparation. Should I be rewarded for their performance on the FCAT, when I did not do anything to prepare them for the test? They knew the material before they got to me in the first place.

"Pay should be based on merit, and not based on the FCAT results," said the co-head of the mathematics department at the high performing school. One of the mathematics teachers at this same school site also said: "How are you going to reward a teacher who teaches honor students and punish the one who is teaching low-level students?" Teachers stated that they can teach at the same level of

capacity to a low-level math class and an honor math class and the learning will be different.

"I should not be rewarded if my kids pass the FCAT," said the co-head of the mathematics department at the high performing school. And then added:

I did not cause them to pass the FCAT. The FCAT is based on teaching way back before I got them. The concepts and ideas tested on the FCAT are way below the course I am teaching. All my tenth graders passed the FCAT. What did I do to help them pass the FCAT? Nothing! I am teaching them at a level higher than the FCAT. Why should I get rewarded? I don't teach intensive. Why should I worry about the FCAT?