

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Final Comments

The study concludes that the lack of changeability in perceptions among participants towards the A+ Plan, in spite of their differences in school performance grade level, teaching assignment level, race or ethnicity, demonstrates that respondents answered as one person. Albeit participants came from schools and teaching settings that contrasted significantly, they all responded with great sympathy and a deep understanding of their colleagues' particular situations and challenges, unanimity usually observed among people that feel threatened by a common external and unwanted force to change based on beliefs and principles not shared by them

These findings reveal that the A+ Plan was perceived as a bureaucratic school reform initiative. According to Owens (1998), this type of school reform tries to raise student achievement using the "old" power coercive approach, that is, by means of rewards and sanctions that would obtain compliance from schoolteachers and administrators as it considers human relations as secondary to the ability to effect changes directly through the exercise of power. According to Owens reforms with this approach for change postulate that good ideas are developed outside the school, schools prefer stability, and schools are resistant to change and therefore must be forced to change.

This study concludes that participants neither shared the A+ Plan's fundamental belief that "Every child can learn and no child should be left behind", nor its deep-seated assumption that students' performance on the FCAT is the

direct result of their performance as teachers. They believed that the state's reform plan fundamental belief was unrealistic because children are different and learn differently. They said that students did not learn all we want them to learn, nor at the same time, nor at the same level. They were also convinced that their pupils' learning and performance on the FCAT was the outcome, not of their performance, but of their personal motivation to learn, natural abilities, the mathematics course level that they were enrolled in by the time they took the test, and their level of English proficiency. Because the FCAT assesses high Algebra, Geometry content standards, it was impractical to expect any student that has not had the opportunity to take these courses to pass the test. Also, it was unrealistic to expect high school ESOL students to become proficient enough in English during their short high school career to pass the test. These variables were believed to surpass any other variables in determining the student academic level of achievement and performance on the FCAT.

The findings show that teachers did not perceive themselves like what Bradley (2000) described, the heart of the educational enterprise; neither shared Milken's (1999) belief that a teacher's performance and expertise in a subject area is the leading variable that drives student achievement. This demonstrates that the A+ Plan's strategies for creating school change have been unsuccessful in altering deeply embedded beliefs and assumptions of mathematics teachers and school administrators. According to Sarason (1990), an observer of schools reform movements since 1971, school reform initiatives that lacked this ability were destined to fail.

The findings reveal that participants not only believed in being held accountable for teaching their curriculums, using the best resources available, and making themselves accessible to their students, but also in the necessity some kind of accountability measure. But on the other hand they perceived the FCAT as an ineffective and unfair accountability tool for measuring their teaching performance. They commonly pointed out that the A+ Plan instead of using a pre/ post-testing model of assessment that could provide information of students' academic growth in a year; it compared the present year's tenth grade students' scores with the previous year. In addition, it compared schools that have different student demographics.

The findings show that teachers and school administrators did not agree with the way that the FCAT was being used. They felt that the A+ Plan does not give them the opportunity to demonstrate how much academic growth their students have experienced in a year of schoolwork and felt that the students' FCAT scores were removing any sense of day-to-day teaching and learning success. This finding shows that the A+ Plan uses the FCAT in a way that the Fair Test (1999) organization's study, Testing Our Children, advised not to. This study states that large-scale tests like the FCAT should not be used to monitor schools reforms not only because they were blunting, imprecise, and could not be used as a diagnostic tool, but also because they provided limited information for teacher accountability purposes.

This study found that participants not only acknowledged the continual gap in mathematical achievement between minority students and their counterparts, but

also the lack of curricular alignment between lower track math courses that many students, especially minorities, were enrolled and the standards and content tested on the FCAT. But on the other hand they were unreceptive to the Algebra Initiative, the district's attempt to solve this problem by eliminating these courses and placing all ninth grade students in at least a regular Algebra course. They believed that doing this initiative would either set-up many students, especially minorities, for failure or it would force mathematics teachers to water down the course in order to reduce class failure rates.

This negative attitude towards the Algebra Initiative demonstrates Keller's (2000) belief that "getting rid of " the mathematics tracking system was one of the greatest challenges that school reformers had to face because there was a lot of skepticism toward the reasonableness and appropriateness of academic standard movement that tried to ensure that all students, and not just few, had access to higher levels of mathematics.

The study found that the challenges that the three schools faced in the midst of preparing their students for the FCAT were drastically disparate. While the high performing high school was not concerned about the FCAT, but about getting high percentage of students to passing dual enrollment and Advanced Placement tests, the low and average performing schools were struggling getting large numbers of their students to becoming at least proficient in English or able to read at a higher level.

The findings show that participants felt that the A+ Plan was using a playing field that was not leveled while preaching equality and mandating equitable

results. They despaired in reaching the state's high expectations because of their schools' demographics and the history of their students. For this reason teachers and school administrators were convinced that the school grade given by the state did not indicate anything about their professional performance because it was merely a reflection of the student population that they served.

This study shows that participants believed that publicizing school grades was increasing disparity between the district's schools because families financially empowered to buy a house were moving into neighborhoods served by high performing schools. They also thought that this publicity was making the hiring of mathematics teachers more difficult, especially in schools that needed them the most. Teachers associate a negative school grade with stressful working conditions and the present high demand for mathematics teachers allows these professional to choose where they want to teach. They also believed that the school grade publicity was damaging teachers' professional reputation and esteem in the community at large, a stigma especially real for teachers who worked at schools categorized as low performing school. The general public outside the educational arena tends to judge the school staff according to the school grade. Finally, they believed that the school grade did not motivate students to perform better on the FCAT. High school students don't associate their personal academic achievement with the school grade.

The findings demonstrate that the A+ Plan intentions for publicizing school grades are off target. This school reform plan's foremost goal is to improve student achievement and publicizes schools' grades to extol or embarrass

schools as it holds them accountable for their students' performance on the FCAT. In actuality, what this school grade publicity does, according to this finding, is hurt high schools by augmenting demographical disparities; make hiring more difficult, and damage teachers' reputation. It is proving to be inefficient in motivating high school students improve their academic performance.

This study brings forth that participants believed that rewarding teachers based on their students' performance on the FCAT was unfair because they were convinced that their students' scores on the FCAT was the product of prior mathematical knowledge. The mathematics standards and content assessed in this test can only be acquired through many years of successful learning.

These findings show that the A+ Plan's monetary reward system intended to motivate teachers improve their performance was not welcomed among participants. Perceptions and beliefs cannot be divorced from rewards. Participants were negatively reacting to a reward that they felt that they did not deserve; as they did not believe that their students' performance on the FCAT was the product of their performance as teachers. Teachers, like any other person need and wish to be rewarded only for fruits of their own labor.

Recommendations

Based on this study's conclusions, the researcher recommends:

1. More attention should be given to what teachers and school administrators have to say about the A+ Plan because these are the people who can truly experience and understand the entire educational process. Instead of

- increasing supervision, the state leadership must accept and understand the power that teachers' and school administrators' assumptions and beliefs have.
2. An inspiring, aggressive and well-planned statewide educational campaign should be launched intended to get teachers and school administrators' collaboration and deliberately shift negative attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions into more productive norms using different media of communication.
 3. Serious attention and monitoring should be aimed at the state's growing population of low-performing ESOL students. Unrealistic expectations should be set aside and a curricular academic/ vocational program be designed intended to provide ESOL students with the knowledge and vocational skills necessary to become employable and enter the work force.
 4. ESOL students are enrolled in high schools because of their age and are not literate in their own native language should be exempted from the FCAT. It is unfair and unrealistic to expect these students to pass the FCAT. Testing these students unjustly affects the performance grade of the school they attend.
 5. A challenging but different FCAT for ESOL students be created and administered only to ESOL students who at the expected time for graduation have been in United States less than seven years. The content tested on this test should be formatted in such a way that students who

- are in the process of becoming proficient in English have the opportunity to be successful.
6. The state should design a relative school performance grade formula that takes into consideration other variables such as the school student population level of poverty, past reading and math scores, number of ESOL students, etc; and not use only the students' FCAT scores to grade schools. Other factors need to be considered in the process of evaluation.
 7. The elementary and middle school mathematics curriculum should be fortified by including Algebra and Geometry concepts at earlier school years. Students who enter high school with a strong base in mathematics are in an advantageous position over those that don't. Based on the fact that teachers' content expertise is what drives student learning, only elementary teachers proficient in mathematics should teach mathematics to elementary school children.
 8. The salaries of certified mathematics teachers should be significantly increased to reduce the growing gap between mathematics teachers needed and certified mathematics teachers available. There is a national mathematics teacher crisis and in the America's economy pay is based on demands. Having high-quality teachers is second only to ensuring student safety as the most important issue that public schools are now facing.
 9. More attention should be given to the student's role and the power of self-motivation in the learning process, especially at the high school level.

10. An inspiring, aggressive and well-planned statewide educational campaign intended to inform parents about the advantages of getting a strong base in mathematics should be developed. A similar campaign should be launched to motivate students to enroll in higher level of mathematics courses that qualify them to enter high-paying careers. Because minority students are over represented in lower levels of mathematics and under represented in careers that require a strong base in mathematics, this educational campaign should be especially targeted at the African American and Latino student population.

Final Statements

From these conclusions, it can be deduced that high school mathematics teachers and administrators unanimously perceived the A+ Plan, Florida's school accountability system, as an external force to change and did not feel part or have a positive emotional engagement in its implementation processes. Participants experienced a sense of hopelessness because they viewed the reform plan's assumptions as unrealistic and its expectations beyond their control and insensitive to their schools' circumstances. This study demonstrates that the state has failed not only in understanding teachers' and administrators' perceptions, but also in taking into consideration their situational realities. According to Owens (1998), teachers' and school administrators' perceptions are powerful enough to resist any plans for change. It is for this reason that Halpin and Croft (1962) thought that their perceptions ought to be a valid source of data for any intended organizational change because whatever they perceived as their

experience was the reality to be described in their schools. Therefore, a state should never embark on a school reform initiative without, not only a thoroughly understanding of how its principles are perceived by teachers and school administrators, but also taking them into consideration; at the end, these are the people that will do the work.

Although the A+ Plan orates a vision, it has lacked the necessary leadership to get teachers and administrators to share that vision. Decades of school reform initiatives across the nation have proven that getting teachers and school administrators to buy into new ideas is seldom accomplished by external force, legislation, or techniques of reward and punishment. For that reason, if the A+ Plan is unsuccessful in attaining its goal that all students achieve academic excellence, is because the state leadership has failed by setting up goals impossible to reach.

Closing Comments

In closing the researcher commends the state for its determination to equalize access to a quality education for all its citizenry. As the nation's population exponentially grows more diverse, quality education is essential for political stability and economical strength. Equalizing access and quality is an ethical, prudent, and proactive commitment.

To achieve a successful outcome to this commitment the state needs a process of school reform evaluation based upon accurate feedback, careful analysis and corresponding adaptations to the programs designed to equalize access and quality. The feedback should include active listening at the level of

the basic unit for improvement, that is, administrators and teachers at the local schools. This will help the state to focus attention on the people who can best implement reform.

The state should not rely only on the FCAT to measure student achievement until high expectations for success, sufficient opportunity to learn, and challenging instruction is the standard educational fare for all children. An assessment system made up of multiple assessments including norm-referenced tests, criterion- reference tests, alternative tests, and classroom tests can produce a more comprehensive and credible information upon which important decisions can be made about students and schools.

The researcher finally recommends that similar studies be conducted at the middle school level, at the elementary school level, and as closed as possible to the beginning of the school year.