Pathways to Graduation and Beyond:
Practices from two high schools for low-income students

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Sociology
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

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Abstract

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The income-attainment gap in education has widened over the last several decades leaving children born into poverty few avenues of economic mobility. Based on two years of ethnographic research, this study examines how a majority low-income high school graduates and sends to college more than ninety percent of its students. Practices from this school are compared to an average performing low-income high school matched on size and demographic characteristics.

Findings highlight the ways in which structures, leadership strategies, and institutional cultures impact student achievement. In the model school, a combination of participatory leadership, integrated bureaucratic practices and a collective culture translated into more effective decision making, problem solving and implementation of initiatives. These stood in contrast to the autocratic leadership and individualistic culture that translated into contentious dynamics between leadership and staff and more superficial implementation of programs.

Also delineated are the contrasting cultural outlooks I term “collectively guided success” and “limited resource pragmatism”. These cultures defined disparate visions of the features of a “successful school” and translated into a set of priorities, strategies and actions that drove teacher behavior. Practices at each school can be understood as rational extensions of these cultural lenses.
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For my parents,

Nira Herrmann and Ted Szatrowski,

whose endless support got me through
Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the participation and support of numerous individuals. A special thanks goes to Martín Sánchez-Jankowski who mentored me, guided my research, stuck with me through challenges, and read many, many a draft. You have shaped my scholarship in innumerable ways. To Samuel R. Lucas who taught me so much about methods and developed my skills as a researcher and writer. I appreciate your honest feedback and the many hours I worked under your guidance. You have both done much to shape the researcher I am today.

Thanks also to the schools, administrators, teachers, and students who welcomed my research. You generously opened-up your classrooms and this study reflects so many of the lessons I have learned.

To my parents, Nira Herrmann and Ted Szatrowski, and my sister, Miriam Herrmann Szatrowski, who believed in me, supported me, and counseled me through my struggles. To my husband, Rich Werden, who has been with me on this entire journey and shares equally in the joy of its completion.

Thanks to Calvin Morrill and the many other professors who have guided me along the way. To my friends and colleagues for every pep talk, feedback session, and celebration.

Parts of this research were funded by the Sociology Department at the University of California-Berkeley. All questions or inquiries should be directed to the author at aszatrowski@gmail.com.
“The income-achievement gap is now more than twice as large as the black-white achievement gap. Fifty years ago, in contrast, the black-white gap was twice as large as the income gap.... At the same time that family income has become more predictive of children’s academic achievement, so have educational attainment and cognitive skills become more predictive of adults’ earnings. The combination of these trends creates a feedback mechanism that may decrease intergenerational mobility. As the children of the rich do better in school, and those who do better in school are more likely to become rich, we risk producing an even more unequal and economically polarized society.”—Sean Reardon
Chapter One: Overview and Methods

In the United States, economic background remains one of the strongest predictors of educational attainment. Over half of the nation’s public-school students come from low-income families. The academic deficits faced by these students begin before they start school and widen through the end of high school. For many low-income students, high school graduation and college attendance are out of reach despite their aspirations. (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Bischoff & Reardon, 2014; Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins, 2008)

While the black-white achievement gap has been shrinking, the income-achievement gap has increased by thirty to forty percent over the last twenty-five years. Today the income-achievement gap is twice that of the racial gap in achievement. Low-income children enter school with major deficits in vocabulary, literacy, mathematical thinking, and social preparedness. They leave high school with graduation rates ranging from sixty to seventy-three percent. (Bischoff & Reardon, 2014; DePaoli et al., 2015; Isaacs et al., 2008)

These inequalities extend into college. Though low-income students have had the largest gains in college aspirations, their college enrollment has not matched. (Venezia, 2013) Eighty percent of high-income students enroll in college immediately following high school, the rate is forty-nine percent for low-income families. The percentage of students who attain a college degree eight years after high school is fourteen for students from low-income families, twenty-nine for middle income and sixty for high income students. (Kena et al., 2015)

Low-income students bring with them strengths and deficits in succeeding in academic settings. Ethnographic studies have shown that poor students have priorities that supersede education. Neighborhoods in which college attendance is rare and high school graduation rates low shape students’ aspirations and priorities. (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2008; Willis, 1981 [1977]) Studies of the school environment point to fundamental contradictions between school practices and the goals of increasing academic performance for low-income students. Low-income students are more likely to take lower-track courses that do not prepare them for college, more likely to have teachers with lower-expectations and less-rigorous teaching techniques, and they themselves are more likely to reject the aims of schooling believing it will not create meaningful opportunities. (Ferguson, 1998; Lucas, 1999, 2001; L. M. McNeil, 1983)

High Schools are important because they determine the graduation rates of students as well as their ability to connect to college. For children born into poverty, schools promise economic mobility but instead, maintain existing economic disparities for generation after generation. Research identifies multiple challenges schools face in graduating their low-income students. Findings focus on leadership practices, the dual-curriculum structure of schooling, the impact of teachers’ expectations and classroom behaviors, and the role of schools in mismatching with the cultural practices and beliefs of low-income students. In examining the schools in my study, I was interested in how these factors develop, interact, are maintained or changed.

While disparities in attainment exist nation-wide, there are schools that educate populations which are over half low-income but still manage to graduate 90% of their low-
income students (higher than the overall national average rate of graduation of 81%) and send 92% of all their students to college.

These schools raise a simple question that is at the heart of this study: “What are high schools with high graduation and college attendance rates for low-income students doing to achieve that success?” The present study looks at a successful public school as an entire organizational entity capturing the components of success at all levels in the school hierarchy—administrators, teachers, and students.

Several things distinguish this study from other observational studies on school success. First, this study compares two public schools, not magnets or charters, in order to limit selection bias issues that arise with schools where students must test or opt-in. Additionally, this is a comparative study that looks at a highly successful low-income high school and a more typical low-income high school matched on size and demographic features.

Finally, this study focuses on the school as an organization. While outcomes are measured in student metrics of graduation and college attendance, students are not the central subjects of this study. Rather, it examines the operation of two schools through their teachers, administrators, structures and cultures. Findings focus on how organizational features shape teachers’ abilities to effectively educate students. Because of this, results will be reported starting with the organization as a whole—examining how structure and culture impact administrator-teacher relationships, teachers’ relationships with each other, and teachers’ relationships with students.

Schools in this Study

For this project, observations focused on two schools: Grantsville High which represented a “model school” serving a population of students that were more than half low-income and producing high graduation and college attendance rates and Deensboro High, a more average high school serving a similar population of students in terms of school size, racial demographics, and low-income population.

To select the model school, data on income composition, racial demographics, size, graduation/drop-out rates, and college attendance rates was examined for all public, non-charter, and non-magnet schools state-wide serving populations of >35% low-income students. The population was restricted to neighborhood public schools in an attempt to decrease issues of selection bias.

The model school, Grantsville High, had a population of students over half low-income (based on free- and reduced-lunch rates), and a graduation rate of 90% for low-income students, a drop-out rate of 3% for low-income students, and a college attendance rate of 92% for all students (including community colleges and four year universities).

1 School names have been changed to protect confidentiality.
The comparison school, Deensboro High was selected as a closest-fit match to Grantsville based on school size, racial demographics, and low-income population (again based on free- and reduced-lunch rates). For a comparison of the two schools, see tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1: School composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Span</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>% Free Meals</th>
<th>Largest Ethnic Group</th>
<th>% Minority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grantsville High</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>2350</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deensboro High</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>1820</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Rates of drop-out, graduation, and college attendance (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Graduation</th>
<th>Overall Dropouts</th>
<th>Poor Grad Rate</th>
<th>Poor Dropout Rate</th>
<th>College Attendance 2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grantsville High</td>
<td>90.7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deensboro High</td>
<td>67.6</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Racial composition (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Filipino</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grantsville High</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deensboro High</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On some of the basic metrics, Grantsville and Deensboro were average American high schools. Their per pupil spending was $9,680 and $11,123 respectively compared to the national average of $11,670. Their teachers averaged 16 and 12 years experience to the national average of 14. Their student to teacher ratios were 19.3 and 21.5 to the national average of 26.8 for secondary schools.

The largest difference between the schools and the national averages was their sizes. While the average high school is 854 students, Grantsville and Deensboro were 2350 and 1820 respectively—both more than two times the national average. They also had higher free and reduced lunch percentages because this study focused specifically on schools with significant low-income student populations.
Both schools were central urban high schools in cities large enough to have multiple sizeable (1500+ students) secondary schools in the district. Both schools also had similar average class sizes (approximately 30). They both augmented their standard college track curriculum with programs designed to retain low-income students and prepare them for post-secondary education. Both had central administrations who emphasized graduation requirements as well as requirements for university eligibility, pushing students to pass all classes starting freshman year and reminding students of the consequences of not doing so.

Though Deensboro was the best fit match in the state to Grantsville in terms of size, income of residents and racial composition, the schools were not racially identical. While both are Asian dominant, Deensboro has a higher percentage composition of African-American and Latino students than Grantsville. This is notable because the achievement gap has significant ethno-racial dimensions in addition to income. This difference likely made closing the achievement gap at Deensboro more difficult than at Grantsville. Though the racial composition of the schools overall was not identical, there were classes at Grantsville like Algebra I, AVID, and Pathways Programs that had higher ratios of African-American and Latino students than the general population of the school. These areas were examined closely as they had important ties to college eligibility and attendance.

While there were differences, both schools grappled with many of the same issues and questions that plague low-income schools throughout the country: How do we increase passage rates in Algebra I? How do we best serve our most struggling students? How do we retain as many students as possible and get them to graduate on time? How do we effectively manage our time and resources to teach students this year and plan for future curricular changes from the state and district?

In this way, both schools had many structurally similar challenges and financial resources with which to address these challenges. They also both existed in similar contexts of urban poverty with similarly stated goals for student success. However, the schools mobilized their resources in very different ways. This study will examine how each school operated and how their practices facilitated or blocked success in student achievement.

As with any research involving human subjects, particularly in schools that serve minor students, research was approved by the University of California, Berkeley’s Institutional Review Board, the district research offices and the principal for each school site prior to commencing. Teachers were informed of the research purpose, methodology, and confidentiality protections and signed consent forms before observations took place and data was recorded. All classes and teachers observed throughout the two years, including those not of primary focus, were informed of my research project and purpose in the school prior to observations. While students were present during my observations, my primary focus was on the actions of school personnel.

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2 In selecting schools, I examined population data on public schools throughout the state and Deensboro was the closest match ethnically of schools of similar size and income levels of students. Though imperfect, efforts were made to match the student populations as closely as possible.
Confidentiality of individuals in the study as well as of the school locations was promised as part of the terms of participating in this research project. Confidentiality protocols were maintained as agreed to with University of California, Berkeley’s Institutional Review Board.

**Observation Schedule**

Observations took place at both schools over a period of two years during the academic years 2012-13 and 2013-14. They included full day observations of English and Math at each school and took place over classroom time, lunch time, key assemblies, teacher professional development, teacher collaboration meetings, department meetings, and leadership team meetings. Observations were also conducted of key college programs at each school.

Although English and Math teachers were followed intensively for this study, many more teachers and staff were observed throughout the two years including those running programs like AVID, working in the college office, participating in key programs like a small school initiative, and leading the school as part of the administration team. The goal was to gather a 360-degree view of the school from the perspectives of teachers, staff, and management as well as a window into as many aspects of school life as possible. Particular attention was given to programs designed to increase student retention and college attendance.

In the first year of this project I focused on shadowing English and Math teachers at each school during and after school hours in school-related activities. In general, I alternated weeks at the two schools and tried to observe each teacher on different days of the week throughout the year as some activities or classes convened only on certain days. I also spent multiple days a week with each teacher at some point during the year. In addition to a more regimented observation plan, I was flexible to be present at each school for important planned events, meetings or trainings. Changes in the schedule were made when it was important to be present at one site in particular.

In the second year I focused more time observing classes, events and special programs that facilitated college attendance for students. I spent time in AVID classes, Pathway classes, and the college center and its events. This occurred a bit during the first year as some of the English and Math teachers I observed also taught Pathway or AVID courses but it was a primary focus in my second year of observation. In the second year, I also spent more time in leadership team meetings at each school to gain additional insight into the operations of the administration.

My intent was to observe as unobtrusively as possible to understand the operations of the school as they unfolded. I would frequently sit in the back of classrooms and meetings recording notes electronically on my phone. Notes were completed and fully transcribed at the end of each day. While no formal interviews occurred, I did find myself in frequent teacher-initiated conversations.

A unique aspect of observational research in schools is that teachers normally have very little adult interaction within their classroom. While teachers work with others, namely students, they may experience a great deal of professional isolation. Because of this, teachers were often eager to discuss how the class had gone in the prior period or what events had unfolded. I
participated in these conversations as a listener but allowed teachers to lead with their thoughts and agendas. These naturally occurring discussions became part of my data.

My identity as a young white woman was similar to that of many of the teachers and student teachers at the school. Although all participants understood that I was a graduate student researcher, they viewed me as the equivalent of a student teacher. This was a familiar insider-outsider role for individuals in a school and, aside from the teaching part of being a student-teachers, I exhibited similar actions by observing in classrooms and shadowing teachers in meetings. This naturalized my presence in the school and made it less obtrusive. It also meant that my presence as a non-participating observer, even in smaller teacher meetings, fit into a familiar paradigm.

The data presented in this study represents patterns of action and events that occurred throughout the two years. While I may provide only one or two examples to support my claims, each of these examples represents patterned occurrences in similar settings or situations. Notes were loaded into Atlas.ti, a computer assisted qualitative analysis program, and coded for patterns in categories relevant to my research questions. Therefore, behind each illustrative example that appears in the text exists a series of similar observations supporting the same conclusions.

No formal interviews occurred as part of the research. Quotes that appeared are predominantly those that I observed in natural conversations or interactions between research subjects. Occasionally I include quotes from conversations teachers or administrators initiated with me during breaks and lulls in their schedule. I note the context of these quotes when they appear. I viewed my role as researcher to be an unobtrusive observer of events as they naturally unfolded and endeavored to act in-line with that goal while in the field.

**Plan for the Text**

The remainder of this study will examine each level of the school organization to determine how operations and culture facilitate or block a school’s ability to produce successful student outcomes. Chapter Two will focus on how each school navigated the structures in place from the state, district and administration and how these impacted teachers’ ability to perform key functions. I will discuss curriculum, programs, resources, operational practices, schedules sand course offerings. I will also look at how teachers and students operate within and around these structures to achieve their goals.

Chapter Three examines how relations between administrators and teachers impact a school’s ability to effectively set goals, address challenges, and implement initiatives. Here, data will illuminate how leadership characteristics and practices shaped the schools on all levels.

Chapters Four and Five will explore how school culture impacts the behavior of teachers and students. In Chapter Four, I delineate the foundational components of each school’s culture.

Chapter Five will illustrate how these cultures played out in staff interactions with each other and classroom interactions with students. I will look at the behaviors each culture shaped. I
will also explicate what happened to teachers and students who deviated from the dominant
culture and how the institutions responded.

Finally, Chapter Six will present a synthesis and conclusion about how schools’ cultures
and practices impact the academic outcomes of low-income students. It will also discuss the
policy implications for these findings. In the pages that follow, this study will peel through the
layers of a school that graduated and sent to college a large number of low-income students to
expose how the school’s operations facilitated these outcomes and how other schools might
struggle to achieve the same ends.
Chapter Two: Structure

Schools have numerous structures that measurably impact student outcomes. Research shows that budgets and spending cuts reduce test scores and graduation rates. (Jackson, Wigger, & Xiong, 2018) Class size is less related to educational achievement than originally thought. (C. M. Hoxby, 2000) Tracking in schools is a means of maintaining inequality in educational outcomes that is a durable part of the institutional structure of schooling. (Lucas, 1999, 2001; Van, xa, & Houtte, 2004)

Literature on practice shows that programs that increase teacher-student relationships and accountability increase graduation rates. Programs and course offerings can also represent the content of tracking and how well a school prepares students for college. (J. Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992; J. Oakes & Saunders, 2007) While we know a lot about the aggregate impact of structures on student achievement, less is known about how structures shape the daily lives of teachers and students and how teachers work within or adapt these structures. This chapter provides a mechanistic view of how structures operate within a low-income school and impact student achievement.

Many schools operate with similar goals but different resources to overcome obstacles. Low-income schools frequently have the additional challenge of a student body that is years behind academically. These schools must work harder to implement their curriculum and get students to the finish line of graduation and college attendance. How they adapt or mal-adapt to the structures in place can have a major impact in their ability to achieve these goals.

Operating as an Institution

Every school has operational practices for how they set goals, troubleshoot challenges, make changes in curriculum and programs, and enforce implementation in classrooms. This way of operating shapes how things get done (or not done) in the institution. It also has consequences for teachers’ willingness and ability to administer the central functions of the school.

In the literature on schools as organizations, two contrasting models emerge. In one, the school is a unified system where all parts collaborate, share goals and are informed of each other’s actions. This form is known as integrated bureaucratic. Well-integrated systems are marked by high levels of unity, coordination, and consensus. Organizational goals are understood and enacted by all members of the organization. Each department has a clearly defined path toward goal fulfillment and the pieces work together effectively for the organization. Communication and collaboration happens frequently, if not daily, in integrated schools and teachers are knowledgeable about practices in the larger organization outside of their classroom. (Firestone & Herriott, 1982; Herriott & Firestone, 1984; Thompson, 2003; Weber, Gerth, & Mills, 1958) In this model, it is the organization, not the individual, who fails or succeeds so collective efforts are more highly valued by all actors.

Organizations may also be characterized by how information flows. In organizations, information flows can be unidirectional, i.e. top-down or bi-directional where ideas and feedback trickle up to the top and organizational leaders adjust course based on this information. (Glauser,
In the integrated bureaucratic structure, information flows from the bottom to top and top to bottom. The organization is flexible to trying new ideas and taking suggestions from anywhere including teachers. Departments lead initiatives rather than centralizing these under-takings in the upper administration. Goals are understood and shared—they have often been generated by departments and not solely top-down. Departments also play a crucial role in determining the resources most necessary to achieve these goals.

Grantsville reflected many of the features that define an integrated organization. At Grantsville, goals and year-long plans were developed at the department level, approved by administrators, and shared across departments so joint synergies and critical collaborations could be developed. There was a mix of department generated initiatives like a project geared to improve instruction and externally set priorities like transitioning to the core curriculum. Teachers were more willing to undertake top-down priorities because their voices were valued in the process of goal setting and they were treated as effective implementers who needed support and resources from the administration rather than strict guidelines. In this way, the teachers were leaders in the school and took on both the power and responsibility that comes along with that role.

At Grantsville, teachers collaborated over everything from classroom plans to major initiatives. Informal collaboration happened in classrooms and teachers’ lounges. At department meetings, teachers debated challenges and planned solutions that were taken to the administration for approval. Teachers themselves started programs to address issues that arose. In fact, many of the programs were internally generated by faculty rather than brought in by the administration. At leadership team meetings, department heads participated in creating school-wide policy. Perhaps most notably, departments coordinated efforts and sacrificed resources for the good of other classrooms and departments.

Because of this operational practice, teachers at Grantsville were more participatory and acted in ways that aligned with goals. There was a shared goal of graduation and college for students. College discussions were woven into every classroom. Teachers also worked closely with the college center and consistently followed up on students about fee waivers, college tours, and SAT registration.

At contrast is Weick’s conceptual model of a school as a set of loosely coupled systems clumped together within the same building but operating largely autonomously from each other. Systems within the school are weakly linked and share few variables in common. While part of the same institution, these systems have little direct influence over each other often resulting in a lack of coordination, unity, or shared goals. In the context of a school, the systems of administration comprised of principals, vice principals, and superintendents may be loosely coupled to the daily systems of teachers, students, and classrooms. In this model, the classroom is the teachers’ fiefdom and administrators have little power to influence or create change. Additionally, teachers may be loosely coupled from each other, existing primarily in their classrooms with few opportunities for collaboration or coordination and great ambiguity around shared goals. (Weick, 1976)

This organizational form has several notable features: an absence of clear goals; challenges in creating effective interdependence between teachers and between teachers and
administrators; an environment of isolation for teachers; a relative absence of collective decision making and parallel follow-through; and a vacuum of knowledge about school practices outside of each individual’s classroom. Additionally, attempts at collaboration may result in conflict as actors see their interests and domains as individualized and not collective. (Firestone & Herriott, 1982; Herriott & Firestone, 1984; V. E. R. F. D. Lee, & Julia B. Smith, 1991; Weick, 1976) In a loosely coupled school, teachers have little influence outside of their classrooms. Collaboration then becomes unimportant because success and failure occur on the individual, not collective, level.

From teacher collaboration to course curriculum decisions to leadership team meetings, Deensboro exemplified the characteristics and outcomes of a loosely coupled system. This had powerful impacts on teachers’ feelings of efficacy and ownership of school goals.

At Deensboro High, goals were frequently superimposed from above, creating a tense relationship between administrators and departments. Teachers were rarely consulted in the creation of school-wide goals and operations—from achievement markers to course offerings. They were employees of the school but were given little access to creating the organization’s vision, rather they were there to fulfill more circumscribed roles. Major decisions were so centralized that when the principal was let go a month before the end of the school year, senior staff scrambled to understand the master schedule he had been constructing for the next year. This occurred because no one but the principal was designing the master schedule and determining course offerings.

There was a disconnect between the goals of the principal and those of the teachers. Often the principal would announce achievement benchmarks but teachers did not believe these were achievable. Even mandatory texts in English class or school curricular instructions were sometimes ignored. There was little direct communication between administrators and teachers except through department heads. The principal was not a visible presence in the school. The vice principals interacted with teachers frequently, but they were disciplinary, not academic, leaders whom teachers contacted when they needed help managing class disruptions.

In contrast to Grantsville, teachers at Deensboro spent most of their time in their own classrooms unless there was a mandatory meeting. They ate lunch and worked through their prep periods in class, not in a teacher’s lounge. Teachers each ran their classroom independently of the larger institution and with little direct oversight. Even mandatory collaboration rarely created unified practices.

Characteristics of loose coupling predominate many secondary schools for a number of reasons including the degree of diversity in curriculum, subject specialization for teachers, and the focus on departments as hubs of decision-making and goal setting to the extent that any decisions are made that impact multiple classrooms—i.e. departments have little to no cross-collaboration or even awareness of each other’s goals and practices. In contrast, elementary schools more often resemble integrated bureaucratic organizations because they tend to have smaller staff, a more unified curriculum, greater over-lap in subject area, and stronger connections between content from grade-to-grade. In this sense, high schools by their very nature are more prone to be loosely coupled while elementary schools can more easily achieve high levels of integration. (Firestone & Herriott, 1982; Herriott & Firestone, 1984)
Research shows that schools that intend to enact change and achieve consistent practice are more effective when they have unified goals and consensus around these goals—traits that one would expect to find in a more integrated organization. (V. E. R. F. D. Lee, & Julia B. Smith, 1991)

**State and District Curriculums**

Curriculum is comprised of decisions made on multiple levels outside of the classroom including state requirements, required readings/texts from the school and teaching methodologies dictated by the school or department. Curriculum structures hold teachers accountable to minimum learning standards and provide a blueprint for what teachers must accomplish each year. They also create consistency across classrooms ensuring that students in the same grade receive the same education and are similarly prepared for the next year’s material. State requirements ensure that a high school diploma signifies the same set of knowledge and skills across the state.

Curriculums form the academic structure of a school and provide externally imposed goal posts. The task of teaching becomes taking students from their starting academic levels past these goal posts within the constraints of time, skill, and funding. In this way, they represent one of the most powerful structures shaping a school as well as the origins of many of the challenges that educators navigate.

In low-income schools, teachers struggle with curriculums that emphasize grade level standards but leave little time for re-teaching the basics on which these standards are built. This is because low-income high schools have populations of students who are years behind in knowledge and skills. (Reardon, 2011) State and district curriculums do not account for these gaps leaving teachers struggling to fit review and grade level content or else failing a large number of students.

Each year, teachers in low-income schools must move their students farther academically than those in middle-class schools. This holds, despite the fact that low-income schools have similar length school days and required classes. Navigating this structural dilemma is a cornerstone of teaching low-income students—how to teach more in the same amount of time. Unsurprisingly, these schools have higher rates of drop-outs, held back students, and students who do not graduate on time. Teachers must successfully operate within the same structure as middle-class teachers despite needing to cover twice the material with students who have experienced histories of failure and have less outside academic support from their families.

Given the mandate of state and district curriculums, schools have four strategies to combat this dilemma: extend the traditional school day, add academic support outside of school, improve teachers’ capabilities or accept lower-passing and graduation rates. Extending the official school day is constrained by funding and state laws. Schools that add academic support outside of school do so only with the cooperation of teachers. This cooperation can be incentivized if the school can acquire additional grant funding. At both Deensboro and Grantsville, extra teacher time and support was acquired through volunteer or paid initiatives.
At Deensboro, grant money was acquired from a private foundation for a program that increased teacher collaboration time in order to improve their effectiveness in the classroom. During observations, this program was in its fifth and final year leaving administrators concerned about what would happen the following year without the money. The vice principal in charge of Freshman emphasized repeatedly the need to document all aspects of the program because of his hope to apply for funding extension.

Relying on outside funding is a challenge for any school because it is not guaranteed or consistent and programs live and die based on its availability. This is a part of the funding structure on which many schools without wealthy families or PTAs rely.

Grantsville too supported parts of their budget with annual grants that were not guaranteed year-to-year. At Grantsville, the principal acquired a pot of grant funding for teacher development and took applications from individual teachers and departments about projects that would improve instruction. The math department received a portion to undertake a department-wide initiative to improve instruction through observation, evaluation and support between teachers at the school. Teachers undertook this initiative because they felt stagnant in their teaching without more feedback. Other teachers received funding to attend workshops or dedicate extra hours to joint lesson planning. By design, projects had to be short-term because funding was limited to one year and not guaranteed for future years.

The grant money also had the limitation that it was earmarked for specific kinds of teacher development projects. When department heads met with administrators to discuss their needs in terms of infrastructure and supplies, funding was inadequate to cover even half of the requests. The school held car washes and other fundraisers for some of these expenses with students, teachers, and even administrators attending. Raising adequate funding from grants and outside sources was an aspect of administrators’ roles whereas at wealthier schools these costs would be funded by a higher property tax base and wealthier families who raise funds through the PTA.

Schools also struggle when large curriculum shifts are handed down from the state which require additional time and resources to implement. During my observations, both schools were in the process of preparing for a shift to core curriculum standards which emphasized different teaching methodologies, knowledge and performance assessments. This was a large change in standards that required every department to learn how the new system compared to the old and what changes in teaching must be made for each grade level to prepare students to pass the new exit exams. Because of the high stakes for testing scores, there was a lot of pressure to successfully make transition within a year.

Understanding the new standards and adapting curriculums for every course was a major undertaking. In Grantsville, the project was led by teachers in the English department who translated the new core standards into year-long instructional objectives and mapped existing lessons onto this new format. The Department then used their insights from under-going this process to guide other departments.

The new standards required teaching to be more interdisciplinary so science and math departments planned to prepare for the shift conjointly, hoping to create projects and problems
that cross-cut the subjects. Despite these intentions, teachers from both departments struggled to make ample time to collaborate on the curriculum re-design while also teaching and performing other responsibilities. To accommodate, administrators changed any flexible responsibilities so departments would have more joint planning time.

At Deensboro, no schoolwide transition plan was created leaving individual teachers and departments to plan this major curriculum overhaul without administrator coordination or oversight.

Another feature of the curriculums at both schools were required texts. Deensboro teachers struggled with these requirements because there was an inadequate number of books and limited access to the library due to resource constraints. Rather than having the ability to build a departmental sequence of readings and assignments, English teachers were forced to stagger when they read each book. Even so, many times teachers would have just enough books for one class. Teachers coped with this resource constraint by requiring all reading be done in class since there were not enough books for students to take home. As a result, reading occupied the bulk of class time whereas in other schools, like Grantsville, reading was generally completed as homework and class time used for discussion and extension. Deensboro’s English classes had limited time to do any in class learning aside from silent reading.

Some classes would attempt to speed up the reading process by having students follow-along to books on tape during class time. While this was an aide to students whose reading skills were below grade level, it did not improve students’ reading skills which would be assessed on state exams. In this case, the combination of requirements and resource constraints stunted the speed with which classes could move and limited their ability to provide all the skills necessary for state exams.

School-Wide Policies and Practices

The periods of the day and time allocated to each subject shapes the school day for teachers and students. Many schools have fixed schedules defining what subjects students focus on at any period and requiring a certain set of classes be satisfactorily completed before students may graduate. This structures the daily lives of teachers and students.

Students often spend equal time in each subject regardless of whether it is a subject in which they struggle or excel. Schedules are fixed at the beginning of the year and do not change in response to student needs. Even when schedules are created taking into account students’ needs, they can still be rigid in ways that are challenging.

At Deensboro, Freshman English teachers struggled with schedules and curriculum requirements that were not well designed for students’ needs and abilities. For Freshman, writing was provided as a second English period in response to students’ low scores on state writing exams in past years. The curriculum for this new writing class was handed to teachers at the start of the year.

The writing course was structured around four large units each resulting in a final paper. For students with little experience writing, units were not well-tailored to their needs and
abilities. Teachers struggled because students could not write for a whole period at the beginning of the year; units were too drawn out and lacked smaller scaffolding assignments for a body of students who would benefit from more frequent and smaller projects to build their skills; there was a multi-page paper length for unit which was impossible for students’ for whom a five paragraph essay was a challenge; and units sometimes required research skills that were as unfamiliar to students as the writing itself.

Teachers found individual solutions to mold units: using only a half or quarter period of the block for writing because fifteen minutes was a challenge for students at the start of the year; providing smaller assignments throughout the unit like having students write short op-eds to prepare for a lengthier position paper; incorporating free writing or writing on topics disconnected from the larger unit but more appealing to students; or limiting student topics for the research paper so research could be a class-wide rather than individual endeavor.

The structure of the curriculum was not informed by teachers’ experiences or well designed to meet students’ abilities and learning needs. Teachers individually coped with organizational constraints but the situation exemplified the year-long struggles teachers had when structures did not work for students’ abilities.

The chasm between student skills and district expectations was brought into focus when Juniors were given an analytic assessment asking them to read multiple articles and write an essay on whether or not graffiti loses authenticity in commercial use or in a museum. Even in the Honors English classes, students did not understand the question or readings. Despite the testing environment, teachers defined terms like authenticity and counter culture so students would be able to begin the assignment. Students did not know how to pull out evidence from the articles—they did not understand what they were being asked to do. Their skills were too low to successfully complete the essay.

The situation emphasized the misalignment that can occur in curriculum, teaching ability, and student skills. Although mandatory structures emerge from outside the classroom, they are not always implemented successfully. In this way, curriculums can bolster but also challenge effective teaching for low-income students.

**Programs and Course Offerings**

In addition to their standard curriculum and requirements, schools have a variety of academically oriented programs whose core functions are motivating students to do well in school, supporting students in their academics, and building meaningful relationships with staff that assist in these aims. Both schools had a range of such programs including: AVID, small schools, Upward Bound, and Pathway Academies.

These programs targeted low-income student populations with the goal of increasing graduation and college attendance rates. Small schools was a program at Deensboro that broke the Freshman class into four “small schools” so that each group of students would share the same math, English and science teachers in an attempt to mimic the benefits of extra attention that arise from actual small schools. AVID and Upward Bound were both targeted to low-income first generation college students and specifically focused on college prep. While AVID was an
in-school program at both schools, Upward Bound was administered out of school but required recommendations from teachers.

Both schools had Pathway Academy programs which augmented traditional academics with either vocational or special-interest areas in subjects like: Public Health, Environmental Sciences, Visual Arts, Hospitality and Tourism, and Automotive Technology. From one school’s website:

The academy system in the school is basically a school within a school. In an academy, students attend several classes together, forming a tight sense of community with one another. When a student attends an academy program, they are not only getting their normal school credit requirements out of the way, they are also getting an in-depth look into a specific profession or industry.

With the exception of small schools, all programs were designed to be elective and application based. They began Sophomore year and students stayed with the same teacher and group of students for the remainder of high school. For the schools, the goal of community building was as important as the academic piece of the academy.

A main function of programs at both schools was to provide a smaller community to students and give them steady relationships with a set of teachers. Students in these programs would frequently spend lunches with the teachers who ran them. They had events internal to the school or in the community which required students to engage with the school outside of school hours.

Students in these programs tended to have stronger relationships with specific faculty. These relationships kept them engaged in school and working in all their classes because someone they respected regularly checked in with them about their academic performance in all classes. GPA was a requirement for participation in programs like AVID and helping students work through the material with which they were struggling in school was a substantial part of the experience. All of these programs were part of an effort to increase retention, graduation, and in some cases, college attendance.

While students were not assigned to rigid tracks, students varied in their course enrollment in ways that were meaningful academically. Pathways themselves varied from academic to vocational separating students into college and trade orientations. However, all students had to meet academic graduation requirements.

Grantsville and Deensboro also differed in their AP course offerings and test scores. Grantsville had fourteen AP courses and enrolled 25% of their population in at least one of these courses in a given year. In contrast, Deensboro had nine AP courses and enrolled only 10% of their students. Grantsville’s test scores were also higher with 62% of AP test takers receiving a three or higher while Deensboro’s rate was 17%. This score cut-off is significant because colleges generally give credit for classes in which students score a three or higher. In this way, students are constrained academically by the offerings of their institution and the institution’s ability to successfully implement challenging courses.
**Structure and Social Capital**

In addition to formal programs schools may have “resource centers” that hold a broad scope of ways in which they engage with students and support them as part of their structure. For example, Grantsville’s college center took only juniors and seniors on their caseloads but had open doors for students from freshman year on. Students then did not narrowly frame it as a college center but as a resource center where, if they needed to print something last minute, the staff almost always said yes. By the time students reached college age, the college center was already a resource center they regularly utilized.

Resource centers are not just officially designated spots. They also include teachers’ classrooms where students eat lunch, borrow a ping pong table or buy snacks at reduced rates. They are comprised of anywhere informal but regular contact occurs and students see the relationship or space as a source of tangible help for immediate needs. They can even occur outside of regular school hours as teachers serve as coaches or take students on extra-curricular outings.

These relationships are important both for the immediate assistance and emotional support they provide but also because they are rich in the capital most useful in navigating high school success and transitioning to college. For students whose parents, relatives, and neighbors may have never attended college or, in some cases, completed high school, these resource centers represent unique pools of knowledge that do not otherwise exist in their lives. Because of the dual roles of teachers as formal school figures and informal adults with whom students regularly interact, institutional agents of the school become part of students’ intimate networks.

Building strong relationships with institutional agents was a strategy at Grantsville to prevent student dropout and increase college attendance and the structure of the school worked to facilitate this in formal and informal ways. Low-income or minority students are more likely to lack the resources in their families and communities to effectively navigate the academic setting. For these students, strong relationships with institutional agents filled in gaps in information and academic support that middle class white children receive from their families who have completed high school and attended college. (Arnold et al., 2012; Lareau, 2003) For many low-income students, daily struggles with academics, money, access to computer resources, and even inadequate nutrition trump more long-term planning for their academic future. (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2008; Warren, Thompson, & Saegert, 2001)

While quantitative studies have focused on the utility of social capital, fewer studies have focused on the process of creation and disbursement of capital in a school setting. This leaves a sizeable hole in our understanding of low-income schools and the structural aspects that explain how capital is created and distributed to students in a way that keeps them in school and connects them to college. This process has been studied and theorized in other contexts like opt-in after school programs and childcare centers but not translated to low-income high schools. While many of the features transfer to high schools, other unique challenges and distinct patterns of behavior emerge in this setting.

Studies have shown that while the poor have strong community ties, they also have fewer social assets and have to overcome greater obstacles than the more affluent. Warren et. al.
provides the example of the PTA at an affluent school using their resources to debate pedagogy while at a poor school they must use their resources to get a ceiling repaired. (Warren et al., 2001) More than the affluent, the poor rely on relationships, for subsistence. (Boisjoly, Duncan, & Hofferth, 1995; Stack, 1974)

Those in poverty are more likely to have ties that will provide informal support but they are less likely to have ties to formal resources that require information to access. In the case of a natural disaster, Hurlbert et. al. found that those who received formal support often had more heterogeneous networks, broader networks (with weaker ties) and networks with more educated individuals. In fact, the poor with strong informal support networks were less likely to access formal government support. In order to access formal support, individuals needed networks that could provide information about available resources. This information was not prevalent in the networks of the poor. (Hurlbert, Beggs, & Haines, 2001)

Translating this to the study of social capital in schools would imply that schools with larger low-income populations need to be more strategic about dispensing social capital than schools with mostly middle-class white students who are trained from home to identify and access important resources. Additionally, social capital in schools is more important for and makes more of a difference in the lives of low-income children because their families and communities are not saturated with academic social capital in contrast to the families and communities in which middle class children are embedded.

For low-income children, effectively connecting to institutional agents who provide knowledge and support makes a larger impact on their likelihood of graduating high school and attending college than it does for more advantaged students. (Muller, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2011) Because of this, low-income schools which are largely under-resourced must have more internal capital and information channels while also being more purposeful about recruiting students into accessing the resources. For at-risk students, the school organization has to create and distribute social capital to clients who lack purposeful strategies to identify important resources and seek them out.

The key challenge for low-income students is the need for heterophilious and not just homophilious relationships. People connect most often and most easily to those that are similar to themselves even though these individuals tend to have similar resources at their disposal. (Laumann, 1966; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001) Heterophilious connections require more effort because of differences in resources as well as in sentiment. (Lin, 2001) Schools put in proximity heterophileous individuals (teachers and students), but more is needed than proximity to build useful connections. Reciprocal relations come from interaction, sentiment, and joint activity. (Homans, 1950)

For connections to be made, interactions between actors must be frequent, long lasting, meaningful, cooperative, and they need to be both internally and externally motivated. Additionally, the agents themselves need to have deep pools of knowledge and networks for relations with them to provide useful capital. (Small, 2009)

There is strong evidence that social capital is important for low-income high school students to be successful. Meaningful relationships with teachers enhance students’ attachment to
school, increase students’ engagement in academics, and decrease drop-out rates significantly. (Croninger, 2001; Fashola, 2009; V. E. Lee, and David T. Burkam, 2003)

In a school context, social capital performs many functions: providing essential knowledge, bridging or brokering connections to social networks in external institutions like universities, advocacy, emotional support, and regular advice and guidance. (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) The funds of knowledge provided by successful relationships between school personnel and students are diverse—appropriate language and communication styles in the academic setting; subject-area content; direction for navigating academic bureaucracies; knowledge of how to increase social networks and effectively interact with gatekeepers; practical academic skills like using a computer, time-management, or studying effectively; information on how to apply and meet requirements for job and educational opportunities; and the ability to effectively solve school-related problems. (Stanton-Salazar, 1997)

For low-income students, all of these functions are meaningful but especially important are learning how to speak impressively to academic gate keepers, self-advocate and network, overcome challenges to job or college acceptance, and how to solve the problems they face at school. (Bettinger, 2012; Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2012; C. Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013)

Effective production of social capital for low-income students relies on a number of factors: frequent opportunities for general exchange to establish trust and unconditional support and create mentorship relations; many “empowerment agents” i.e. staff who are committed to providing at-risk youth with key resources; an environment where college is the standard expectation; institutional agents with crucial networks and knowledge as well as acknowledgement of the reality that low-income students do not otherwise have resources for academic success; long-term relationships and repeated encounters with agents; individualization of relationships so they are tailored to the needs and predispositions of students which may not be uniform even in the same school; an ability and commitment of staff to innovate strategies for the strengths and weaknesses of specific students and families; and a school culture that is asset based and frames the issue of student retention not as a passive prevention of dropouts but a proactive effort to retain students and provide individualized pathways to college. (Fashola, 2009; V. E. Lee, and David T. Burkam, 2003; Montecel, 2004; Murray, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011; Teachman, 1996; Towns, 2001)

Even in ideal settings powerful social capital relationships take time to form. Students who change schools have less access to social capital than those who remain in one high school all four years as do students in large high schools where relations may be more anonymous than long-term and personal. (V. E. Lee, and David T. Burkam, 2003; Teachman, 1996) Even in opt-in after-school programs designed to develop students’ social capital, relationships form in stages beginning with suspicion and distrust from students, then facilitated contact, and finally meaningful connection. (Jarrett, 2005)

Reconceptualizing Social Capital with Low-Income Students

At Grantsville, the distribution of social capital was an active and purposive process on the part of the school, not a passive aspect of the social environment or a resource sought out by
the agents, i.e. students, who benefitted. In a low-income school it is often the holders of resources, teachers and staff, who are best able to identify what will be valuable for students. They must pursue students to convince them to utilize school-based resources. The students who benefit most from the capital have to be wooed into a relationship, often because it meets their immediate needs, before the institutional agents can effectively connect them with key resources and encourage them to utilize these resources. (In this context, resources can be tangible like SAT vouchers, key knowledge like how to write an effective essay, or skill based like how to advocate for themselves and speak to other institutional agents.

In this sense, it is the distributors of social capital that have to activate the relationship for the students’ benefit. Students may be reluctant at first to engage in obtaining key guidance or assistance therefore in order to distribute resources, institutional agents have to overcome suspicion, gain credibility, and exhibit that they are caring, trustworthy and useful even though they are not the ultimate benefactors of the relationship.

Because the creation of resource centers at Grantsville involved a school-wide cultural outlook encouraging all school personnel to forge relationships, students had multiple opportunities to identify adults with whom they connected and build a bond. This stood in contrast to a more traditional model in which counselors are assigned to students and serve as a primary source of information and support but have more limited relationships with each student because of large caseloads and because the particular assignment of student to counselor might not be a good fit. In a school where most teachers attempt to provide availability, assistance and guidance to students outside of formal classroom interactions, students just by sheer math have a broader base from which they can identify mentorship and support and more opportunities for ongoing, frequent, and individual connection.

Grantsville created diverse formal and informal situations for students to connect to faculty regularly over multiple years. These networks were personalized because students were able to choose between a number of different staff and build rapport with those with whom they most identified and connected.

Resource rich relationships did not originate from purposeful guidance and transmission of social capital but from informal social interactions and efforts to address students’ in-the-moment needs. This set the foundation of trust and caring that allowed teachers to later mentor, advise, and transmit knowledge that was key to students’ academic success.

Once established, these relationships performed a diverse set of social capital functions including many identified by Stanton-Salazar like bridging connections to external networks, advocacy, advice, modeling communication styles most appropriate to the academic setting, teaching students to be self-advocates, modeling problem solving skills in an academic environment and transmitting key life skills important for academic success. (Stanton-Salazar, 1997)

**Conclusion**

Structures impact the resources, opportunities and constraints within which teachers and students operate. While budget and teacher ratios are frequently explored as pivotal elements of
school success, the structures that define the daily lives of teachers and students are more diverse.

Districts and states structure schools by requiring specific curriculums, course offerings and programs. These are frequently immutable to teachers. While teachers have flexibility in their classroom, these requirements comprise the most firm requirements controlling their actions.

Schools are also shaped by lived structures that develop in daily practice. How schools gather information and make decisions fundamentally impacts how challenges are attacked. These operational practices also impact teachers’ cooperation, unity, and investment in goals. These practices are primary in a principal’s ability to move the school as an entire institution, a frequent goal for schools struggling to educate low-income students.

Finally, informal practices such as teacher generated programs, curriculum changes within the classroom and the development of resources centers become a piece of the school structure. These institutions may be generated informally, but once in existence, they may become enduring structures in the school.
Chapter Three: Leadership

Leadership is an important part of understanding school performance for a number of reasons. Behind classroom instruction, school leadership has been shown to quantitatively have the second largest impact on student outcomes. (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) This impact is even larger in schools with challenging populations of students like those in this study. (Leithwood et al., 2004) Additionally, school leaders are the decision makers and priority setters that guide school practice. While more participatory or autocratic styles allow for more or less input from other school actors, principals hold the ultimate responsibility for school performance and are likely to be replaced when a school under-performs. Because of this, even the most inclusive leaders must own major decisions on curriculum, administrative structure, staffing, and operational practice.

To fully understand leadership, it is not enough to look only at the factors that shape leaders but to have a 360-degree lens to understand how leaders shape school relations. Leadership matters because it impacts student outcomes by shaping teacher actions in terms of collaboration, problem solving, belief in goals, and classroom implementation of school-wide initiatives. The ultimate effect of leadership can be seen in how the school organization functions as a whole.

While school leaders perform innumerable tasks throughout the year, their most essential functions can be narrowed to setting a goal and course for the school’s future and convincing others to work toward that goal. Others have defined these roles as “providing direction” and “exerting influence” (Yukl, 2002); or “helping the organization set a defensible set of directions and influencing members to move in those directions.” (Portin et al., 2009) Leithwood breaks down three essential functions, “setting directions,” “developing people” and “redesigning the organization.” (Leithwood et al., 2002) While researchers have broken down school leadership to as many as 21 actions, these fit well into Leithwood’s three categories. (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003)

Leadership categories can be further unpacked to dissect what performance of each entails. Setting a vision involves selecting a goal that represents school success and also motivates and compels followers. It is optimal that goals are accepted by staff who share the leader’s vision. Therefore setting a goal has two essential parts: selecting the appropriate goals and investing the organization in working toward those goals. (Hallinger & Heck, 2003)

Developing people includes motivating individuals and ensuring that they have the skills necessary to achieve goals, providing additional training and support when necessary. Building capacity among staff is part of leading an organization toward challenging goals. Research has shown that leaders with strong emotional intelligence who build positive relationships with staff build motivations that increase performance. (McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002) This highlights the importance of a leader’s ability to form positive relationships with staff in addition to having good ideas for the organization and providing effective training opportunities.

Finally, redesigning the organization includes building school cultures, changing operational procedures and programmatic structures, and increasing collaboration throughout the
Leadership affects students’ everyday lives because it creates many of the structures through which they pass such as programs, course sequences, and some mandatory aspects of the curriculum. Additional structures and requirements are imposed from outside the school, but the ones leaders’ control are important. Leaders’ strengths at selecting goals and their ability to invest teachers in these ends has an impact on student achievement. (Leithwood et al., 2004; Portin et al., 2009) Decisions as to how the school will overcome challenges that arise must be approved by administrators if not generated by them as well. Finally, how tailored programs and initiatives are to student needs is an effect of the planning and decision-making process in which leaders engage. All of these aspects of leadership shape the experience of students in a school.

In the present study, Deensboro and Grantsville presented two contrasting visions of school leadership. Grantsville’s Principal Howard typified participatory/distributed leadership, making decisions with input from those below and building consensus. Deensboro’s principal Edwards and his administration took a top-down approach. The principal set goals and prescribed actions for school personnel with little feedback from below. He owned the vision for school success and saw articulating that vision and ensuring compliance as key.

Contrasts in background and the context of the schools and districts in which they were embedded shaped how both principals led their schools. From goal-setting to motivating staff to shaping the organization, each principal utilized strategies that reflected their beliefs about the teaching staff and the role they could play in improving school performance. This chapter will unpack the factors that shaped each leadership style to illuminate why two individuals with similar goals would utilize contrasting strategies.

**History and Context**

Leaders do not form priorities or select strategies in a vacuum but rather arrive at schools that exist at a period of time with specific histories of success or failure and specific external pressures and goals for success. A school’s past performance powerfully impacts a leader’s goals and expectations. In the age of accountability, districts and states track school performance metrics and assign growth goals for “under-performing” schools. Principals either meet these goals or risk losing state or federal funding or their jobs.

Schools exist in specific contexts within the community and district and are comprised of specific components in terms of staff and students. Principals must design leadership strategies that take these elements into account in order to lead the school they are given. While most schools have “good” “average” and “bad” teachers, the proportions may vary. Even with two similar student bodies, schools may still be working with drastically different human capital and economic resources. Teacher quality itself is hard to gauge as a school-wide metric. In this sense, leaders in my comparative schools shared and did not share pieces of their contexts. These disparate contexts impacted how leaders made decisions.

Although Principal Howard from Grantsville High and Principal Edwards from Deensboro High were both tasked with creating successful academic outcomes each year, their
school’s performance over the years prior to observation were quite different. Deensboro’s graduation rate had been consistently below state and county averages. Their dropout rates exceeded state and county averages. In contrast, Grantsville High’s graduation rate consistently exceeded state, county and district averages with drop-out rate lower than these metrics. (See Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4)

During the years of observation, Deensboro’s principal faced pressure from the district to lead the school to a level of performance that it had never achieved. In contrast, Grantsville faced less external pressure and scrutiny as it had a long-standing pattern of exceeding expectations in performance. These dynamics impact the leadership styles and strategies at each school.

“Successful” and “failing” schools, labels imposed by districts and states based on past and current student performance, face different narratives and beliefs about the quality of teachers in their schools and the ability of the schools to utilize internal resources and ideas to improve. Therefore, external labels of “successful” and “failing” shape the context of the school. Principals, informed by these narratives about the capacities of their school, select different leadership strategies.

According to our societal narrative, if a school is successful, it is because the administrators and teachers know what they are doing. Successful schools are able to try new ideas and innovate because principals believe their teachers have good ideas (as evidenced by their already existing success). Rather than struggling for the most basic academic outcomes, staff is able to strive for improvement on an already strong base. The teachers working at successful schools are good educators, as are their colleagues, and the administration knows this. The “few bad eggs” are also known and everyone acts to limit their influence. Finally, successful schools are able to guide themselves internally rather than having intense external pressure to create instant success and improvement. Administrators’ jobs are secure and the school has the luxury to take time to make changes.

Failing schools operate under a very different set of beliefs and pressures. If a school is failing to produce adequate academic outcomes, it must mean the leadership or teachers are incompetent. It is the administrators’ job to get “more” out of the teachers which creates a contentious relationship. Administrators are under intense pressure to create change in short timelines or else lose their jobs.

Failing schools have a stigma of having bad teachers whose ideas do not work or who are lazy or disinvested (as evidenced by the school’s failure), therefore administrators cannot rely on the teacher’s ideas and input for improvement. Instead external “successful” programs are brought in and teachers are trained to these programs. Administrators give little latitude for teachers to experiment or modify the programs in the hopes that if an “effective program” can be implemented without deviation then success will surely follow. Administrators may try to micro-manage all collaboration between teachers, believing this is the best way to guarantee its effectiveness.

These external pressures and internal beliefs about the capacities of the organization impact the strategies that leaders use to work toward school success. The leadership styles at Deensboro and Grantsville were responses to the context and history of each school. The schools
Figure 1: This graph displays the 4-year graduation cohort rate for Deensboro High School.

![Deensboro High Cohort Graduates](image1)

Figure 2: This graph shows the students in a 4-year cohort who left 9-12 instructional system without a diploma, GED or special education certification of completion and did not remain enrolled after the end of the 4th year.

![Deensboro High Cohort Dropouts](image2)
Figure 3: This graph displays the 4-year graduation cohort rate for Grantsville High School.

![Grantsville High Cohort Graduates](image)

Figure 4: This graph shows the students in a 4-year cohort who left 9-12 instructional system without a diploma, GED or special education certification of completion and did not remain enrolled after the end of the 4th year.

![Grantsville High Cohort Dropouts](image)
faced differing pressures to achieve success and differing viewpoints about the capacity of the organization’s internal resources. Leaders’ strategies impacted each school’s employee relations, operating patterns, and cultures.

The principals at Deensboro and Grantsville each had a distinct outlook on the capacities of their schools to achieve academic goals. These outlooks were shaped by the schools’ prior performances, the principal’s role in that history and his or her personal background and administrative experience.

During my observations at Deensboro, Principal Edwards had been recently promoted after the departure of a multi-year successor. He was hired as an interim principal with the hopes of getting the principal job long-term. In the two years prior, he was a vice principal at Deensboro focusing on “Administration of school-wide attendance, security, substitute teachers, student discipline and sophomore faculty and students.” Like the vice principals during my observations, the focus of Principal Edwards was disciplinary, not academic. At Deensboro, Vice Principals spent little time observing classrooms or bolstering academic training and improvement. Their primary classroom contacts occurred when they were called in by teachers to intercede in discipline problems. They also wrote grants and administered programs specific to the grade levels they oversaw.

There was intense pressure for Principal Edwards to improve school performance, particularly if he wanted the permanent position, as Deensboro was a Title I school with a federally mandated improvement plan. Principal Edwards began the year with ambitious goals for school performance and a low opinion of many of the teachers. In my first meeting with the principal, only a couple weeks after the start of the school year, he provided me a list of faculty and discussed my plans for observation. Despite my plan to observe teachers randomly selected from the list, he wanted to tell me about the faculty and steer me toward the teachers whom he believed to be the school’s best.

Of the English faculty, he identified only four out of twelve that he believed were worth observing. Of these four, one was a teacher who he personally hired and believed was excellent. However, during the course of my research she exhibited glaring weaknesses in her planning and classroom activities that impeded student learning. For one of her courses, AVID, an opt-in program designed to help first generation students prepare for college, she rarely created lesson plans in advance of the class period. Instead, her class frequently consisted of “study halls” in which students could work on anything they wanted as long as they were quiet. She believed the students would be unable to handle the tutorials process which were the key bi-weekly activity that represented one of the cornerstones of the AVID program. Her Freshman and Junior honors classes relied heavily on activities like silent reading, coloring, and completing vocabulary worksheets. Despite student requests for class discussions of the reading, they were rare. This teacher was in no way representative of the quality of the English teachers I observed at Deensboro, but it was notable that Principal Edwards had such strong, and at times incorrect, evaluations of the faculty before observing their classrooms. This happened in several other cases where, for example, the math teacher he admired had a more charismatic personality than others in the department, but her teaching was directly from the textbook and her academic outcomes were no better than others teaching the same course.
Administrators at Deensboro expressed a strong preference for personnel and programs transplanted from the outside over the skills of the current school faculty or the program ideas they might generate. Administrators often overlooked the assets at the school and failed to work with teachers to adapt outside programs to existing contexts so that they best served the student population. While in some cases, the veteran teachers hired from the outside were stronger than existing staff, the teacher quality observed during this study was highly variable. Not all existing instructors at Deensboro were weak nor were newly hired staff universally more skilled, dedicated or effective.

Principal Edwards was even more critical of the math faculty than English. Of them he could not identify any as “excellent” and only one he considered worth observing. Both his mindset on faculty quality and his decision to judge quality prior to any classroom observation set the stage for the leadership strategies Mr. Edwards pursued. These strategies reflected a desire to manage with strong hierarchical leadership and seek little input from faculty. They also foreshadowed a tense relationship between the math faculty and Principal Edwards.

Principal Howard’s context and experience were different from Principal Edwards. She was a veteran principal who had been at Grantsville for five years. On the walls of her office were school leadership awards and certifications from elite national leadership programs. She had a history of success—outperforming state, county, and district averages while serving a substantial low-income population. She was trusted as a leader in the district and her position was secure. Rather than worrying about getting re-hired, she was held as a model for other principals in the school system.

Like Principal Edwards, she began the school year with a list of weaknesses that the school would be targeting. However, she had a more nuanced view of the assets and deficits at the institution because of her experience at the school and long relationships with teachers. Principal Howard viewed the teachers and departments as combinations of strengths and weaknesses. She pointed out departments like History that were her strongest and identified teachers she felt underperformed. She also identified initiatives to improve instruction and passing rates. Despite Grantsville’s positive recognition, Principal Howard was neither glowingly positive nor overwhelmingly negative. Her focus was of assessment and improvement. In describing her school, she said, “I wouldn’t say this is a model school. We have some great departments and some that are not as strong. We’re always looking for ways to improve and do better with students but there’s still a lot we’re working on.”

In contrast to Principal Edwards, Principal Howard’s framed critiques of her school as a list of improvement projects for the year. “This year we’re trying something new in the math department, putting all the Freshman into Geometry before they go into Algebra. This way we’re not separating the stronger and weaker students at the start of high school. Math is also doing a project to improve instruction. In English we’re working more with some of the weaker teachers and getting the department to increase collaboration. Every department has some teachers that need to improve and some that we’re ready to see retire.”

Simultaneously, she credited past successes and new initiatives largely to the commitments of her teachers, many of whom she saw as motivated and self-improving. She pointed to specific ideas that emerged from teachers and were being implemented that year. Her
trust of her staff, as well as a prior year to plan, allowed her to approach the start of the year with the knowledge of what worked and did not work at the school and with plans to address key issues.

In this way, the start of the year for both principals was informed by their personal experiences, experiences in the institution, and external pressures that affected how they would be evaluated by the district and the likelihood that they would keep their jobs as principals the following year. Despite Principal Howard’s assessment, Grantsville was viewed as a model in the district and faced little outside scrutiny allowing her a wider leeway in planning for the year. In contrast, Principal Edwards began the year with a single-minded pressure to improve the school academically if he wanted to retain the principal position. These contexts informed their approach to the year and the goals they set.

**Leadership Strategies for Setting Organizational Goals**

One of the first tasks for Principals Edwards and Howard was setting year-long goals and conveying them to teachers. School principals set goals in a number of ways. Some create a vision for organizational achievement through participative leadership—including teachers and department heads in defining goals and priorities for the year. Others engage in a more hierarchical approach, setting goals with fellow administrators and communicating the year’s targets to teachers. Goals are also defined externally, and principals must include mandated benchmarks in their plans for the year. The administration at each school set goals with a process that reflected their context and beliefs about the capabilities of the teaching staff.

Goal setting practices are determined by leaders but may also reflect “how things have been done” in the past. Under the prior administration in which Principal Edwards participated, a hierarchical leadership style had been established for many years. At Deensboro High, goals were frequently superimposed from above. Teachers were rarely consulted in the creation of school-wide goals and operations—from achievement markers to course offerings. They were employees of the school but were given little access to creating the organization’s vision, rather they were there to fulfill narrower circumscribed roles.

Principal Edwards set achievement goals for the year, informed by the federally imposed improvement plan, and handed them down to the teachers. Initiatives and programs were similarly selected by the vice principals and given to the teachers to implement along with instructions on how to do so. There was a hard line between the decision-making of administrators and the domains occupied by teachers. The principal set goals and met with each department head to inform them of the year’s targets and priorities. Information flows were unidirectional with commands handed down from the administration but little feedback sought from the teachers. The year’s goals included increased passing rates and test scores in all departments. Some were double the passing rate of the prior year.

Within the first month of the school year, a tense relationship existed between central administrators and department heads/teachers. This could be observed throughout the institution reflected in sentiments expressed by individual teachers and during collaboration time and departmental meetings. In one collaboration meeting, teachers discussed the principal’s goals and expressed frustration that they were being asked to accomplish “the impossible” with their
group of students. They began to look up pre-high school records on their most struggling students to see if there had been continuity in special education and language placement during the transition into the high school. The teachers were able to pull up records of prior classes on their computer system and the grades received in each class.

I have at least five students that were misplaced in regular classes when they have a history of SPED or ESL. These students are all miscategorized and then put into classes that don’t mesh with their ability level. This student failed all his classes in eighth grade. Why was he moved forward? How are we supposed to teach him and the others and the rest of the class? And [the principal] blames us when they fail. Should we just pass them through again? There’s no way to teach all the students. Where’s the language specialist? Where’s the special ed support?

Teachers believed goals were unachievable and feared their job security would be threatened when they were not reached. This was a realistic concern in their district as many teachers were give pink slips in the spring and then would later be re-hired for the fall. This allowed schools in the district to skirt systems of tenure and to not make commitments to teachers until enrollment and funding was finalized over the summer. It was common for junior teachers to not be asked back and for more experienced teachers to be moved within the district despite their preferences.

At Grantsville, goals were generated at the department level in conjunction with Principal Howard who acted as a facilitator, troubleshoot problems, and helped acquire resources. Early in the year departments presented year-long plans, new initiatives, grants, efforts to acquire resources and other intra- or inter-departmental efforts at the leadership team meeting. They also highlighted key challenges they anticipated and their ideas for taking these on. These detailed plans had already been hammered out and approved by Principal Howard.

Each year, departments planned key areas of improvement requiring departments and teachers to be self-critical. It was the teachers, not administrators who generated these ideas and therefore better owned their plans as they were self-imposed.

The Math Department had a year-long initiative to improve instruction. This included a focus on collaborative planning and scheduled observations and critiques of each others’ classrooms at regular intervals. They were also restructuring the course sequence by putting all 9th graders into Geometry regardless of whether or not they had passed Algebra I. This program, called Geometry for All, aimed to combine stronger and weaker students in the same classroom and build core math skills for students so that they would have a better base the next year for Algebra, a course the weakest students traditionally struggled to pass. Each of these plans had been developed at department meetings in consultation with the administration and received approval.

At Grantsville, central administration and department heads met monthly to discuss the departments’ progress and challenges. Ideas were regularly passed from teachers at department meetings to central administration. This involved a high degree of trust in the judgement and assessments of the teaching staff on what were key problems and plausible solutions. Achieving goals was a collective effort with all individuals attempting to add value to the pursuit.
This contrast in the goal-setting process reflected differences in leaderships’ beliefs about the capabilities of teachers and their ability to drive school improvement. At Grantsville High, goals emerged through an interactive process between all levels of school staff. There was also a mix of department generated initiatives. The principal valued teachers’ ideas and initiatives because teachers had the most in-person data on students and were therefore most likely to come up with ideas that worked and that they were invested in implementing.

For their part, teachers were more willing to undertake top-down priorities because their voices were valued in the process of goal setting and they were treated as effective implementers who needed support and resources from the administration rather than strict guidelines. They viewed the administration as supportive and there to facilitate success. As one of the teachers expressed:

[The administration] basically lets you teach how you want. No one’s hovering over your classroom. There are a lot of good teachers here but everyone’s different. Not everyone talks about their cat. I try to make it fun for them so that they’ll get excited. That’s why I act things out and I’m over the top. It makes them care about aestheticism and the romantics and they want to do the reading even if it’s hard. We all have to sell Shakespeare somehow. But kids get into it if it’s funny and fun and they understand what’s going on.

The administration was also hands-on and present for important initiatives like showing up for monthly AVID lunches to provide support to the program and be a presence in students’ lives outside of just a disciplinary role. Teachers had a regular working relationship with administrators that contributed to positive feelings from both sides.

We do a pizza lunch once a month and [the vice principal] always comes. We’re trying to make [AVID] feel like one program and not just a bunch of separate classrooms. This gets everyone in one room. If we can get someone from the college office here, that’s great. The students need to know they have all these resources. We’re working on a couple volunteer projects and recruitment trips to the middle school, so we coordinate that as a team. We want to bring in speakers in the next few months so [the vice principal] is reaching out to some folks at Facebook. Generally, we run it together, [the vice principal], the teachers, college staff, counselors.

**Leadership and Investment**

In order for goals to be meaningful for the organization, leaders must invest teachers and staff in their pursuit. When teachers did not believe in goals’ importance or viability or did not believe in the leadership’s abilities, then goals remained administrative platitudes with little impact on organizational action. In the goal setting process, principals had to persuade others to work toward their goals. Investment was impacted by two factors: teachers’ belief in the achievability of goals and teachers’ relationship with their principal. This was particularly true for ambitious goals that called for achievement beyond historical precedent.

When achievement levels surpassed what had been seen before, teachers only had their belief in the principal’s skills and ideas to support the feasibility of goals. One teacher said, of
Principal Edwards, “He’s never taught math, how does he think [these passing rates] are going to happen? He has no idea. We’re just supposed to do it.” Others focused their doubts on their beliefs about Principal Edwards intentions, “[Goals are] an easy way to blame the teachers. Nothing has changed but it’s gonna to be our fault. We still have the same students we’ve always had. I’m not getting fired over this.”

The concept that teachers evaluate the feasibility of goals based on their beliefs about school leadership is not intuitive on its face. In theory, teachers are able to evaluate performance targets irrespective of their feelings about school leadership. However, because leadership plays a major role in distributing resources such as class size, collaboration time, training opportunities, and out-of-class supports, teachers looked to leaders to determine what would be done differently to achieve different results. Leader responsiveness to teacher and student needs then became a key element to teachers’ investment in goals.

Leadership styles generated cooperative or combative relationships between administrators and teachers. When teachers believed the principal was setting them up for failure their focus became job security. Leadership’s attempts to increase student performance were viewed by teachers as a trap. Fingers were pointed between teachers and administrators for who was at fault for poor student performance. When teachers felt supported by the administration in the achievement of goals and administrators shared responsibility for student achievement, teachers were more likely to focus on productive initiatives and new ideas and solutions.

The principal at Deensboro was infrequently in hallways or classrooms although he had a strong electronic presence sending frequent and lengthy emails to teachers. One English teacher described, "Mr. Edwards is almost never here but he sends his emails. Leading by email we say." Because his physical domain was quite separate from the work of teachers, they frequently experienced his attempts to set goals as attacking their skills with little understanding of the context of their work. His emails were interpreted through a lens of judgement and distrust.

The dynamics were very different at Grantsville where teachers had a close working relationship with the principal and were included in the goal setting process. Teachers were not in the same defensive posture because there was a collective recognition, on all levels of the school organization, that the goals were challenging and that the effort and responsibility to achieve goals was shared between teachers and administrators. Teachers had to produce results in the classroom and administrators had to solve challenges by finding time, money, training or other resources. Solutions could come from leadership or the classroom so there was a broader sense of influence and responsibility.

Grantsville High’s Principal Howard’s strategies for achieving goals and overcoming obstacles stood in stark contrast to Deensboro. While their goals were also ambitious, there was more of a collective recognition that challenges might arise and the administration was there to take these problems seriously and help facilitate solutions. Leadership team meetings between department heads and the upper administration were times for administrators to hear the concerns of teachers and collaborate to make changes even ones that required additional resources of time or training. There were also times when administrators and staff would engage in deep discussions on new initiatives being considered so that the decisions were collective rather than top-down.
At the end of the year, the leadership team met to discuss “wish lists” for the next year and budget allocations to make these happen. Leadership strategies for decision making and consensus building reflected the principal’s participative approach. The principal had $5,000 to spend on materials needs and $40,000 in requests from the departments. These requests focused on replacing equipment and ensuring departments had their needs met to continue existing programs. The requests were predominantly basic equipment: microscopes, printers, overhead projectors, laptops etc. but they exceeded the funding currently available.

Rather than allocate the money behind the scenes and deliver the decisions to the departments, Principal Howard presented everyone’s requests to the group and suggested they collectively decide where to put the funding. Rather than fighting over resources from a zero-sum pot, department heads began to work together to make decisions. The largest requests were pulled off the list because they exceeded resources available. These were put to the side to be addressed in the fall from potential pots of funding, grants, or projects with the PTA. Department heads agreed that, while important, larger requests could not be part of this allocation. This included an effort to increase the number of laptops for students use that would benefit students across all departments.

Next, they identified requests that were small enough to just be filled. Some of these could be taken care of by the facilities department and their budget. Others were duplicative and could be filled for multiple departments at once. Finally, some departments realized they already had equipment that other departments were requesting and it could be shared or passed along.

At the end of the meeting, most of the requests were unfilled. The discussions by no means stretched $5,000 into $40,000. However, more of the needs were filled than could have been with the pot of money and no input from the departments about resources that already existed. Additionally, by pushing the department heads to solve the discrepancy in needs and funds, they had a deep appreciation for the real limitations and the legitimacy of others’ requests. For needs that could not be filled, department heads had a sense that they were recognized and plans would be made in the fall if they represented necessities. No one left the meeting angry at Principal Howard or other staff. They were able to recognize that this money was not the time to make large requests because it was a relatively small amount for the size of the school.

In contrast to Deensboro, this collaborative problem solving was engaged in with belief that a solution could be generated and an openness to work together to accommodate that solution. Teachers and administrators approached problems as solvable rather than unsolvable and the principal saw her role to guide and facilitate rather than impose top down. There was strong communication and trust between teachers and administrators which expanded each individual’s ecological domain beyond the classroom or administrative office to a more school-wide perspective. This was sufficient to allow teachers to accept decisions that contradicted their own personal interests for the good of the school and the fiscal realities they faced.

Leadership practices set the conditions for inter-personal relationships in each school. While at Deensboro, the principal took a more traditional managerial role seeing teachers as employees whose work he directed, at Grantsville, the principal positioned herself as a resource manager and facilitator. At Grantsville, the participatory model of decision making and problem solving and role of the administrator facilitated a culture of trust and collaboration that
characterized her relationship with teachers. In contrast, the relationship between the principal and teachers at Deensboro was characterized by mistrust and antagonism. In this way, administrators’ leadership strategies influenced key relationships which shaped the school’s capacity for success.

**Redesigning the Organization**

Shaping the school’s practices, programs, collaboration structures, and culture are key functions of leadership. This is where goals were translated into plans of action and implemented throughout the school. While the second half of this study will examine culture, here I will focus on how leadership styles impacted the way programs were selected and implemented school-wide. In the culture section, I will look further into how school cultures are formed and impact the implementation and collaboration practices of teachers.

Whether struggling or successful, schools take on curriculum and programmatic changes every year. Some of these were state mandated like a switch to core curriculum standards. Other programs were created with grants for which the school applied. One example of this was the small schools’ initiative program at Deensboro which gained funding to implement a small school structure within the larger high school for freshman students. Each year course offerings were tweaked to better match student-interest and facilitate achievement from the most struggling students. Both schools also had a variety of outside programs like AVID and Pathways that had been brought in because of their proven success in other contexts. These programs were shaped by structures dictated from their organization but also included many factors that schools may adapt. All of these initiatives came to the schools with rules, restrictions, and guidelines. Each school had to figure out how to take the structure of the program, meet its requirements and integrate it into the larger school curriculum.

Leaders played an important role in selecting these programmatic initiatives and guiding their implementation. As in other facets of the leader role, administrators selected strategies that were more autocratic or participatory. They decide if they would work with existing programs or ideas internal to the school or bring in external programs that had shown success in other contexts. Leaders also made choices about which parts of the programs they would follow or eliminate. Finally, they decided how much leeway teachers got in programmatic implementation and adaptation vs. how much they planned to script and monitor new programs.

One of the major initiatives at Deensboro was a small schools program for freshman. In its fifth year of a five-year grant, the program was designed to increase retention of 9th grade students and reduce dropouts during their most at-risk year. Although embedded in the larger high school, the small schools’ initiative attempted to replicate the benefits small schools by providing students with smaller classes, more personal relationships with teachers, and a small set of teachers responsible for all their courses—English, Math and Science—who would collaborate on unified practices and find solutions for students struggling in multiple subjects. In this way, students would be in a smaller peer-group, all attending the same smaller classes with the same four to five teachers. This was the structure of the program as it was brought in from an outside source and funded through a grant which compensated teachers and administrators for the extra time spent training or collaborating.
The program was run by one of the vice principals who guided program initiatives, weekly agenda items, and monitored notes from teacher collaboration meetings. Several Wednesdays a month, small schools’ teachers would meet during professional development time and discuss articles and ideas handed down from the vice principal. They would also meet during one shared prep period each week to focus on agenda items determined by the administration, often focusing on unified practices among teachers, identifying failing students, or choosing improving students for the quarterly awards ceremonies.

In this way, Deensboro’s small schools program was guided and monitored by the administrators. After each meeting, teachers would turn in notes to reflect the agenda items covered. While they could suggest agenda items for future collaboration sessions, these were only sometimes included. For the most part, the content of collaboration between Deensboro teachers was superimposed by administrators and outside funding and not driven by what the teachers saw as the key areas of need. For administrators, the top priority was ensuring faithful implementation of the program both so that it followed grant guidelines but also because the program had shown success elsewhere and they did not want teacher adaptation to hinder effectiveness. In one of the few times the vice principal sat in on a small schools’ teacher meeting, the focus was solely on methods of documenting their time and agendas. “The most important thing is that we document everything. We want to document your hours so you get paid. We need to document what is discussed in each meeting.”

Because collaboration was a mandated part of the small schools grant, it was important that agendas and notes were turned into the administration and collaboration time was accounted for so teachers could be appropriately compensated. This focus on record-keeping centralized the task of meeting bureaucratic requirements over using the time to meet their classroom needs and improve the instructional experience for freshman.

Administrators’ decision to run the small schools’ program with little feedback from teachers about how the time could be used most effectively had a number of consequences. Collaboration resulted in minimal impact on classroom practice and collaboration structures did not facilitate planning or problem solving on the issues teachers deemed most pressing. Teachers followed the instructions delineated by the grant and administration even when it was to the detriment of more organic and relevant discussions.

In a meeting early in the year, the teachers from one group spent their time discussing agenda items from their professional development week including how to make the program feel like a small school and what practices they could all implement. The discussion centered on using consistent language and implementation—using the term thinkpairshare, and the word catalyst for the do now activity. When one teacher said she has been doing these activities for years, rather than asking her what she did to make the activities effective, the teachers reminded her to start using the right terms and make sure her do now is called catalyst and completed in a binder. The discussion focused on consistent implementation, not effectiveness, which left the collaboration very surface. In subsequent meetings, no one discussed whether the activities were effective, they only reported on whether or not they used them so these reports could be recorded in the meeting notes. This discussion took the place of problem solving other pressing issues in the classroom. For example, the most challenging thing about Mr. Learner’s Freshman math
classes was the consistent two-thirds attendance rate despite it only being the second week of school. This was not mentioned.

Principal Howard from Grantsville also implemented formal teacher collaboration time into the weekly schedule as part of Geometry for All. These structures facilitated planning for key shared courses so that teachers could jointly design learning activities relevant to the week’s course objectives. The shift in course sequence coincided with a shift to a majority student-centered and inquiry-based Geometry curriculum. This meant that many times lesson planning involved designing hands-on activity that would help students discover the day’s lessons and solidify the concepts. Teachers were able to use collaborative structures to share lesson activities and resources. These resulted in touch points and parallel lessons between classrooms in the same subject.

It also pooled teachers’ expertise and time so that lessons were more rigorous and better addressed the areas in which students struggled. Rather than following a strict structure that was not always connected to the most pressing challenges, teachers were able to focus their collaboration time around what they were seeing in the classroom. This required a great deal of trust from the administration that teachers were capable of deciding what was most important to address and could use their time effectively without extensive documentation and supervision.

Because of the value Grantsville administrators placed on discussion between teachers and between teachers and administrators, teachers were empowered to collaborate in the ways they deemed most critical. In this way, teachers capitalized on their collective skills, knowledge, and resources. Further, administrators were able to tap into the first-person information that teachers had about students and how programs were working in order to adapt them to the school’s context and increase their effectiveness.

When redesigning the organization in terms of programs and practices, leaderships’ strategies set the tone for implementation. These strategies conveyed the roles administrators and teachers occupied vis-à-vis each other and in implementing major initiatives. They also affected how effectively school initiatives were adapted to the context of the school.

**Conclusion**

Leadership practices play a key role in structuring actions and interactions throughout the school organization. Leadership strategies, informed by principals’ backgrounds and the contexts of the school in which they are embedded, impact student achievement. Highly politicized environments that demand immediate results from principals often serve to create dysfunction in the relationships between administrators and teachers and a disjuncture between leader actions and intended outcomes in teacher performance. Leaders need time to assess the abilities of faculty, mobilize assets that currently exist, and integrate ideas from throughout the organization in making improvements.

While schools that are already successful have the time necessary to implement long-term change, administrators of struggling schools are given little time to enact improvement or else be replaced. This creates a tense relationship between administrators and teachers that blocks, rather
than facilitates change and improvement. Findings show that leaders have limited success when they attempt to enact change without investing teachers.

Leaders of schools serving low-income students often find themselves unable to effectively cohere the organization and move it in a positive direction. This creates a self-fulfilling cycle in which schools most in need of change fall into the same patterns of weak implementation and poor problem solving that have driven low achievement in the past.
Chapter Four: Culture in Philosophy

Cultural understandings in schools are important drivers of school success, failure, and the gradients between. School culture shapes how individuals seek to solve problems and how they do not. It defines the role of schools in students’ lives, the goals that are important and achievable, and the roles school personnel occupy. (Schein, 1997) In this way, culture impacts the behavior of individuals throughout the school and the academic outcomes that result. (Cheng, 1993)

Schools have institutional cultures that define and impart beliefs, values, roles, and norms but these develop from and may change when leadership or composition shifts. Culture reflects the history of an institution, the individuals who occupy it, and the community in which it is embedded. It emerges out of the experiences of students, staff and management—both the values these individuals bring from outside the school and their experience within the school itself.

Culture exists in and is recreated through interactions in every part of the institution. These interactions are what perpetuate and change the culture. (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003) Collectives and the roles they delineate for individuals have a powerful influence on individuals’ actions within that organization. (Campbell, 2010; Joas, Gaines, & Keast, 1997; Weber et al., 1958) Culture consists of enduring values, beliefs and assumptions members of a group or institution share about how to behave. (Louis, 2006; Schein, 1997)

Because of the diversity of “eco-systems” within the school organization, different groups within a school may operate with separate values and beliefs. (Weick, 1976) The culture an administration attempts to create is not necessarily the one that actually guides the behaviors of teachers. Teachers may have a set of morals, values, and beliefs that are distinct from the administration. Groups within a school may also establish norms of behavior enforced through a range of formal and informal sanctions. (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003)

In this sense, within a school, multiple cultures may exist and impact action on different levels of the organization. We can see the impact of culture on the organizational level in terms of leadership practices and teacher participation; on the level of the teachers in terms of attitude, commitment, efficacy, and job satisfaction; and in terms of school effectiveness and success. (Cheng, 1993)

Over the last hundred years, school culture has played a key role in education research. As far back as 1932, Willard Waller identified schools as each having distinct cultures with their own beliefs, rituals, taboos, values and sanctions. For modern researchers, Deal and Peterson, culture is:

Schools’ unwritten rules and traditions, customs, and expectations. The unofficial patterns seem to permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about or consider taboo, whether they seek out colleagues or isolate themselves, whether they work together, and how teachers feel about their work and students. (Deal & Peterson, 1990)
For them, culture is a set of beliefs that guides meaning making and interpretation of everyday actions. It comprises “the deeper structure of life in organizations” and shapes behavior throughout the school. (Deal & Peterson, 1990)

For Fuller, culture is expressed in the way a school operates. The behaviors and approaches of individuals throughout a school are impacted by their shared beliefs. It “shape[s] the way individuals think, feel, and act.” (Fuller & Izu, 1986)

Culture both patterns and is patterned by daily interactions. It is the social organization of life at the school—a set of behaviors, meanings and values that guide individual behavior in the organization more than biographies. (Rosenholtz, 1985) It is shaped by the history of behavior at the school but also re-created each day through interactions. (Deal & Peterson, 1990)

**Culture in this Study**

For this discussion, I will operationalize culture as a set of morals, values, and beliefs that shape the actions of actors in the school. These ideas are enduring and powerful in that they pattern interactions, conceptions of roles, and the responsibilities of administrators and teachers. The roles that teachers subscribe to are dictated by the cultures that exist in the institution. Through patterning the norms of action, interaction, and collaboration, culture in schools creates the rules of engagement and the everyday behaviors of administrators, teachers and even students.

The cultural features of the schools in my study are the values and beliefs that guide internal practices, the roles of each member of the school community, and the agreed upon or understood goals of the organization. In this study, culture is comprised of core principles that dictate:

- How capabilities are distributed among individuals;
- How much students should be expected to attain (some hs, hs graduation, college, etc.);
- The uniformity or diversity of acceptable achievement goals;
- The role schooling should occupy in the lives of students;
- The role each staff member has in addressing failures of students and programs;
- What classrooms should impart to students in terms of academic and non-academic skills;
- How the school should operate in terms of power and integration—the level of unity and collaboration in the organization.

These elements of school culture impact operations at all levels and affect the academic outcomes of the school. The following two chapters will explore the mechanisms behind this finding—how school culture impacts behavior in ways that are important for educational outcomes.

Deensboro and Grantsville displayed very different cultures. Both had ideas of what a good teacher was, what they should provide to students and how their work environment should be structured. Their philosophies on what constituted good teaching shaped their actions in a
number of arenas. These values were shared institutionally and formed the benchmark of a functional school. These common understandings oriented teachers’ behaviors in a range of contexts. When actions of the administration challenged these paradigms, teachers worked to re-align practice to their values.

School personnel shared beliefs about what behaviors would achieve their core values. These beliefs crafted the solutions administrators and teachers attempted. While there might be a broad set of practices that aligned with the school’s values, a narrower set contained those that most teachers believed worked best. When these beliefs were widely shared and enduring, they comprised another piece of school culture.

Finally, culture was connected to norms and actions. Not all actions were driven by culture, but repeated practices spread broadly across the school often were. Those who violated norms faced a range of official or unofficial sanctions. Values were expressed repeatedly in my observations. Below I will delineate the key values of teachers at each school with data that is representative of the multiple occurrences I observed.

The majority of the literature focuses on the elements that comprise school culture, what ideas make a “toxic” culture, why school culture is important, and how leaders can endeavor to shift culture. These studies offer only a cursory examination of culture from interviews, data, or short observations. (A. Bryk, 2004; A. Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; A. S. Bryk, 2010; Carbaugh, 2008; Cheng, 1993) This study takes a more long-term and in-depth look at the morals, values and beliefs that dominate two schools and how these shape the behaviors and interactions that impact student achievement. Here I illuminate the specific morals and values and the mechanisms for how culture in a school shapes the behaviors of teachers, administrators and students in all levels of operation.

I find a striking contrast in the ideas shared in each institution that play out in rational behavior that may or may not serve the goals of universal student achievement. I also identify strategies schools use to dominate the goals of students regardless of background or values. It is not enough to understand that culture is important without understanding the mechanisms behind how school culture impacts behavior.

**Foundational Beliefs and Contrasting Cultures of School Staff**

The morals in the low-income schools I studied centered around the concept of what makes a school “effective”. Acting in-line with making the school “effective” was considered moral while acting against effectiveness was considered immoral. The staff’s definition of effectiveness had significant implications for how individuals throughout the institution behaved.

The values at each school shaped the goals whose achievement comprised effectiveness for the school. The values said what the school “should” accomplish for students. There were two value orientations that dominated the schools. One was a “collective” orientation in which effectiveness meant graduating and sending all students to college. This orientation focused on a uniform goal of academic achievement and an imperative toward universal achievement of this goal. The other was an “individual” orientation in which effectiveness meant achieving the
academic outcomes best suited to each individual student. This orientation focused on a diversity of goals individualized to the skills and motivation of each student.

Undergirding the values at the schools were contrasting beliefs about the distribution of capabilities to students. An “individual” orientation is predicated on the conception that every child is different with different capabilities. Therefore, goals for students should be diverse, not uniform reflecting students’ different skills and interests that made them more or less suited toward high school graduation and college attendance. The purpose of school is to create an academic pathway that students can follow to its appropriate termination—dropping out, graduating, or attending college.

With this purpose in mind, the expectation at a low-income high school with an individual orientation is that graduation in four to five years is the endpoint for the largest proportion of students, but a significant percentage will leave high school early and a smaller percentage will graduate and attend college. Universal graduation would not be realistic or appropriate for every student. Instead, graduation is appropriate for some students, but not others because students have a range of skills and competing interests outside of school

I term this culture “limited resources pragmatism” to capture the strategies teachers invoke based on this set of morals and values. Given limited resources, teachers in an “individual” culture focus academic attention on those most likely to graduate and not those most likely to fail or drop out. Teachers emphasize self-determination and personal responsibility for students. In this culture, it is the teacher’s role to present academic material and create opportunities, but students needed to be proactive about learning, making up work and getting help. Because of the belief that some students are not capable of high school level work, having students fail or drop-out is normal. College is not viewed as a realistic priority for most students, just for the most academically exceptional (especially 4-year schools).

This set of morals and values shaped behavior in a number of arenas. In the classroom, teachers promoted self-reliance and personal responsibility during lessons. While teachers were willing to provide help, the onus was on students to be pro-active. Teachers did not want to “waste” time on students who did not value education. Instead, they encouraged students to make their own decisions about the appropriateness of different academic pathways. Teachers’ primary responsibility was to complete the curriculum for the year and help those who wanted their help.

In contrast, a “collective” orientation is predicated on the central beliefs that every child is capable of high school graduation and college attendance and that this is the ideal path for every student. Because every student has the capability to graduate, if students fail to do so, it is a failure of the school and its staff. The primary goal of the high school is universal graduation and college attendance and when this does not happen, the school needs to overhaul its practices because it is the school, not the child, who is responsible for this failure.

This value orientation has implications for the role of the school in students’ lives and the responsibility of faculty to do whatever it takes to ensure graduation. This means that failing students and failing programs are everyone’s responsibility. The goal of the school is to move the entire collective across the goal of graduation and everyone working at the school has a broad responsibility toward achieving this goal.
I term this culture “collectively guided success” to capture the ethos that emerges from this set of morals and values. In this culture, “good” teachers are those that mentor and guide their students, even the reluctant students, toward graduation and college attendance. Every adult in the building has a responsibility to do everything they can to ensure every student in the collective succeeds academically.

This set of morals and values has implications for the behavior of teachers and the role of the school in the community. The culture required that teachers taught content but also checked in with students about course enrollment and grades, started programs to help struggling students, and played a role in student’s lives that stretched beyond classroom instructor. The school itself was a resource center for the community and it was the school’s job to engage families so they would adopt the school’s values for their child’s education and upbringing.

These two cultures differ principally in how they define an effective school. Teachers make decisions about the “right” thing to do based on their view of students’ capabilities, appropriate goals, and the most effective ways to achieve these goals.

Each moral perspective on what constituted “good” and “bad” teaching had implications for how teachers should or should not approach different aspects of school life. This comprised their world view on education and educators. (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2008) I will now dive into more specific examples from the data to note how these cultures guided life in the following arenas: goals; college; student roles; failing students; teacher roles outside the classroom; and work environment.

**Establishing a School’s Goals**

Goals are a key reflection of culture as they are shaped by the values and beliefs staff hold about students’ capabilities and the definition of an effective school. One of the primary things school culture shapes is what ends teachers’ view as realistic, significant, and important. The goals teachers held for students were very different in Deensboro and Grantsville. This section will delineate those differences and explain how and why school culture is an important variable in determining goals for student achievement.

At Deensboro, the culture of “limited resource pragmatism” dominated. Despite efforts from a new administration to increase passing and graduation rates, Deensboro teachers held on to goals that reflected past patterns of passing rates and student success. For example, in spite of the principal’s modified math goals and attempts to motivate teachers to double the Algebra I passing rates, teachers believed they would be the same this year as all others. Just a month into the school year, teachers were already solidifying predictions of who would and would not pass. In a collective culture, teachers would use data on failing students to identify those that needed more support however, in this individualistic culture, data was predictive of outcomes.

Early in the year, Mr. Gunner, an Algebra I math teacher, pulled out scores from the first test to explain who he thought would and would not pass for the year:

While some gain proficiency in Algebra after repeating the course, many stay the same or decrease proficiency despite having taken the course twice. Often the first quiz is an
indication of whether or not the students will do well in the course and pass so I know pretty early on in the year who will succeed.

When asked what this meant for students’ prospects of graduation and for the principals’ goals of increasing passing rates and graduation numbers, Mr. Gunner expressed his frustration:

Look, periods one and two have mostly failed Algebra in middle school and are repeating it. These aren’t the Geometry kids. Most won’t make it to a fourth year of math and, if they do, the absolute farthest would be Pre-calculus and that is only if they pass the first three years. These kids are not destined to graduate, not in four years, and they’re definitely not going to college.

Algebra I teachers publicly tracked passing on unit tests and rates consistently settled at a 30-35% passing rate for the year. Others in the math department shared Mr. Gunner’s skepticism about achieving 70% passing in Algebra I.

When the principal emphasized his desire for the department to raise scores, teachers resisted, arguing this was out of their control and not part of their job as teachers. One teacher complained, “It’s like he’s given us a roster of five foot basketball players and told us to win the championship.” Instead of discussing ways to meet his expectations, the teachers armed themselves with justifications in case the principal used passing rates to threaten job security. “I could just give everyone an A but that’s not being a good teacher.”

For teachers, setting goals of universal or even greatly increased passing rates was a useless endeavor. Instead, this clash of ideology with the administration led to increasing levels of distrust and defensiveness. Teachers felt they were being asked to achieve the impossible and worried it would undercut their ability to serve the students who were passing.

At Deensboro, conflicts in setting goals reflected a conflict in value between a new principal who teachers viewed as inexperienced and a teaching staff who maintained an ideology that good teaching meant utilizing limited resources to help students who they believed could be helped. Teachers’ comments reflected their view of the principal as naive and misinformed. Teachers complained, “He says we’re bad teachers but he’s never spent an entire period in my class;” “He was an English teacher, not a math teacher. He doesn’t understand the challenges we face.”

Because of the clash in cultural outlook and assumptions, setting goals became one of the first points of conflict between the administration and teachers. Teachers resisted new initiatives, like the principal’s goal of high Algebra passing rates, that pushed them to embrace a "collectively guided success" outlook which did not mesh with their view of what it meant to be an effective teacher for their students.

In contrast, teachers at Grantsville held a collectively guided success orientation and believed that goals had to be academically ambitious for all students. Homerooms were arranged such that students stayed with the same teacher for all four years and he or she played a role in helping students stay on track to graduation and college. At the beginning of the January semester, Mr. Russo, an English teacher, gave his homeroom class a pep talk about their grades from last semester and his expectations for their high school achievement.
If your grades were bad last year, now is the time to improve. Ninth and tenth grades are the grades people mess up the most. You’ll be with me all four years. I want you to all be with me at graduation. Last time I lost only one student, this time I don't want to lose any.

Mr. Russo’s belief that every child was capable of and should graduate high school reflected the school’s culture. When hurdles to achieving those goals emerged, they were solved through collaboration with fellow faculty or assistance from the administration. If issues arose that prevented teachers from being successful, the principal viewed it as her job to find time and resources to support teachers’ efforts. Departments were collaborative in their efforts because there was less differentiation between each individual's responsibility and the responsibility of the collective.

There were numerous examples of the principal partnering with teachers to problem solve and meet goals. One of these occurred, a few months into the school year, when department heads and administrators met in their weekly leadership team meeting to discuss each department’s year-long plans, new initiatives, important goals, and timelines. These plans had been drafted by the departments and approved by administrators.

While some of the initiatives were encapsulated just within the individual departments, others required cross-department collaboration including one of the year’s biggest projects, preparing for the transition to core curriculum standards. This required multiple levels of collaboration and coordination. On the department level, teachers had to effectively map the major objectives of this new set of standards onto existing practices to understand what aspects of the curriculum were covered. On a school level, the English department was put in charge of the transition over to new standards and departments were advised to find time to collaborate when necessary.

One challenge that immediately arose was the lack of planning time to complete this work on top of the other initiatives in progress. Rather than dismiss or solve the issue, the principal turned it over to the room to brainstorm ideas of where time could be found offering to be flexible and support changes they could come up. Ultimately the department heads were able to identify exam days when, with purposeful scheduling of proctoring slots, teachers could carve out windows of time to collaborate. The principal committed to implementing this plan.

Under the outlook of collectively guided success, teachers and administrators believed that good educators took responsibility for the passing, graduation, and academic success of all students. This meant that goals necessarily centered around high passing rates and teachers who opted to give up on students or set goals that allowed some to fail, would be breaking with the ethos of the institution and viewed as "bad teachers" by their colleagues.

**The Question of Student Underachievement**

Closely connected to the values driving goal setting were beliefs about how the school and teachers should respond to students who were failing their classes. Each institution took a different approach when faced with a segment of students unlikely to pass or graduate and these approaches were reflective of "limited resource pragmatism" or "collectively guided success."
Under a limited resource pragmatism approach, failing students were a consistent part of school life and attempting to eradicate failure was both an impossibility and a waste of teacher time and resources. Teachers accepted existing passing rates even if they were low and saw little need to change anything about course sequence, assignments, curriculum or how it was administered in the school. This occurred in multiple arenas in the school but I will provide a few representative examples below of how teachers’ value orientations and beliefs shaped their reactions to the “problem” of failing students.

During my observations, Deensboro High was in the final year of a multi-year grant to support small school collaboration for freshman students. What this meant was that the freshmen were split into four “families,” each with a designated set of English, Math, and Science teachers. Students would take classes all day with others in their “families.” Additionally, the teachers would share a prep period during which they would meet once a week in addition to meeting twice a month during school-wide professional development hours that occurred every Wednesday after students were dismissed on a shortened day schedule.

The principal's top priority for collaboration time was for teachers to focus on failing students. They were to list the failing students in the small school, discuss their collective experiences with these students and plan initiatives to intervene. Teachers had mixed reactions to focusing solely on this issue week after week. In a school with high dropout rates, some teachers expressed concerns that they were devoting all their time to students already likely to dropout regardless of their efforts rather than students that were more borderline where interventions might be most effective. Many expressed a wish that they could skip the meetings believing the time could be put to better use as a prep period. Teachers expressed frustration because they believed that the conversations were not useful to their classrooms.

Ms. Edison, a Freshman English teacher complained during a meeting with her colleagues, “Every week we’re talking about the same five students. Every week. Five weeks now. I have ten students that aren’t failing and skipping class but sure will be if I’m giving all my attention the same five students who don’t care. I’d rather talk about the students who might have a chance to pass than the ones who are on the verge of leaving.”

These discussions aligned with the belief that not all students would graduate regardless of school intervention. Within the paradigm of limited resource pragmatism, some students were not going to succeed so the best option was to let them be and utilize the disciplinary system when those students' behaviors disrupted learning for others in the class. Teachers were skeptical of interventions believing they took a great deal of effort but were frequently unsuccessful. The following conversation with an English teacher who was the lead teacher for her small school family echoed the view of many of the veteran teachers.

I have no interest in going to this meeting today. I could use this period for so many other things like prep or going home early. I get that there are teachers with lots of failing students, but I don't have that many and don't want to spend another hour trying to figure out what they should do.”

Later in the conversation I asked her what she thought of the parent night one of the other small schools had to try to engage the families of failing students.
Yeah, did you hear about how it went? They invited the parents, called them--no one showed up. They scheduled two hours to meet with parents, but these parents don't have time for that. Inviting the parents in is pointless.

Teachers resisted the administration's efforts by focusing on students who were doing well or borderline rather than those who were failing. Teachers who attempted new strategies were corrected to the philosophy of the school by other teachers with whom they collaborated. As I will discuss in the next chapter, teachers whose ideas deviated from the majority had some freedom to enact different philosophies within their personal classroom without sanction so long as they did not promote them in the larger school community.

Under the culture of collectively guided success, the majority of teachers saw it as their responsibility to address the needs of failing students so that they too would graduate. These efforts ranged from targeted tutoring and mentorship to changing the course sequence or class composition to better serve struggling students. In other words, teachers collectively engaged in efforts on the classroom, department and schoolwide level to push struggling students across the finish line of graduation.

In Grantsville, teachers sometimes had different ideas of what strategies would best help struggling students but there was a shared belief that everyone was responsible for addressing these issues. As a result, teachers owned initiatives like designing course offerings each year and engaged in active debates about the curriculum and how best to serve students.

For example, when designing math course offerings, a key debate was how best to help chronically struggling or failing students succeed. Teachers discussed whether it was better to put struggling students in a remedial class where they could be targeted at their level or whether these students benefited more from being mixed in with younger students taking the math course for the first time because it would expose them to stronger math peers. While teachers fell on both sides of this debate and offered varying perspectives, all were aligned in the goal of getting the most challenged students to pass and graduate on time. They ultimately decided that these students would benefit most from being in classes with stronger peers rather than isolated in remedial classes. Improving academic outcomes for failing students was a common focus of conversations within departments.

In addition, under collectively guided success, it was not uncommon for teachers to start tutoring or after-school programs for struggling students. For example, Grantsville had a group of math teachers who were baseball fans and managed to get the local team to donate tickets to students. These teachers would regularly attend games with students and out of this activity decided to start a program to support student athletes both through regular lunches and opening their classrooms as study halls for students before practice each day. This program gave struggling students a place to get help and also provided a mentoring relationship in which teachers would meet with students during weekly lunches to check in on their grades and progress in all their classes. Though these teachers were technically only responsible for their classroom content, the culture of collectively guided success meant that teachers felt obligated to extend beyond their classroom roles to target an academic need that was preventing students from success in schools.
Understanding Programmatic Effectiveness

Culture impacted not just how teachers dealt with failing students, but also with failing programs. Under limited resource pragmatism, teachers were more likely to work within programs that were not effective rather than attempt to overhaul them entirely. It was expected that students would struggle and their job to create avenues of success for those who were motivated rather than tailor initiatives so that everyone was successful. Teachers did not believe programs needed to be modified for struggling students, but rather that programs existed as part of the hurdles of schooling that some would overcome and others would not.

At Deensboro, teachers spoke articulately about the struggles students faced, why current school practices were not working, and they accurately reflected the holes in student knowledge. Yet, despite all of this, teachers did not work to change practice outside of their classrooms, even so far as to problem solve with one or two other teachers facing similar challenges with their students. School culture helps to explain why teachers would exist in this problematic space, year after year, but not take any steps to make change. Instead, each year, teachers charted a similar course knowing its limited effectiveness.

One of the consequences of this culture is that ineffective practices became entrenched and teachers faced some of the same issues, year after year. At Deensboro, both the math and English departments had challenges that arose every year, and every year they discussed how they would work around these known issues. Conversations focused on responding to the problems that arose rather than changing practices to better prevent problems. The following are a couple examples of how teachers at Deensboro confronted programs that were frustrating and challenging by creating work arounds to maintain these programs rather than developing new, more effective systems.

For math, the problem of getting students to pass the parts of Algebra I they failed as Freshman surfaced throughout the year, heightening as graduation drew closer. In English, the last couple months of the year represented the behemoth challenge of senior projects which required faculty time throughout the school to get all seniors to pass in what historically dragged on until the last days before graduation. Both of these situations exemplified how problems that everyone on the faculty anticipated still arose year after year in a culture of limited resource pragmatism where problems and limitations are viewed as part of school life and therefore not something that needed to be changed. These problems became deeply embedded as part of the yearly calendar despite the time, contortion and ingenuity they required each year. What was striking was not that the school faced problems every year. Every school faces challenges, sometimes ones that cannot be avoided. Rather, it was that these challenges were never preempted by teachers attempting to change the programs. Instead, teachers devoted resources to making a flawed system work the best it could. These examples illustrated how the culture of limited resource pragmatism shaped what “should” be done when programmatic challenges arose in the school.

The first example is how teachers responded to high Algebra I failure rates so that students could graduate on time. When Deensboro students did not pass all ten modules (or units) in Algebra I, they were still moved on to Geometry, the next course in the sequence, but required to re-test on the units they had failed sometime before graduation. The system
envisioned that students would study over the summer, learn the math they failed to learn in class, and re-test early in their Sophomore year when the material was still fresh. In practice, this almost never happened. Instead, students tended to return to this requirement sometime in their Senior year, many years removed from exposure to the material, to attempt a re-test necessary for graduation.

This then became a process that teachers either handled individually with students or planned with the rest of their department. One unique challenge that emerged was that due to teachers leaving the school, there were no longer detailed records of which modules students had passed and failed. The department convened to troubleshooting what to do with students who needed to re-test in order to graduate. They decided it would be unfair to just pass these students. Instead, they would use semester grades to determine if students had passed or not and then give one exam for the first five modules and another for the second. But then they also had to decide, how many exams they would make so students had multiple chances to pass.

Students showed up throughout the year, needing help on material they had not looked at in years and asking for multiple exams if they could not pass the first time. By the time they were addressing this issue, the stakes were high because it would mean the difference between graduating on time or late. Math teachers frequently complained about the system that required them to spend so much time out of class working with students who were no longer theirs and creating individual plans to clear this graduation hurdle. Yet every year they went through the same process, creating patches when old data was lost or other issues arose. Given seventy percent of students who needed to take Algebra I as Freshman did not pass, there were a lot of students to handle on a case by case basis.

What was not discussed during this meeting were more systemic options: requiring summer school immediately after Freshman year for those who did not pass all Algebra I modules, changing the course sequence so students would repeat Algebra I while taking Geometry, or even requiring that students address the failures before the end of Sophomore year. Under limited resource pragmatism, these challenging situations were part of the fabric of school life. There would always be challenges of students not passing and teachers having some responsibility to create alternate pathways for the most motivated. Because no system would eradicate these inevitabilities, the best teachers could do was find patches to make the system function.

The English Department also had yearly challenges in getting students to the finish line of graduation but similarly patched the holes each year rather than creating a new process that might function more smoothly. Each year, seniors had to complete a project that consisted of a research paper and formal presentation to a panel of teachers in order to graduate. In the planning meeting for the upcoming round of projects, frustration and dread was audible. For the upcoming weeks, all department meetings and professional development in the school would be put on hold so teachers could grade papers and listen to presentations. Just the first round of grading required help from teachers throughout the school and resulted in the majority of students not passing, despite working on the papers in English class for over a month. Once students passed the paper, they could make their presentation to a teaching panel which would convene at least once a week.
The majority of students passed the presentation once their paper was approved, but the paper itself required multiple rounds of grading as well as an appointed teacher mentor to help with revisions. This process dragged into the last week before graduation. Capturing this frustration, Ms. Duff, a veteran teacher, complained during the English Department planning meeting. “I haven’t had one year where students weren’t following me out to my car to present in the parking lot so they could walk in graduation.”

Yet despite the problems in student ability and the staffing resources required to get students to pass, little was done to change the process. Instead, the English department meeting focused on who would be scheduled to grade when and what teachers would serve on presentation panels. There was no discussion of how to better support students in classes so the first papers were higher quality or how to create a system that was more streamlined for students and reduced teacher hours.

Both examples illustrate teachers’ responses to failing initiatives in a culture of limited resource pragmatism. Programs with limited or partial student success were not “failures” but rather parts of the school machine.

Under a culture of collectively guided success, failing programs were overhauled and changes large and small were attempted to get every student to pass including, and sometimes especially, those students most likely to fail. Discussions on initiatives focused on how to target struggling students to increase passing rates and graduations.

In contrast, to Deensboro, teachers at Grantsville regularly brainstormed effective ways to address challenges to student success. Rather than patching holes in failing programs to make them function, teachers made changes at the department or school-wide levels that might prevented problems before they occurred. Teachers changed the course sequence, the structure of classes offered, contributed to conversations about school-wide grading policy, created new academic pathways, brought in additional resources to programs, and went to the administration frequently with ideas or requests.

One example of how the collectively guided success culture attacked failures that arose was how they responded to high failure rates for Algebra I. Because of the cultural focus on universal achievement, teachers changed the course sequence for math hoping that it would increase passing rates. Geometry For All was a program that reversed the sequence of math courses so every student would take geometry as their first course in high school. The idea behind this initiative was that rather than putting struggling math students in Algebra I their first year and putting strong math students in Geometry, students would all take Geometry together in mixed level classes. Teachers were hoping that this would advantage weaker students because they would be intermixed with stronger students. Also, students who were bad at Algebra would have an opportunity to be successful in math since Geometry invoked very different mathematical skills. Teachers were hoping that this would give students a more positive experience of math so they would take re-take Algebra I with more confidence.

This approach was one of many initiatives that exemplified the culture of collectively guided success. Rather than accepting high failure rates as inevitable and working instead to give the most motivated students second opportunities, the school pro-actively attempted to prevent
failures from occurring. Teachers believed that if they worked differently, they could raise passing rates for all. They also saw it as part of their role to take these actions rather than viewing failure as a part of school life when educating low-income students. Their worldview on what constituted a successful school for low income students and the role they should play in creating that school meant that failing practices needed to be overhauled and teachers needed to “do what it takes” to ensure students passed even if it required extraordinary effort or major programmatic changes.

There were many other initiatives that targeted struggling students so that the school could better facilitate their success. When the scores of African American students were trending lower than their peers, administrators and teachers spoke with focus groups of African American students to get ideas on how to better serve their needs. They examined grading policies leading to grade inflation and teachers and administrators debated what principles should drive grading in their school after reading articles on outside best practices. The culture of collectively guided success meant that administrators and teachers worked together to set priorities for change. They were invested in looking at problems across the organization and outside their individual classrooms. Many of Grantsville’s problems were solved by teachers who collaborated on solutions.

These examples highlight how the cultures of limited resource pragmatism and collectively guided success targeted similar issues with programs in their schools. Under limited resource pragmatism, programs with substantial failure rates were not flawed but a reflection of the limited skills and academic prospects of low-income students. Under this world view, devoting extensive resources to the weakest students would actually result in even lower passing rates. The culture of limited resource pragmatism focused teachers on the most successful and the borderline students. The culture viewed student skills and school resources as limited and sought to apply teacher time and effort where they believed it would have the most impact.

In contrast, the culture of collectively guided success focused attention and resources on the weakest students in the school. Teachers believed that high passing and graduation rates were possible, and programs should be designed to facilitate success. They made dramatic changes to accommodate the most struggling students.

**Whither College?**

The cultures of limited resource pragmatism and collectively guided success have divergent views on the necessity and practicality of college attendance for students. Under limited resource pragmatism, college was not an appropriate pathway for every student and a focus on college attendance would have taken away from the more urgent need of getting students to complete high school. Teachers therefore viewed college initiatives as a waste of time and resources that benefited only a small fraction of the student population.

Administrators at Deensboro wanted to prioritize college and build college initiatives into the school year but teachers resisted by advocating a different focus, implementing the programs with minimal enthusiasm or investment, or directly providing messaging about college that contradicted expectations of universal attendance.
The following example illustrates how teachers under limited resource pragmatism simultaneously implemented and undercut messages about college attendance handed down from the administration. In this example, teachers were asked to implement programs designed to get students to prepare for and think about college. It exemplifies how teachers conveyed their values to students and downplayed the necessity of college and is one of many examples of how messages from the administration that contradicted the cultural outlook of teaching staff were filtered and adjusted as they were conveyed to students.

This dialogue took place in the first period of the school day when teachers in every classroom in the school were asked to guide their students to review their transcripts, GPA and credits to assess their path to graduation and college.

<Ms. Taller reading off questions to students> What D's and F's do you have and in which classes? How do you plan to make them up? What courses do you need next year? Do you plan to go to college? If no, Why not?

There are lots of reasons you might not want to go to college: no interest, you don’t have the academics, money. You don’t need to go to college to be successful but you do need to graduate high school.

<Ms. Taller draws a graph on the board showing high school graduates earn much more than non-graduates>

High school graduates earn a lot more than drop outs. Lots of folks don’t go to college and they’re just fine, but you should finish high school. You really need to keep track of your GPA because you need an overall 2.0 to graduate. If you ask the super seniors what happened, most of them will say Freshman year. Again, if you plan to go to college, great. Colleges do look at freshman year grades. Whoever says they don't, that's a lie. That's the first thing on your transcript.

<When students leave after the period, Ms. Taller complained that the activity was a waste of 30 minutes>

This does not mean that teachers thought no students would go to college. If students themselves sought advice for college or letters of recommendation, teachers were forthcoming and responsive to requests. On the same day, Ms. Taller modeled for a student who approached her at lunch, how to approach another teacher to ask for a letter of recommendation. In another instance, she reviewed a student’s transcript and advised her to engage in more extra-curricular activities because that was important to colleges.

In the culture of collectively guided success, college was a standard expectation which was infused in the messaging teachers sent students. This manifested as emphasizing vocabulary words or study skills that “will be necessary in college” or discussing the college experience during lessons. Teachers at Grantsville reminded students of the PSAT and of fee waivers available. They asked students when they planned to take these tests, how they did, and to what colleges they were considering applying.
Part of the centrality of college manifested with the college center itself playing an important role at the school. At Grantsville, the college center endeavored to be a resource-rich center for all students in the high school beyond their specific mission of facilitating successful college applications. While the college center was comprised of multiple outside organizations each charged primarily with working with just a caseload of students who were low-income and first-generation college-attendees, the staff saw their role as expanded beyond this narrow swath of students. While staff signed-up to their caseloads all eligible students who came in the door, any staff member would help any student with college-related questions.

The college center served as the school wide hub for fee waivers for the SAT and other testing. It was also a place students would come to hang-out, work on computers, and print their work. Staff never rejected a reasonable resource request, like printing out a classroom assignment, even if it was not college related work. By the time students reached senior year, the college center and its staff were viewed as friendly, helpful and familiar. By making it a place where students felt comfortable, they were able to help many more students with questions big and small. They were also able to be proactive in the school, expanding the colleges students looked at as well as students’ understanding of financial aid.

Beyond functioning as a day-to-day resource, the college center put on two workshops a year for students’ families guiding them on the path to college. These workshops included sophomore, junior and senior students who were broken into groups so staff could provide the most relevant information to students’ families. They also served dinner and provided translation services to attract and accommodate a range of families particularly those facing the greatest degree of challenge in navigating the application system. Beyond informing parents of the process, these workshops explained the range of services provided by the college center including strategies for navigating financial aid. This meant that both students and their parents knew of the school-based resources available.

In addition to these workshops, at the same time each month and with the same full-dinner offering, the school hosted other sessions that were of interest to parents on the current challenges they faced. These sessions related to issues of parenting like how to raise an adolescent to issues of how to budget or how to connect to resources in the community. School then, for families, became a friendly institutional setting that provided resources. This is in contrast to a more common paradigm where low-income parents who visit their children’s schools experience alienation, confusion, and blame for students’ failings. (Lareau, 2003)

The college center staff were frequent visitors to students’ classrooms particularly during junior and senior years. They provided full class lessons on what makes a successful college essay and what pitfalls to avoid including exercises where students discussed the quality of writing samples and practiced editing each other’s work. Staff also read and edited numerous essays from students including many not on their assigned caseload. They spent hours after school in the computer lab assisting students with writing.

Later, when financial aid applications were open, staff repeated this practice to guide students through the complex bureaucracy of aid applications. They also emphasized to students the importance of applying to lesser-known school-based scholarships for at-risk and minority
students explaining that students who received these awards might be accepted to colleges that would otherwise reject them based purely on academics.

Finally, college center staff were key in connecting students to outside networks and external gatekeepers through planned university visits including meetings with admissions staff and through their own networks and connections.

The collectively guided success approach was infused with high expectations and asset-based messaging. It stood in contrast to limited resource pragmatism where discussions focused on not failing courses, meeting academic requirements, staying on track to graduate, and not dropping out. Teachers might mention college, but it was not the primary focus and expectation. Teachers themselves would pass on messages that college was not necessary.

**Conclusion**

Culture in schools, as any other arena does not eliminate the autonomy of the individual. It does however, set standards and expectations for how “good teachers” act. This has a number of impacts that shape behavior and practice within the institution.

First, culture sets out standard practice for how things are done. Under limited resource pragmatism, teachers are expected to focus on their classrooms and not take on institutional issues outside of their narrow role. This had implications for how problems were solved (or not solved), what efforts teachers prioritized with their time, and how the community behaved as a whole. Limited resource pragmatism limited efforts to change larger school practice.

Similarly, collectively guided success defined how teachers “should” operate within the institution—how they interacted with each other and with school-wide problems that arose. In this culture, teachers were expected to confront failures in the institution and generate solutions. They were expected to broaden their role from classroom instructor to mentor for the students they encountered. Though these practices were not formally enforced, the culture set out norms and sanctioned individuals who opted out of the collective.

Though organizational culture does not replace actors’ autonomy it shapes pathways of action and selects out those who do not subscribe to the institution’s philosophies. Because culture is so impactful and intractable, it plays an important role in a school’s capacity to generate academic success for students. Though culture may shift over time, it is challenging for administrators to implement policies that contradict values around what comprises an “effective” school.

While one culture may produce more academic success than another, both are approached with the belief that the actions they invoke are the best way to serve students. Limited resource pragmatists focus on a section of students because they believe that if they dilute their attention to the whole student population, they will see higher failure rates. They also believe that schooling is not necessary or a good fit for all individuals, so it is more important to help those who are motivated than to force everyone into an academic pathway. This cultural outlook looks at a school’s resources and population and makes a determination that a focused approach is the best way to teach.
Collectively guided successors have a stronger belief that education is a universal necessity and therefore all students must be led to pathways of success. In this culture, it is the teachers’ actions that determine the level of school success not students’ motivations or abilities. Therefore, teachers at the school are expected to take on roles outside of classroom instructor and put in more time to promote student success.

While culture shapes school-wide values, it also shapes concrete practices between teachers and within the classroom. The next chapter will explore how culture shaped teachers’ interactions with each other and with students both academically and disciplinarily. This chapter laid out the central philosophies of each culture, the next will look at culture in action in each school.
Chapter Five: Culture in Practice

Cultures in schools are more than abstract ethos, they shape interactions on all levels of the organization. Existing research on school culture generally falls into two buckets:

- Leadership and school change; and
- The cultural orientations of students based on ethnicity, race or income.

The first is aimed predominantly to administrators and policy makers sharing findings for leaders on how to establish effective culture and what elements define “successful” or “toxic” cultures. (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Fullan, 2016; Muhammad, 2018) This literature focuses on school improvement in a political environment of school accountability. It focuses on school culture as a primary driver of this improvement such that leaders who change the institution’s cultures will change the academic outcomes of their schools. Much of it applies corporate and organizational leadership practices to the world of education. Effective practices are translated so that principals can apply them to schools.

From a more sociological perspective there is a substantial literature on the culture of students and how that impacts their educational experience. This literature looks at the barriers for students to succeeding in schools and the mismatches between students’ cultural expectations for appropriate behavior and the expectations of the institution. (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; Carter, 2005; Lareau, 2003; Rosenberg, 1971; Rosenshine, 2005; Teachman, 1996) This cultural mismatch leads to low achievement. Other literature finds that the culture of neighborhoods or students is incompatible with the goals of schooling. (MacLeod, 2018; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2008; Willis, 1981 [1977])

I also include in this category literature that examines teachers’ individual cultural outlooks as members of the middle class and how that shapes their behaviors in the classroom as this too can create mismatches between teachers’ and students. (Blazar & Kraft, 2017; Zajda & Freeman, 2009) Studies on teachers’ treatment of students based on gender and race fall into this category. (Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel, 2008) These studies focus on behaviors emerging from teachers’ backgrounds, not their experiences as part of the institution.

A much smaller literature exists on the professional world of teachers examining how they interact and behave and how these are linked to school outcomes. (Rosenholtz, 2000) This literature examines the aspects of the work environment that impact collaboration, efficacy, job commitment, decision-making, and effectiveness. While this literature provides important insights into teacher behavior, it does not look at the links between institutional culture and teacher behavior.

Missing from the literature is research on how school cultures translate into behaviors between staff and within the classroom. This chapter looks at the kinds of behaviors that emerge in different school cultures and why divergent understandings of what comprises an effective school results in these behaviors.
Culturally Motivated Behavior in this Study

Within any setting exists a range of behaviors between individuals and even within the same individual. In order to study how culture shapes behavior, one must first define what distinguishes behaviors that are impacted by an institutions’ culture from the diverse sets of behaviors exhibited. Individuals in an organization do not behave identically despite an overlap in values and beliefs.

Culturally motivated behaviors must be discreetly defined for analysis to be meaningful. For the purpose of this study, these behaviors are distinguished by the following characteristics.

- They are patterned, repeating and common—unfolding similarly in similar situations among a range of individuals.
- They are encouraged and reinforced by other members of the organization in speech and action.
- Deviance to these behaviors is sanctioned formally or informally by other members of the organization.
- They are durable and enduring, emerging in a large range of contexts and persisting despite situational or administrative challenges.
- While these behaviors may change overtime, this change will require persistent challenge and a change in the dominant values held by members of the institution.

These culturally motivated behaviors are key to how an institution operates because they are common and enduring. Culturally motivated behaviors then comprise the “way the school works.” These behaviors persist even when their logic or justification is no longer relevant.

Teacher Roles: Leaders vs. Followers

Collectively guided success and limited resources pragmatism result in very different role definitions for teachers. Under collectively guided success, teachers have broad roles and feel responsible both in and outside the classroom to increase students’ academic success. For these teachers, the most effective way to help students is to be good teachers in the classroom, support the practice of other teachers, and develop school-wide solutions to help struggling students. Teachers have as much responsibility as administrators to generate ideas and lead the school in new directions to better serve students.

Under limited resource pragmatism, teachers maintain more limited and focused roles. There is a stronger separation between the leadership role of the administration and the implementation role of the teacher. Teachers focus on the area they can best impact—their classrooms. Teachers who work to change policy outside of their classroom are viewed as busybodies who are investing time in marginal endeavors. In schools dominated by the culture of limited resource pragmatism, leaders set policy and teachers implement to a greater or lesser extent depending on their beliefs in the initiatives passed down. Teachers’ viewpoints get expressed in how they implement ideas from the administration not in direct lobbying of the administration for change.
Their roles as leaders or followers shape how teachers engage with problems that arise and how they implement new initiatives. When teachers are leaders, they see problem solving as a key function of their role. Programs are a starting point for these teachers who take it on themselves to adapt the programs to their students. These teachers are always innovating—if there’s a problem they make changes to try to solve it.

When teachers are followers, they implement programs and initiatives but do not change them. Their roles are narrow in the school and even when they see problems that occur over and over, they feel powerless to make changes. These teachers may make changes within their own classroom but not seek to change larger structures.

In Deensboro, the role of expert on the organization was held by the principals and vice principals, not the teachers. Administrators were the ones who “knew” about the institution and problem solved. In contrast, at Grantsville, teachers were the experts. They were the ones who generated initiatives, observations, and trainings.

The way each school culture manifested in terms of teacher roles had implications for the effectiveness of the school. Findings show that when programs were not adapted to students, they did not match their needs. When problems arose, teachers as followers and implementers did not make changes. Practices, even problematic ones, tended to stagnate.

Role definitions shaped behavior at both schools. At Deensboro, teachers could speak articulately about the struggles students faced, why current school practices were not working, and they accurately reflected the holes in student knowledge. Yet, despite all of this, teachers did not work to change practice outside of their classrooms, even so far as to problem solve with one or two other teachers facing similar challenges. Ineffective practices became entrenched and teachers faced some of the same issues, year after year. It was also hard for teachers to implement challenging programs because of their isolation and lack of collaboration.

**Informal Collaboration**

Effective collaboration produces robust teacher networks that share information and solve problems collectively. Teachers learn from each other and engage in training and improvement together. Some teachers have relationships and activities that extend beyond school hours whether it is happy hour together or baseball games. Researchers have found that these types of relationships bond employees to their organization and make them more likely to independently engage in initiatives to help the organization even without an expectation of direct personal benefit. (Bolino et al., 2002; Leana, 1999) At an under-resourced school, this itself becomes an asset.

In their study of effective schools, Stein and Coburn sensitize us to the fact that though the work of teachers is embedded in a larger school environment, only some of it may be mandated by the organization. In schools with a limited resource pragmatism orientation, even mandated collaboration can be ineffective. On the opposite end of the spectrum, schools with collectively guided success orientations benefit from official collaboration structures and seek out informal opportunities to provide help, access help from others, take on independent
planning, learning or evaluation projects and just generally work together more often and in more meaningful ways. (C. E. Coburn, 2001; Stein, 2008)

Because collaborative environments synergize resources to maximize programmatic effectiveness, schools with collectively guided success cultures are better able to support complex programs. Deensboro and Grantsville contained several parallel programs that showed success rates in national data. Implementing these programs and adapting them to students’ needs was a challenge for teachers at both schools.

Because of Grantsville’s penchant for collaboration and sharing best practices, teachers were more effective at implementing challenging initiatives that required specialized teaching skills or resources outside of the classroom. In schools with a limited resources pragmatism culture, teachers view their endeavors and challenges as individual, not collective. When teachers see their work lives as unique to their particular classroom, collaborating with others does not appear to be an effective aid. Further, research shows that isolated teachers are more likely to believe that their struggles are their own and other teachers do not face problems. Collaboration in this environment becomes a threat to teachers’ self-esteem as they must admit to problems they believe no one else is having. (Rosenholtz, 2000)

In collectively guided success cultures, teachers are more aware of their shared struggles and therefore have less fear that exposing the challenges in their classroom will reveal them to be incompetent teachers. “In collaborative settings, on the contrary, teaching is defined as an inherently difficult undertaking; one that challenges the best of teachers. And if even the most capable teachers need help in similar situations, there is little reason to question one’s own sense of professional worth.” (Rosenholtz, 2000)

The example of a program that existed in both schools, AVID, illustrates how teachers’ ability to effectively implement the program was shaped by behavior emerging from the school culture. This meant that even when, for example, more collective strategies would be the most helpful, teachers with a limited resources pragmatism orientation would still act independently. The experience at both schools illustrated that even when a program has shown success in national data, culture impacted the effectiveness of implementation.

AVID was a program geared toward getting first generation low-income students into college. Students in the program had one period of AVID every day starting freshman or sophomore year through senior year, theoretically with the same teacher all four years. Twice a week, students would have “tutorials” where they would spend the class in small groups working through problems in math, English, Science, History or from any subject in which they were struggling. Students were supposed to be assisted by college tutors during these sessions.

While AVID was a well-established national program with lots of trainings and guidance available to participating schools, the implementation itself was extremely variable classroom to classroom even within the same school. This variation points to the challenges in implementing the complex AVID tutorials system. Teachers at both schools struggled to make this program work. Both the strategies they used and their ability to bring about good outcomes revealed a great deal about how culture impacted teacher actions thereby shaping their ability to succeed with challenging initiatives and endeavors.
To successfully implement AVID, teachers had to be effective at a range of duties: bringing in outside resources like college tutors and internship or volunteer opportunities for students; keeping students committed to the program, its goals, and keeping their GPAs high; training themselves and students on the complex instructions for tutorials; and building strong mentorship relationships and community within the program. None of these were easy for teachers.

At Grantsville, one of the first things the Sophomore AVID teacher, Ms. Davis, said to me about her first year in the program was, “I'm a good teacher, not a great teacher, but a good teacher and I've never failed like that before.” To give context, all evidence pointed to this being a modest assessment of her skills. Ms. Davis, a history teacher in all periods but AVID, had won multiple teaching awards and her counsel was frequently sought by others in the school. About her Principal Howard commented, “History is our strongest department and Ms. Davis is one of our best teachers.”

Grantsville’s collectively guided success orientation allowed teachers to discuss challenges with each other and with administrators and identified resources and solutions. In contrast, Deensboro’s teachers operated individually with varied levels of success, no sharing of techniques that worked, and a limited ability to pull together necessary resources. The program looked different in each Deensboro teacher’s classroom and little cross-class collaboration occurred.

AVID teachers at both schools also struggled with running tutorials on math or science when they were English or History teachers. These tended to be the subjects with which students consistently struggled. To address this challenge, the AVID teachers and vice principal at Grantsville recruited a math and a science teacher into AVID to take on new cohorts of students. They also ensured that at least one of the college tutors that helped in all AVID classes twice a week had a math or science background.

Even at Grantsville, AVID did not always run smoothly. Sometimes tutorials went well and students were able to help each other, other times they did not and students could not figure out math problems or essay prompts that confused them. If the teacher was stumped, he or she might be forced to send the student back to their core subject teacher.

However, Grantsville’s culture of collaboration identified the program’s successes and weak spots. The high level of participation of administrators, college counselors, and teachers meant that problems were more quickly identified and assets from multiple areas of the school could be brought to bear. Counselors took an active role in planning college visits for AVID students and ensuring that students were able to attend. Administrators ensured budgetary funds were available to pay for college tutors twice a week for every AVID class. And teachers shared ideas when students struggled with key aspects of the program they actively shared knowledge and assets. For example, the Freshman AVID teacher, Mr. Harley, was a science teacher who was in his first few years at the school. Ms. Davis recruited him to bolster the program but she also mentored him, as a veteran teacher, on teaching struggles he faced.

Grantsville’s collaborative culture highlighted the idea that everyone struggled. When the strongest teachers openly discussed their challenges it made room for others to seek out help.
without fear of losing face. Ms. Davis was one of the best in the school but embraced innate challenges and reached out to colleagues. She knew when she could be better. She knew when there were things she did not know. She was unafraid to admit when she needed help or when different kinds of teachers were important for the program. In these ways, Grantsville’s collective culture allowed them to be more successful in implementing a challenging program because they pooled their resources and knowledge and engaged a diverse set of actors in overcoming issues that arose.

Like Grantsville, Deensboro teachers struggled with effectively implementing AVID but were also hindered by a culture of autonomy and isolation. Teachers dealt with struggles on their own, rarely sharing best practices they developed. The culture of distrust between teachers and administrators hindered them from aligning their efforts, sharing challenges, and distributing resources. These issues resulted from behaviors on the part of teachers and administrators that were motivated by Deensboro’s culture.

The first bucket of challenges at Deensboro were the problems that emerged from the lack of communication or collaboration between the administrators and teachers. The administration viewed AVID as a place to put struggling students where they would receive more specialized attention. However, minimal communication with teachers or participation with the program meant that administrators had little feedback on why this was not working.

At Deensboro, the administration eliminated the application process typically required of students. The program was designed for highly motivated first-generation students who were committed to maintaining a high GPA for all four years of high school. At Deensboro, Vice Principals and counselors placed their most struggling students in the program with no application process and little knowledge of what the program entailed. AVID was not designed to be an effective intervention for students in danger of failing or dropping out. As a result, students scheduled in the program did not understand its purpose or intent and teachers were frustrated that some students lacked the commitment or preparedness to succeed.

Ms. Clarey, the Sophomore AVID teacher aired her frustrations at the way the AVID program was run, “Nothing about this program is done like it’s supposed to be. Students are supposed to apply and have high GPAs. This class shows up and they don’t know what the program is about and say their counselor assigned them. No one applied and most of them wouldn’t have the GPA to qualify. These students are failing some of their classes, they’re not capable of AVID tutorials. None of them are going to college.”

Deensboro’s individualized culture also meant that teachers and administrators did not align on outside resources like college tutors and school visits that were required parts of the program. Elements that took commitment of both administrators and teachers never materialized.

The second bucket of challenges were the result of teacher behavior toward each other that reflected the values of limited resource pragmatism. AVID teachers rarely met with each other as there was no formal collaboration time and informal collaboration was outside the cultural norm. The result was that AVID was not a cohesive program and teachers were not in a position to retool program operations when problems arose.
Because of the lack of collaboration, teachers each struggled with the program alone and classrooms had different levels of success. In AVID, the process of tutorials is particularly challenging because students must learn a complex, scripted system of identifying gaps in their own learning and working to support each other in solving their own questions through a Socratic method led by students. This is a challenging task for any high schooler let alone those struggling to pass most of their classes. The result was significant variation in how successfully the program was implemented in different classrooms.

In one classroom, Ms. Clarey, the Sophomore AVID teacher, gave up on tutorials early in the year, despite them being the center of the AVID program, because she determined that they were too difficult for students. The following year, when Ms. Clarey left the school, the students that remained in AVID were assigned to Ms. Martin who attended AVID training on her own. With Ms. Martin, these same students, now Juniors, were engaging in the tutorial process with the majority bringing their pre-work to class. Those that did not were held accountable and excluded from tutorial groups so they could do the work on their own. She reminds them, “Doing what you know you need to do is the definition of responsibility.”

They also practiced UC essay prompts. She encouraged peer editing so students could learn from the strengths of others in the class. The essays were personal stories but she encouraged students who liked another’s writing style to try to copy it in their own essays.

Teacher skill, motivation and ability to individually problem solve played an important role in effectiveness for Deensboro AVID teachers because resources were not readily available and distributed program wide. This was evidenced by the experience of Ms. Clarey and Ms. Martin and the experience of Ms. Cantero who taught the next year’s Sophomore AVID class.

Ms. Cantero had a good rapport with students and had successfully developed a scaffolded approach to teaching the tutorial process. At the start of the year, students learned and practiced the first part of the process, developing a good question. When this was mastered, they moved on to practicing the next step in the tutorials process. Once they had practiced all parts, she began the tutorials by restricting the subject each week. This way, students would all be working on History or Science or Math at the same time. They could then compare what other students did well and incorporate it into their own tutorials process next time. Also, students were prepped to work on a similar set of tutorial questions each week. Within a couple months Ms. Cantero’s Sophomores were executing the entire tutorial process in groups.

Ms. Cantero had to develop how to teach tutorials on her own as little communication between teachers meant that she did not have the benefit of their knowledge and experience. Conversely, other AVID teachers did not benefit from the work she did to find an effective way to teach tutorials. This meant that teacher knowledge and practice did not contribute to the overall success of the program. Rather than capitalizing on each other’s strengths and innovations, Deensboro’s AVID teachers had only their own ingenuity and the resources they acquired for themselves.

The examples of AVID at Grantsville and Deensboro exemplify how culture shapes implementation behaviors. Both schools faced the challenge of bringing in a complex program to guide first generation students to college. At Grantsville, the collective culture facilitated
effective knowledge sharing, resource acquisition and problem solving. Teachers worked
together to maximize the impact of the techniques they developed to benefit all students in the
program. In this way, individual knowledge became institutional knowledge. Administrators had
high levels of familiarity and participation with students so they were able to see firsthand what
resources were necessary to maximize the program’s effectiveness. These resources like outside
tutors and college visits were shared across all AVID classrooms. Additionally, teachers were
invested in the overall AVID program, not just their classroom, and therefore identified and
addressed issues like the necessity of science and math teachers that improved the program’s
success. This is how culture was practiced in implementing AVID.

In contrast, Deensboro’s AVID program struggled because of a cultural orientation
toward autonomy and non-collaboration. Administrators and teachers did not work together to
acquire resources, so teacher quality varied by the ability and interest of individual teachers. The
culture also meant that successful innovations never made it beyond classroom walls to impact
the program as a whole. Conversely, there was no outside support for teachers who could not
overcome challenges. In addition, total autonomy meant that there was no development or
administration of expectations of teachers in the program through peer collaboration and the
pressure of the group to enforce norms.

**Mandated Collaboration**

Both Grantsville and Deensboro had some amount of mandatory collaboration time
however the content and productivity of collaboration were reflective of each schools’ culture.
While at Grantsville, results of collaboration could be observed in impactful ways in classroom
instruction, Deensboro’s collaboration, designed to create more unified classrooms, often
resulted in surface aspects of unity rather than core teaching similarities.

Collaboration must be measured both in quantity and in quality. Teachers may spend
hours meeting but develop nothing useful for their classrooms. While teacher networks at
Grantsville developed new initiatives, improved lesson planning, and restructured curriculum,
Deensboro teachers struggled to align basic practices across classrooms. The individualistic
culture and passive roles for teachers meant that even formalized, mandated, and compensated
 collaboration programs floundered.

One program mandating collaboration at Deensboro was the “Small Schools Program.”
The struggles of this program to generate joint practices and solve problems is an example of
how schools with limited resource pragmatism schools practice collaboration mandated by the
administration.

While on paper, the small schools initiative at Deensboro represented an opportunity to
facilitate joint planning and problem solving, the results did not live up. Collaboration time was
driven by the priorities of the administration and ranged in content including: determining
common practices from a list provided at a training teachers attended, listing failing students and
discussing their collective experiences with these students, planning initiatives to intervene with
failing students and to engage their families, planning team building days, deciding on the format
and recipients for awards, and reading articles about teaching and discussing their applicability to
their classrooms. Because of the culture of limited resource pragmatism, Deensboro teachers did not place tremendous value on the potential of collaborative time.

Different families adopted rote practices to unify their classroom routines: mandating that all students had notebooks that would be kept in the back of the room and checked periodically; starting each period with a do now question; asking students to compile grade reports from the online system monthly. With each family, some of the teachers followed the agreed-upon practices while others did not. Generally, the families implemented shared strategies without full consistency and little discussion about whether or not these practices had key linkages to student success. Though there might be touch-points like notebook checks between classrooms in the same family, students experienced the majority of their classes as independent entities.

For example, one group of teachers agreed early in the year to create “Puma Power Reports” where every week they would send students home with a list of missing assignments. This required all teachers to fill out students’ forms for their class every week. By the second week, only half the teachers were filling out the report and were frustrated the others who had agreed to the practice were not following through.

Within another couple weeks the program was scrapped. One of the math teachers explained, “It just became too frustrating. We agreed that every teacher would make students look up their missing assignments but only two of us were doing it, so what’s the point?”

Teachers’ lack of investment in the program as a meaningful lever for student success was apparent on many levels. Most of the small schools struggled to find someone willing to take on the responsibility of being the leader for the school team. More than one leader had reluctantly taken on the role when no one else would volunteer.

This is not to say that no practices productive to student investment and community emerged from the program. Even the mandated face time sometimes resulted in sharing of skills and knowledge, like how to more effectively use the online grading system, that teachers felt were relevant to their daily practice. Teachers had organic informal discussions at the beginnings or ends of meetings most often about students whose misbehavior was hard to manage. Occasionally teachers teaching the same subject, like Algebra I, would have short discussions about how they were progressing through the course timeline and if there were resources they could share with each other.

Because of the strongly individualistic culture, teachers were not invested in unifying classroom practices across subjects. The culture meant that teachers were most invested in time that directly benefitted their classrooms and least engaged in collaborative processes that only helped others. Because of this, newer teachers were frequently “on their own” to solve challenges as they had little interaction with the veteran teachers of the school.

Like Deensboro, Grantsville had collaboration structures built into the weekly schedule. These structures facilitated planning for key shared courses so that teachers could jointly design learning activities relevant to the week’s course objectives. Teachers were able to use collaborative planning periods to share lesson activities and resources. These resulted in touch points and parallel lessons between classrooms in the same subject.
At Grantsville, the Geometry curriculum was rigorous with lessons that centered around student discovery and problem solving. The rigors of these lessons required creative planning which was done during joint planning sessions built into teachers’ prep schedules. Because these classroom activities deviated from the textbook assignments, they required more planning than one teacher could manage. Joint planning pooled teachers’ expertise and time to collectively create solutions to problems that emerged in multiple classrooms and to tailor weekly lessons to struggling students.

**Culture and Classroom Approaches**

Beyond shaping how teachers interact with each other, with administrators, and how they enact their roles in the larger institution, culture shapes how classrooms operate within a school. Within classrooms, culture determines how teachers teach material, what they deem important for students to learn, and their expectations for academic achievement and behavior. Classrooms can be places of learning or warehouses for students. While curriculum is a key piece of the structure of a school, how teachers approach and implement the curriculum is shaped by institutional culture.

Classrooms are also the stages of production for a school. If the output of a school is educated children, the classroom is the factory floor. Management can provide training, instructions, or even coercive measures but it is the daily work in the classroom that ultimately determines the success or failure of the school as a whole. At any school, classrooms represent a combination of teacher autonomy and larger organizational vision. To differing extents, they reflect an integration of school wide philosophy, instruction, expectations and programs with teacher style and skills. This is why classrooms within the school have differences but also share similarities that are shaped by the larger school’s structure and culture.

Schools have shared values about what comprises a functional classroom that derive from their vision of an “effective” school. In a culture of limited resource pragmatism, the classroom does not have to be the epitome of academic rigor. Classrooms must adhere to the rules of the school in terms of behavior and curriculum but student achievement may be secondary to implementing the curriculum as written. This has implications for how classrooms in a limited resources pragmatism school function and what priorities dominate. For teachers and administrators, maintaining classroom control and implementing mandatory standards from the state, district, and school are the bones of a high school education.

In a culture of collectively guided success academic rigor has to be sufficient for almost all students to pass the high school exit exams and perform decently on college prep exams. Because achievement goals are ambitious and universal, a successful classroom is one in which students are mastering grade level content and behavior is not the dominant focus.

Given the deficits faced by low-income students, teachers also expand instruction time past the traditional school day. In order for academics to play a prominent role in students’ lives, teachers and school officials increase their involvement in students’ lives in after-school hours and evenings through sports, clubs, tutoring, volunteering programs and other special programs that pair students and teachers in after-school hours. The school also actively recruits parental
involvement to support educational goals. Under culturally guided success, the school dominates the time and therefore efforts and values of students and their families.

The Importance of Quiet

Managing behavior can become a major focus of a school. Both the organization and classrooms can find themselves in a tug of war between an academic and behavioral focus. For some, a successful classroom is one in which students engage in discussion and group work—it is lively and focuses on collaborative learning. For others, a successful classroom is one in which students are quiet and focused without behavioral interruptions or distractions. While academics and behavior are not an innate dichotomy, after all, effective learning requires both, teachers and schools can focus more on one to the detriment of the other.

The attention given to each priority is reflected by the concentration of resources in the institution from administrator initiatives to classroom teaching time. When a behavioral focus takes over, silence in the classroom becomes the mark of success. Teachers then choose strategies to keep the room silent even when they undercut learning. Classrooms for low-income students are particularly prone to valuing silence and “good behavior” over a noisier classroom even if students are engaged in learning. (L. M. McNeil, 1983)

Discussion and participation make classroom control harder to maintain. When discipline becomes a top priority, teachers provide lecture and independent work where enforcing silence is the focus of control and the straight-forward criterion for good behavior. (Bickmore, 1993; L. McNeil, 1986; L. M. McNeil, 1983; Metz, 1978) By not allowing students to engage with each other or the teacher during class, students are pushed to learn on their own. This is particularly challenging for low-income students who tend to do worse academically in student-centered classrooms that lack sufficient teacher guidance and instruction. (Chall, 2000)

The goals of quiet and control dominated Deensboro classrooms. This manifested as letting students listen to headphones or other means of being off task but quiet. It also limited things like group work or class discussion which were harder to manage and maintain good behavior. Quietness itself became a proxy for success and good behavior a proxy for learning.

Discipline was a dominant priority throughout the organization with the Vice Principals of the lower grades focusing on disciplinary over programmatic leadership. Even the bathrooms were on lockdown the majority of the year after a students’ iPhone was stolen. Students were only allowed in bathrooms one at a time and had to locate a custodian to unlock the door for them. Students could not be trusted even to use the bathroom, communicating an expectation that misbehavior would be the norm if strong controls were not in place.

When discipline dominates, school then shifts from being an institution of learning to one Foucault would describe as control and management. (Foucault, 1977) This was augmented by the frequent practice of re-assigning seats and re-configuring chairs to separate students and create order in the classroom. In Deensboro, seat changes were frequent in every class I observed. Re-organizing bodies in the classroom was a favorite way to manage behavior whether it was moving students to new spots or reconfiguring the room from groups to rows to horse-shoe shaped configurations. A classroom’s seating chart could change as often as weekly to
shuffle students into new positions where the loudest would be closer to the teacher and separated from peers with whom they talked. Sometimes this involved re-arranging the desks themselves to create maximum space between students. At least every couple weeks, classrooms were moving students to gain better control and management.

In order to keep the class quiet, many teachers would allow students to skip assignments or work on work from any class as long as they did not talk. For the chattiest students, teachers would compromise by allowing them to wear earbuds throughout class. If loud chatter and chaos interrupted when teachers implemented lessons, some, lacking other effective tools of classroom control, would reduce the frequency of planned lessons replacing them instead with “study halls” where students could work on anything they wanted. Quietness was positive even if students are doing other work or no work at all.

In schools that operate according to limited resource pragmatism, an “unsuccessful” classroom is one in which misbehavior and noise dominate. At Deensboro, struggling classrooms were those in which a cacophony of off-topic sound would fill the classroom from fall to summer. In these classrooms, time was taken up with discipline or ignoring discipline problems. It would take only a couple loud students to de-rail class day-after-day and when the teacher lost all semblance of control, kids would yell across the room continuing flagrant misbehavior even when the teacher walked over. Notes from a typical day in one such classroom:

When the 2 boys return from the bathroom—one was gone for over half an hour, they are very off task. Kids are yelling across the room and fighting and squabbling even when the teacher walks over to help them. They ignore him and continue to talk, curse, say vulgar jokes to each other. For his part, he just stands there and does not correct them, just waits. The two boys continue to talk for the rest of the period, disrupting the rest of the class. While he thinks of period 2 as “the loud class” it is really just 2 students who manage to generate noise and chaos for the rest of the class. They effectively pull in a girl sitting in front of them. The boys continue for the rest of the period in yelling but the teacher seems to feel like a passive victim to their behavior. “Remember we’re professional students” he reminds them. They say, “I can do whatever I want.” The level of disregard is so high that even when the teacher is standing right there, the behavior doesn’t change. Both his verbal techniques and discipline strategies do not resonate. They do not care if they lose points. Other students in the class need the teacher’s help but he is distracted by the boys. They have more outbursts when he walks away and they even take out their phones. The boys talk about highly inappropriate topics. Discuss smoking and where to smoke in the school and where they have smoked for 5 minutes but the teacher does nothing.

The value placed on silence is noteworthy because of what it substituted—more lively and engaged learning styles like discussions and group work. Instead teachers would shy away from assignments students might deem challenging focusing instead on coloring or low-level learning objectives.

In contrast, both Math and English classes at Grantsville incorporated frequent group work. These classrooms were not silent and sometimes disruptive behavior emerged, however
teachers relied on relationships with students and an ability to address behavior on a one-on-one basis to manage it. Grantsville classrooms tolerated a much higher level of noise.

At Grantsville, where independent learning was a top priority, teachers spent more time creating lesson plans that generated effective student activities while Deensboro’s plans were closer to the textbook. Grantsville was also more able to embrace alternative learning methodologies because they were not as dominated by the culture of silence which discouraged teaching practices that generated noise or risked the loss of classroom control.

Student efficacy was a key instructional value at Grantsville. Classroom practices at Grantsville encouraged independence and collaboration such that students were able to solve problems and learn without constant support from teachers.

Grantsville’s math curriculum frequently pushed students to find patterns and solve puzzles in small groups that allowed students to derive the next piece of knowledge or apply what they had learned in more challenging ways. Students were encouraged to turn to their peers for support, not just the teacher. For example, in a Calculus class, when a student asked the teacher to review a second homework problem similar to the one she just solved on the board, the teacher told her to try applying the same strategy they just used, rather than solving the problem.

In Algebra II, students played a silent board game where they had to complete a patterned list of numbers by figuring out the function generating the list. As students got the pattern, the teacher let them put the next number in the sequence on the board without saying how they got it so there were more hints, but students still had to figure it out on their own. The function was $2$ to the $y$ power and after the pattern was completed on the worksheet, the teacher asked them to write out a rule. She then had them convert the pattern to log equations as a way to practice logs. This is just one example of how Grantsville teachers asked students to use their knowledge base to teach themselves the next steps. This methodology of teaching encouraged independent learning in students while building their confidence in their ability to discover new mathematical ideas and apply mathematical principles to a range of problems.

At Deensboro, teachers played a more constant support role to students—aware that students felt unable to progress with independent work without the teacher next to them. In the extreme, students would stop working entirely until the teacher was able to assist with the next question or problem.

When students struggled with a concept, teachers often had to juggle assisting multiple students in order to move them forward in their work. This created gridlock in the classroom as students relied on the teacher for help often asking him to work with them on each problem rather than helping each other or accessing their notes. Many students would only work when the teacher was standing over them.
Implementing the Curriculum

In addition to leadership policies and practices, schools are structured by the curriculum supplied by the state, district, and school. While principals choose initiatives and curricular guidelines, teachers choose how these are implemented.

Even within the structure of curriculum, teachers have a great deal of leeway in the content of their teaching. These decisions are shaped by outside standards, the current capabilities of their students, their skills, beliefs, and preferences, and the culture of the school.

Within the structure of a given curriculum dictated by the state, district or administration, there are three major elements that teachers control within their classroom: how much they focus on basics vs. rigor; how committedly and effectively they implement as directed; and what non-curricular skills they teach in their classrooms. Each of these areas has a major impact on the learning experiences of students.

Teachers, particularly those in low-income schools, must make decisions about how to balance teaching basics and higher-level material. Students who lack the basics will be unready to learn more advanced material. On the other hand, students with large gaps in their learning can end up in classrooms that only teach the most basic material and never bridge to advanced areas that will provide them with thinking skills crucial to future success. Nowhere is this more acute than in a low-income high school where gaps in knowledge have compounded over years of schooling but these are also the last years some students will be in a classroom, so standards require higher level thinking and advanced topics. The decisions teachers make, even within a curricular framework, greatly shape student outcomes.

In addition to implementing the standard curriculum, administrators require teachers to implement specific units, initiatives, programs or practices. In enacting programs, teachers choose strategies that range from form focused implementation where they implement what is instructed with little modification for their classrooms and little commitment to the outcome to function focused implementation which reflects a deeper commitment to the goals of the program and attempts to customize the program to meet students’ needs and maximize the potential of achieving the program’s goals. (C. Coburn, 2004)

Finally, teachers make decisions about what types of non-academic skills or values they teach in their classroom. These are things like autonomy, self-reliance, navigating bureaucracy in the school, advocating for oneself with other teachers, etc. These reflect the values deemed most important by the individual and school culture and are important to helping students navigate academic environments.

All three elements are shaped, in part, by school culture. Though teachers have a large amount of independence and privacy within their classroom, there are elements of implementation that are consistent among many classrooms in a school and reflect teachers’ relationships with administrators and shared values about effective schooling and its goals.
Content Decisions in the Classroom

Grantsville’s focus on college attendance meant that teachers needed to consistently elevate content beyond basics. Teachers did not ignore gaps in the basic knowledge necessary to master grade-level material. Instead, teachers strategically taught just the basics that were relevant to the grade-level material they wanted to cover. Students at Grantsville were also regularly assigned and completed homework. In addition, when students struggled, they sought resources outside of class time whether with their teachers, counselors, or in the college center.

Deensboro’s focus on getting students to graduation resulted in two opposing strategies. Some teachers simplified the curriculum and assignments so most of the students would succeed. Class would consist of coloring or listening to a book on tape and little homework was assigned. While students would leave these classes with a below grade level mastery of the material, the bar for passing was low enough that they could continue on to the next grade.

In classes where requirements were more concrete, teachers would teach the curriculum without pausing to address students’ knowledge gaps even though many of the students could not follow along and pass the course. This was particularly true of math courses where passing criteria was more objective and rigid. Both situations would result in students struggling to pass the state exit exam for graduation. While the exam was first administered in tenth grade, many students were still attempting to pass the test during their senior year. In each case, cultural expectations for performance impacted teaching strategies within the framework of the curriculum.

At Grantsville, basics provided the foundation for extension and were selected because they represented necessary chunks of knowledge without which grade level content was hard to understand. Supplementing with basics is not the same as teaching only low-level knowledge. Rather, the basics were challenging to students and connected to complex grade-level content. Basics might be parts of math in which students struggled that were necessary for the day’s lesson or weekly vocabulary related to challenging readings. They were not coloring a scene from a story or completing worksheets with level one questions.

At Deensboro, math students struggled with basic knowledge that impacted almost every unit: order of operations, lines, square roots, negative numbers, basic shape calculations of area and perimeter, and general number line/integer skills. Struggles with these areas impacted the majority of students making each module a challenge from the beginning. One teacher tackled the challenges through ten minute do now problems at the start of class that asked about connected basic content but provided little re-instruction. Another urged students to come during lunch or after-school for additional help but few did.

English classes faced challenges that were qualitatively different but fared no better in overcoming their challenges to increase student learning. Limited books meant that class time had to focus on reading because there were not enough for all students to take books home. Even with units where enough books existed much of class was spent reading silently or aloud because students did not complete reading homework or teachers believed that reading together was the best method to ensure universal comprehension. One of the results was, even in a Junior honors English class where students frequently asked for more discussion of the books, little discussion
High school students read books and answered worksheets or drew scenes from the books with markers and crayons. These materials were handed to the teacher and scored but the focus of classroom time was on completion of the assignments, not on utilizing the reading to build stronger skills in understanding and analyzing literature.

Even vocabulary was not connected to the reading in a way that would facilitate greater understanding of challenging texts. This disconnection between the vocabulary and reading undercut a synergy that would have aligned basics to best facilitate student learning.

Grantsville classrooms strategically taught the basics that linked to higher-level concepts. They utilized vocabulary and summary as a launching pad to facilitate challenging readings and deep conceptual discussions, not as ends in and of themselves. The level of the readings and discussion were higher at every grade level at Grantsville. At Grantsville, students read *Salome*, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, Edgar Allen Poe Poems, *The Color Purple*, and *Death of a Salesman*. They discussed aestheticism, romanticism, and the American dream. They discussed symbolism and engaged in close readings. Teachers found ways to present complex vocabulary, concepts, and readings so that students could understand and participate.

One of Grantsville’s teachers, Mr. Russo, started every unit with his “World Famous Vocabulary Chart” providing relevant vocabulary. The vocabulary and reading were tied into a unit like romanticism, and he would act out the words, provide historical context, and provide examples that were funny and relevant. Students learned definitions and started each unit with a foundation that allowed them to understand the readings.

Classroom activities set students up to write their own poetry and understand poetry with dense language and complex themes. Sophomores could read a sequence of books and relate how each critiqued the concept of the American Dream. The vocabulary students learned took shape in memorable ways and was utilized immediately to aid reading comprehension.

One class started with the question, “Is my happiness contingent on others?” He had students write answers to this question which launched a discussion about utopias and dystopias. The class read “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” stopping after the first paragraph to discuss the imagery and how it was meant to make the reader feel. He reminded them to “be meta-cognitive—think about the author’s purpose.” The class discussed the author’s intention and the questions that arose about whether or not a utopia is a place they would want to live. In returning to the opening question, students tied themes in the reading to the modern world of sweat shops.

In this way, students were able to understand a challenging reading and learn higher level skills of close reading, thematic and symbolic analysis, and how to approach a large conceptual question using text and real-world examples.

**Implementation Styles: Form-Focused vs. Function Focused**

Teachers’ beliefs and the culture of the school shape how effectively they translate new ideas and programs to their classrooms. For new initiatives to be implemented whole-heartedly by teachers, teachers must understand their goals and purpose and have buy-in towards these
ends. Without this shift in belief created through repeated engagement and interaction around core ideas of change, behavior shifts are more superficial than meaningful and initiatives may not achieve full impact and effectiveness. (C. Coburn, 2004)

Stein and Coburn studied how belief and engagement impact implementation and found a dramatically marked difference in effectiveness between teaching bodies that were given directives to implement and training on just the skills necessary and those given directives along with deep engagement in ongoing evaluation and meaning making around new ideas. Teachers that were engaged in understanding the purpose of the changes and how best to integrate them with current practices were far more effective. Teachers merely given directives and implementation guides without deeper engagement resulted in “marking compliance” where teachers were focused mostly on implementing procedures rote ly. (Stein, 2008)

While Coburn focused on the effectiveness of teacher implementation based on the congruence of new initiatives to existing beliefs on instructional practice, I broaden this to include existing beliefs about the organization as a whole and the quality of teachers’ relationships to those providing the mandate. While congruence to instructional beliefs is important, teachers are also more willing to adopt new ideas from administrators with whom they have a good relationship and see as valuing their contributions vs. administrators with whom they are combative and see as not believing in their skill set.

When teachers frequently partner with administrators, information flows are bidirectional, and decision-making is inclusive, teachers are more apt to see new initiatives as a positive means to support them rather than mechanisms of control or critiques on their current abilities. How teachers’ feel about the credibility of messages is based on their relationship to the source. These feelings impact implementation of ideas in the classroom.

Teacher beliefs and their relationships to the larger organization is critical in the success or failure of new initiatives. At Deensboro teachers did not opt out of ideas imposed by the administration, quite the opposite. Teachers frequently opted for form-focused implementation where they would execute directives in a rote way and avoid deeper problem solving or modifying the programs to make it successful in their classrooms. Even in situations where teachers were frustrated with a program or believed that it would not work, they tended to implement it in their classrooms in a surface way.

In contrast, at Grantsville, function-focused implementation was dominant. Teachers understood why they were doing what they were doing and were integral in adapting outside programs to their specific contexts. Teachers felt the programs were in place to support, not constrain them and they took it upon themselves to learn how to use the programs to benefit the students.

Deensboro teachers were instructed to implement a set of new and old practices every school year. Teachers who had been there multiple years brought expectations for how these initiatives, old and new, would play out. These expectations were not universally negative, but they were based on real-life data from their classrooms over the past few years. Teachers had explanations for whether an outcome would likely fail or succeed. These views were shared
among staff and represented the collective view of what ideas would and would not work in the school.

Teachers also had shared views on administrators and beliefs about their intentions. The principal who set goals for the school was not there walking the halls and observing in classrooms. He met with department heads to impart feedback but did not build the same relationships with teachers. This left teachers suspicious of his intentions and critical of his judgements. While they were obligated to implement plans from the administration, they did not invest in them as things that would help make their teaching successful. Instead they implemented programs to the letter but made no adaptations to effectively integrate the programs into their teaching.

Grantsville High contained its own set of initiatives including internal programs and ones brought from the outside but implementation in Grantsville took on a very different form. Teachers there were far more likely to take programs they were given and adapt them to the context of the students in their classroom. This was shaped by their belief in the intention of administrators and their experience in effectively taking new ideas and changing them to work rather than having the ideas fully control their classroom content. The roles teachers took as innovators made engaging in new initiatives a more positive and effective endeavor.

**Soft Skills**

Beyond transmitting academic knowledge, teachers at both schools attempted to impart a range of skills and values necessary for long-term success. At both schools, teachers spent time coaching students to be effective advocates for themselves. They helped students track their academics and noted important times like end of marking periods when students had to complete assignments and speak to their teachers.

In both schools, teachers, regardless of the subject, would make a point to look up students’ academic records particularly near the end of the marking period. Both schools had online systems where teachers were to track grades and missing work. Students themselves had access to these systems, as did their parents, but few utilized them strategically. By checking assignments with students, students felt an external sense of accountability sometimes to a teacher they had a better relationship with than the teacher whose class they were failing. It also gave teachers an opportunity to engage students about why the assignments were incomplete, formulate a plan and encourage students to speak to their teachers in order to be able to hand in missing work. As Mr. Sanders, an AVID teacher at Grantsville advised on a Monday near the end of the semester: “It’s the end of marking period on Friday. If you’re going to beg or plead to one of your teachers, do it today or tomorrow. Don’t go to them on Friday to try to raise your grade.”

Beyond urging students to advocate for themselves, teachers often gave students specific language to use when speaking with adults. If assignments were missing or students were failing a course, teachers would coach them on how to speak with the instructor.

Teachers also spent a lot of time teaching students the skills necessary to be effective students from notetaking to asking questions and speaking up when they were confused. Many of
the teachers used the Cornell notes template which guided students to take notes on important ideas and to summarize their learning. This format was designed to teach students how to take notes and study effectively. The template structured their studying and taught them the steps of being effective learners. They would take notes in one section. Then for homework they would have to identify key points in their notes and write a summary for each page.

In other classes, teachers regularly reminded students to take notes and pointed out how textbooks were structured to highlight the key ideas with colored boxes and bold text—these were the ideas that should go in their notes and this is what they should study for exams. At Grantsville, they referred to high school classes as “mini-college” preparing students for the future rigorous standards.

At Grantsville, in particular, teachers served as a resource advising students on what courses to take and how to best position themselves for college. Teachers encouraged students to be advocates for their own educational needs—for example, demanding the courses they required to graduate. As the end of the year approached, Ms. Gardner, a Grantsville teacher, coached students on how the interaction with their guidance counselor might unfold and what they should do to push back on their counselor and advocate for themselves.

Around the end of the year, she met with students to discuss what classes she should recommend for the next year. She said several students had requested AP Statistics or AP Computer Programming in addition to Calculus B/C. “And I think that's great. Your counselor will try to talk you out of taking two math classes so you need to advocate for yourselves. And if they tell you you can't take computer programming because they won't offer it, then you need to demand it. You should be able to learn computers if you want to. I mean that for any course you want, I just particularly care about math.”

**Student Orientation within Institutional Culture**

Students inhabit multiple worlds with distinct cultures and goals. They bring these outlooks into school where they interact with the culture of an institution. While culture impacts teachers’ behaviors, it also impacts the behaviors of students. Classroom interactions between students and teachers negotiate how the school will function. These interactions are impacted by the relationships teachers have with students, the role school plays in students’ lives, and the relationships between the school and students’ families/communities. The strategies schools utilize vis-à-vis students and their families impact how school is situated in their lives and what goals the school may achieve.

In a limited resource pragmatism school, the institution is seen as only a part of students’ complex lives. The school is there as an academic resource for students that are willing to work the system and generate their own opportunities. Students spend standard school hours at the school, but are not aggressively recruited into activities that would engage them beyond the traditional school day. This means that far more of their lives are spent with peers and in their communities than at the school. This marginalizes the influence of academic culture on students. It also limits the strength of relationships students form with teachers and the institution. Students then spend the most time in environments in which long term academic achievement is uncommon.
Under limited resources pragmatism, the school operates as an institution of the state, not the community. The school, acting as an agent of the state, brings the state’s values of discipline and control. This aspect is amplified in schools with the presence of security and police who escalate in-school misbehavior to the official legal system. School then may be seen as an enemy of students and their communities, as it represents another arm of incarceration and state control. This is particularly true when schools offer little economic mobility but high rates of disciplinary and law enforcement encounters. (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2016)

In the average low-income schools, a large population of Freshman enter and a much smaller group of seniors graduate. In the first two years of high school, the battle between students and the institution over its function are most acute. This is students’ first exposure to the more serious expectations of high school where behavior requirements are stricter and academic failure has real consequences for graduating on time or at all. The first year of high school is when dropout rates are highest. Many low-income schools concentrate resources in this first year, launching their toughest offensive at the start of high school.

Freshman at Deensboro entered the school pursuing fun over achievement such that classroom management was a daily struggle for some teachers. Before academics could be administered, teachers had to achieve a semblance of classroom control. For their part, many freshman students pushed the limits of acceptable behavior—talking loudly during an entire class period, sleeping, fighting, wandering out of their seats, chronic lateness—sometimes coming in the middle of the class period, engaging in off color topics of conversation, leaving class to go to the bathroom and not returning or cutting class altogether. These represented the most pervasive disruptive behaviors in the classroom. These behaviors were ones that occupied class time and minimized the degree of educational content delivered. The following are excerpts of descriptions from a variety of Freshman and Sophomore classrooms at Deensboro:

- There is a LOT of noise in this class. At end of the vocabulary game, students are yelling at each other and flipping chairs though not in an angry way. Some work on their essays while most talk on phone. The teacher is on her computer and not walking around.

- During the second period of a two-period class: Several students have come in who weren't here first period. The room is a lot louder and less focused—kids are walking around and talking to each other or just sitting and chatting. There is a lot of chaos in the room. 15 Minutes in the class is more wrangled and in their seats. But the room keeps getting louder. This semester there are daily writing prompts and they are listed on the wall. A few students walk over to copy the prompt: the more serious ones. MOST of the class is not working and not writing. In fact it looks like only one is doing the writing assign. A lot of chaos in the room again. It is loud and many students are wandering around. At 9:35: 8 of the 27 students are doing the prompt. This class really has a switch flipped between periods. It is pretty consistently out of control this period. Considering the activity is a silent one, there is a ton of loud chatting.

- Period 2: 3 students left during the break and never came back. It takes 5 minutes to get the class quiet and started. Rather than doing the assignment she planned, the teacher is giving them a study hall to work on work for any class. She sets expectations that students not wander around the room. There is constant chatter. This teacher regularly
rearranges seats to manage behavior. She says tomorrow she will put the class in rows. She gives lunch detention to a student who refuses to work. She has a list of parents to call primarily for bad behavior but also for Fs (but not Ds). She says this works with some parents, but some have language issues. No students show up for lunch detention.

- Students burst into class chatting loudly. A boy across the room calls girl a “bitch”. Girl threatens to “come kick his ass”. The teacher has to stop them verbally. Half of students work on the Catalyst math problem, the other half talk about movies even with students across the room. The teacher asks 2 students to put electronics/phones away. Both nod but don’t do it.

Students in this class are not asking as many Q’s as the last class but also don’t seem as engaged. Two girls do work together and want help from the teacher. Most of the class sits in 2 rows on the right side and chats, don’t work.

Boy making up work, "[Teacher], This is too hard, I don't know how to do it." Teacher helps him with the problem. Teacher solves the problems on the board but almost no one is paying attention.

There are three girls on the left side of the classroom. One sings along to loud music—two chat. Behavior totally erupts at the end of class and the teacher is unable to do the quiz he had planned.

- 2 students listen to music on 1 iPod and refuse to put it away even When teacher asks them to and sits next to them. When he asks away, they start singing out loud. They again refuse when he tells them to and continue singing when he's standing there. The room is loud between singing and talking about Jaguar day. Very few are focusing on the Catalyst problem. Student finally puts phone away then asks to go to the bathroom even though she has no passes left. When SF doesn’t let her, she walks out.

At 10 he stops and gives then time to get their notebooks together and puts on music. 5 minutes of trash talk ensues. He turns music off and class erupts more. He flicks lights which they respond to. It takes him 1 minute in front of Class to get quiet. He kicks out student who won’t put phone away. The class claps and he yells at them.

- The chairs are rearranged today into groups instead of rows. There is a fight at beginning of class. B threw water on J after he was trash talking her. SF held her in class and a student took him outside. I got teacher from next door and they were escorted out. The class is very chatty. The teacher has an argument with student about whose responsibility it is to have a pencil. Tells them It will be 3 pts per pencil. So much class time is spent on discipline or ignoring discipline problems. Eventually a student wrangles the class to be quiet.

These excerpts represent the frequent daily disruptions faced by Freshman and Sophomore teachers as they negotiated appropriate classroom behavior with students. When teachers were unable to elicit the behavior they requested, they had the options of ignoring the
behavior, removing students from class, adopting a management strategy like rearranging seats, assigning detention, turning out lights, or striking an unspoken bargain, as identified by Sanchez-Jankowski, in which teachers lowered their academic and behavioral demands allowing students to engage freely with their phones and headphones so long as the room remained quiet. (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2008)

While this behavior dominated many Freshman and Sophomore classrooms, it was less frequent in Junior and Senior classes even with the same teachers. There were reasons for this shift. In schools where dropouts are frequent, many of the worst behaved students leave the school before Junior year. This means that the population of Junior and Senior students are more mature by virtue of age, better socialized into the school’s behavioral expectations, and biased toward better behavior and stronger academics than the average Freshman or Sophomore.

The students who remained through Junior and Senior year had stronger relationships with teachers and higher achievement. The classrooms were quieter, attendance was higher, and students even policed each other’s behaviors or asked for more rigorous work. Even when students struggled to complete assignments like their senior projects, class time remained largely focused. Here is an excerpt from a typical class period in a Junior year pre-calculus class:

33 out of 34 students are here today. The Catalyst problem looks at transformations using a graphing calculator. Class asks teacher to go over questions. The class is quiet. One student redirects a boy who is talking to do work. The class is focused while taking down notes then 1 student starts to sing in Cantonese. They return to focus and SF checks understanding by asking for predictions about which way the graph would translate. The students predict correctly.

Class checks other HW on calculator. The class is relatively focused. The one boy chats a lot but the girl behind him quiets him. Teacher tells them how to use graphing calculators and how to troubleshoot problems. One student asks another why he always sleeps in class. He suggests he sleeps more and eat breakfast. Students ask when their answers don’t match the calculator.

Before going over HW, he gives students the assignment for tomorrow in case they do not listen later. Students are loud and chatty while they wait for him to begin which takes several minutes. Students are quiet while teacher shows how different inputs shift the graph. The teacher’s explanation is not fully coherent.

When boy chats, another student shuts him down: “Sorry, I was listening to him (teacher) not paying attention to you.”

Students at limited resource pragmatism schools interact differently with the institution depending on the year seeing a shift in behavior from the beginning to end of high school. Ironically, the changes in behavior at the end of high school are likely aided by high dropout rates which eliminate many of the more struggling or less academically focused students from the student population. During junior and senior years, students at Deensboro still struggled to meet academic expectations and teacher timelines, but those that remained tended to be more focused on the goal of high school completion (even if it took a fifth year).
At Grantsville, students adhered to behavior and academic expectations much sooner. The institution used a multitude of strategies to overtake students’ values by dominating their time and facilitating strong relationships between students and faculty. A feature of Grantsville’s collectively guided success was the creation of multiple times throughout the school day and after school when students had repeated informal contact with a variety of teachers and staff.

Low-income students live in environments of resource deprivation—economic, academic knowledge, adult time. As such, important work at Grantsville was frequently done outside of the classroom. At Grantsville, as in many high schools, lunchroom space was limited so many students ate in teachers’ classrooms. These informal interactions were a time for teachers to get to know students’ lives beyond school and monitor their academic progress. They also served as a time when students received advice on course-selection and regular supervision on whether or not they were doing what they needed to make it to college.

These informal social contacts allowed students free choice of where they spent their time within the school as opposed to being assigned to specific spaces. Teachers had between two and twenty students eating lunch in their classrooms on a given day. This was not a random group that changed each day. Instead, students often had their “regular” spots, deviating at times to make up assignments or tests during the lunch hour or to spend time outdoors with friends or indoors in a different classroom. This meant that most school days students congregated to have lunch in the same place with the same teacher or school staff member.

This is not to imply that students spent every day speaking with a teacher for the lunch hour. Small student groups would congregate in the same room each day and speak predominantly to each other. Lunch was an informal social time. Some teachers graded papers while they ate, others turned on music for the classroom. It was also a space for a broad range of interactions that were mostly informal and non-academically related. Over time though, as teachers and students formed more intimate relationships, teachers would check in on students and how they were managing challenges.

In addition to these informal spaces, there were several official ways students repeatedly interacted with staff members. Students were assigned to the same homeroom teacher for all four years. This teacher then saw them for twenty to thirty minutes every school day for all of high school. Additionally, there were special programs like AVID or in-school academies/pathways where students took one elective class with the same couple teachers and the same group of peers every year. These programs were opt-in during freshman or sophomore year and created daily or almost daily interaction with the same teacher all three to four years.

These programs all contained a mix of academic and informal interactions with participants. Twice a week, AVID students would participate in tutorials where they brought in challenging work from other classrooms and worked through it with fellow students and college or teacher mentors. Overtime, teachers became well versed in students’ areas of strength and struggle and could follow-up on how they were addressing these challenges. AVID also included monthly catered lunches and regular field trips to universities, to middle schools for recruitment, and to volunteer work in the community.
Similarly, students in pathway programs saw the same teachers in a classroom setting but also worked with them outside of the school day on year-long projects like creating a fashion show with their own designs. These programs all entailed numerous afterschool hours in which students were engaged with school personnel.

Even outside of these programs, there were multiple opportunities to interact with the staff after school. For example, teachers would chaperone after-school trips to sports, theater, art and volunteer events. The teachers who coached sports also held mandatory tutoring in the hour to hour and a half before practice began. In addition to building relationships, these outings promoted school as the center of social life for low-income students by appealing to their non-academic interests during leisure time. In this way, school became a major part of students’ lives consuming the bulk of their free time.

Although Grantsville’s culture of collectively guided success narrowed in on the goal of graduation and college attendance, the roles teachers assumed in students’ lives were more than just academic. They broadened the role of teacher so that they were resources in students’ lives for needs that were not directly related to academic achievement.

Before pushing students to challenge themselves academically toward the goal of college attendance, teachers focused on meeting students’ immediate and daily needs. Students were frequently allowed to use teachers’ computers to go online or to print out papers they forgot to print at home. Many teachers sold students snacks at or below cost some even running these exchanges on the honor system where students made their own payments and change. If students needed to get something signed and were up against a deadline, teachers facilitated contacting a parent or the appropriate staff. Other teachers would store games or ping pong tables that students could use for entertainment during lunch hours.

Because of this, as early as freshman year students began to identify teachers and classrooms as resource rich places they could go to get problems solved. These relationships did not start with tackling long-term challenges like getting into college but rather with addressing immediate needs. Students built trust in these relationships because they knew teachers were there to support them.

By expanding school hours beyond the traditional school day and becoming a community resource for students and their families, Grantsville was able to play a central role in the lives of their students. In this way, the culture of the school and its goals dominated the values of attendees. Students were more quickly socialized into the institution’s culture but also engulfed in its values as they formed strong relationships with school actors.

Because of their frequent contact with students, teachers were able to follow-up on students’ actions and hold them accountable for taking the steps they discussed. This came in the form of regularly sitting down with students to review missing assignments and grades, to inquiring daily about teacher discussions, college applications, permission slips, etc. Informal contacts took teachers outside of their traditional role and expanded their circle of influence over students’ lives.
In a multitude of classrooms including AVID and homeroom as well as regular English classes, teachers used periods of down-time to call students up one-by-one and together look at the online system that tracked grades and missing assignments. This served to inform students of where they stood when they might not themselves access the system. It also allowed teachers to check in with students on how they planned to address problematic situations.

In many cases teachers provided students with specific language and strategies to address their academic challenges. As the end of the marking period approached, teachers would remind students to go speak to other teachers about making up assignments before the last day, telling students that teachers were much more likely to be sympathetic to helping them a week or two in advance than when they were swamped with getting grades turned in on time.

Teachers would also coach students on what to say to other teachers—how to approach teachers about missing assignments, how to discuss grades with teachers they believed were unfair or unwarranted, and how to get extra help when they did not understand the content in a class. These teachers would provide specific wording and role-play coaching with students so they mastered the necessary communication skills. These relationships taught students how to operate effectively in an academic setting, providing cultural capital not available in their communities.

In a collectively guided success school, the institution dominates students’ time and invests in strong relationships. This aids the institution in taking over students’ values and limiting exposure to competing values of their neighborhoods. The institution goes so far as to become a key resource for families, further solidifying their role in their community. In contrast to limited resources pragmatism schools where the institution is a small part of students’ live, collectively guided success schools strive to become one of the largest and most influential parts of their lives. While limited resources pragmatism schools struggle, and often fail, in the first years of high school to dominate neighborhood values with academic values, collectively guided success schools begin forming strong relationships and incorporating students into an institution-centered lifestyle from the beginning. Because the culture of collectively guided success defines schools as multi-faceted institutions around which students’ lives should center, they more effectively dictate students’ behavior and values.

**Deviance**

Not all teachers behaved within the norms of their school. Culture did not erase individuals’ autonomy and teachers had their own histories, philosophies and capabilities which impacted how they acted and interacted. While some forms of deviance were tolerated, others were sanctioned formally and informally. For example, teachers were freer to express deviant behavior in their classrooms than in department meetings.

Deviance was most prevalent in new teachers and veteran teachers—newer teachers because they entered the school more recently influenced by outside ideas and had not yet been socialized into the school’s philosophy and veteran teachers because they had behaviors that preceded the current cultural climate. As newer teachers gained experience in a school, they either learned to operate within the culture or exited. These populations were also at points in their careers where school culture had less of an ability to sanction them—newer teachers
because they are viewed as naïve and given latitude to learn “the way things are” and veteran teachers because they are at the ends of their career and therefore less impacted by isolation or other sanctions imposed.

At both schools, there were teachers who did not operate within the culture. At Deensboro, there were teachers who believed that the staff should be doing more to help students, that programs needed to be changed, and that there needed to be a stronger collaborative community. At Grantsville, there were teachers who did not participate in the collective and were unreliable resources for struggling students. Teachers who exhibited these behaviors were rejected by the larger school community.

One example was, Ms. Ross, an English teacher at Deensboro. Despite working at a school with a strong limited resources pragmatism culture, she frequently sought classroom solutions so that all her students would pass. Ms. Ross had close relationships with students that extended to their needs beyond the classroom—snacks when they did not have lunch for the day, a place to get academic help, an open door during lunch and after school, and wake-up calls for students who were chronically late. When students were struggling, she would meet with parents even if it required multiple phone calls and efforts to track them down.

As a first-year teacher, she had an outside mentor who would meet with her every other week to reflect on her practice and where she was struggling. They would discuss failing students or students who were disengaged, and whose behaviors were disruptive. After a full day professional development, Ms. Ross implemented a number of the techniques for classroom control, clearer execution of objectives and instructions, and strategies to teach students to be stronger studiers. When the morning’s lesson did not work, she tweaked it for her afternoon class.

Her most struggling student was Dante. He had a hard time focusing and staying in his seat and would frequently get up and talk to other students. His behaviors compounded because he would fall farther and farther behind academically and therefore have less of an ability to complete the work further pushing him to distraction. While other teachers dealt with Dante by sending him to the vice principle, Ms. Ross touched base with his aunt regularly to create a plan to help him succeed.

Dante’s aunt had recently become his guardian and she had a hard time setting up meetings with his teachers even though his grades were failing. When she met with Ms. Ross, it turned out that he had been lying about his homework and saying that he was going to tutorials after school when he was not. Ms. Ross and Dante’s aunt made plans for more regular communication and for his aunt to periodically come into class and sit next to him to ensure he was doing his work. This was an unusual solution facilitated by his aunt’s investment and availability as well as Ms. Ross’s commitment to communicate and regularly try new strategies with her students.

Despite these efforts in her classroom to ensure even the most struggling students would succeed, Ms. Ross did little to change the behavior of other teachers or convince them to contact parents and put more efforts into failing students. In the limited resources pragmatism culture, the value placed on classroom autonomy and protecting a teacher’s ability to run their classroom
as they saw fit, meant that Ms. Ross could take actions outside of school norms, without sanctions so long as she did not attempt to change larger practices in the school.

The strategy of maintaining separate policies within their classrooms that were antithetical to the larger school culture was one that several teachers used. At Deensboro, teachers rarely observed each other or made detailed inquiries into what was happening in other classrooms. Regardless of teaching philosophy most teachers took it as a given that their classroom was their space to implement school curriculum as they saw fit. Teachers rarely completely disregarded instructions from administrators, but would vary widely in their commitment to effective implementation and achieving instructional goals that were handed down.

While limited resources pragmatism culture polices norms of behavior in the community of teachers, its sanctions do not extend into individual classrooms. This was where deviance could exist without disruption to the larger organization. The value placed on work-place autonomy allowed Deensboro teachers with different values and beliefs to freely act within their classrooms so long as they did not attempt to influence the actions of others.

The culture of collectively guided success at Grantsville also had teachers who deviated from the school culture. Because of the collective environment, teachers who focused just on their classroom or who were viewed as not doing enough for their students were visible and frequently ostracized. When there was a teacher whose students were struggling, teachers would gossip with each other and administrators while also sending the students elsewhere for help and tutoring.

In AVID where teachers worked with students on multiple subjects, they would send students who were struggling with physics to a science AVID teacher out of frustration that students’ regular teachers were not sufficiently explaining the material or working with struggling students. Math teachers discussed a teacher in their department who was not participating in school initiatives or collaborating and were waiting for him to retire in the next few years.

Teachers like these were visible in the collectively guided success culture because they opted out of the collective. In collectively guided success, teachers have less autonomy to stray from norms and may find themselves sanctioned by isolation and a negative reputation. While limited resources pragmatism culture allows for a great deal of autonomy and deviance outside of the collective spaces of interaction, collectively guided success requires more interaction and conformity. With a more developed community of teachers, those who opt out are easily identified by others and sanctioned.

**Conclusion**

Grantsville and Deesboro were cultural contrasts in morals, values, beliefs and behavior. Culture not only impacts teachers’ approach to and expectations of students, it also informs what they envisioned as an appropriate work environment. Behaviors inside and outside the classroom emerge from beliefs about what defines success for individuals in the organization and what resources would be most helpful to achieving success.
Under collectively guided success, teachers’ ideas are regularly utilized to change practice in the larger organization so their role in the classroom is one piece of their role as part of the school collective. This culture makes teachers more outward facing, more prone to generating ideas and solving systemic problems, more likely to see the value in collaboration, and more likely to learn from each other and identify areas of skill weakness where outside training is necessary. In limited resources pragmatism schools where teachers have little say in leadership decisions and the structures implemented and their ideas about the larger organization are de-valued, it does not make sense to have for them to invest in an external orientation.

Grantsville’s culture could best be described as collective and this was reflected in the way teachers worked with each other and focused their attention on the health of the larger institution. Yearly goals and plans were determined by departments in conversation with the administration. Teachers not only knew the goals but were major generators of these benchmarks. Regular collaboration was present throughout the school whether for the purpose of lesson planning on shared courses, coordinating on plans within a Pathway Academy, or informally jockeying around ideas and solutions in the teachers’ lounge. Teachers would get lesson ideas from others in their department and were well informed of the struggles and successes others faced. Weaker teachers were buoyed by the expertise and assistance of stronger ones. While teachers were alone when teaching in the classroom, they frequently coordinated efforts and plans.

Deensboro’s teacher culture could best be described as loosely coupled and adversarial. This was reflected in the focus of teachers on their own classroom with little collaboration or participation in efforts to support the larger institution. Ambitious goals were set by administrators without consulting teachers. The collaboration that existed was formally mandated as part of professional development time. Teachers spent most planning periods and lunches in their own classrooms, rarely talking with others teaching similar subjects or facing similar challenges. For the most part, teachers focused on their own classrooms with little knowledge of other classrooms even within their department.

Limited resource pragmatism teachers value classroom autonomy through non-interference from the administration and knowing their roles and responsibilities. Under this cultural perspective, teachers have a narrow focus on what is in their locus of control and do not “waste” time and energy attempting to influence larger organizational processes. For them, their time is best spent teaching students and providing opportunities for the most motivated and most likely to succeed. While collectively guided success creates a school that is collaborative with a strong group mentality, limited resources pragmatism schools have teachers who are largely autonomous and focused on their own individual responsibilities. This translates to distinctive behaviors inside and outside the classroom.
Chapter Six: Concluding Remarks

This study has focused on how the structure, leadership and cultures of schools serving low income students impact their ability to produce high academic outputs. As the difference in educational outcomes between the richest and poorest increase, schools are failing on the promise of creating upward mobility for the poorest of society. (Bischoff & Reardon, 2014; Reardon, 2011)

For those who care about stratification and inherited attainment, understanding how schools produce high or average academic results with low income students is important. We know little about what is going on inside schools that do manage to graduate large numbers of low-income students and send them to college. This study exposes the mechanisms that facilitate these outcomes.

Schools hold the promise of economic mobility for low-income youth but many struggle to fulfill that promise. They are an enduring institution that will continue to impact the academic outcomes of future generations, but we seem to know little about how to make them work for poor children. As a college education becomes a necessity for employment with a living wage, high schools provide a key bridge from childhood to adulthood and the career trajectories that follow. The outcomes of students’ time in high school, therefore, shapes their income for decades to come. If students fail to graduate or go on to college, their financial futures remain more challenging than their higher attaining peers. This study examined the practices of a high school that graduated the majority of its low-income students to graduate and sent them to college. The outcomes identified key mechanisms that affected how successful they were with low income students.

Sociological Lessons

Findings show that schools operate as systems in which the behavior of leadership and the behavior and beliefs of teachers impact academic outcomes. The world of teachers and its alignment with leadership is as important as the leaders themselves in determining how a school performs. There is a large body of literature on school improvement that focuses on the role of leaders in reforming struggling schools. From this has emerged a how-to literature for school leaders. Leaders are advised on how to create a vision for performance and how to enact cultural and operational changes in the organization. (Elmore, 2000; Fletcher & Käufer, 2003; Geijsel, Sleegers, Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2003; Leithwood, 2001; Leithwood et al., 2002; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002; Portin et al., 2009; Resnick & Glennan, 2002; Schein & Schein, 2017; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; Waters et al., 2003) Districts, such as Deensboro, then make increasing academic performance in a short span of time a critical criterion for keeping the job of principal.

The focus solely on the role of leaders misses half of the equation. Leadership is an interactive not unidirectional concept. Schools are systems in which there is a constant interaction between leadership, teacher practice and culture each exerting significant influence over performance. While leaders can unilaterally cause tensions within the organization, they cannot unilaterally make schools work. Teachers are a powerful source of implementation or
resistance. While leadership plays a role in school success, leaders cannot move a school without a body of teachers with the skills and investment to work with them.

When a leader enters a struggling school with the intention of consolidating power and changing performance without empowering teachers and listening to their ideas, the administration begins to exist in a system entirely separate from the teachers and classrooms. Principals have a great power to influence teacher behavior, but they cannot go into every classroom and change performance themselves. They must partner with teachers to accomplish their ends. This necessitates more than authority, it must include investment.

Schools are not moved by single actors but an entire system of players. Because of the segmented nature of a high school with different grades, departments, courses and classrooms, these institutions naturally veer toward a collection of loosely coupled systems. Unifying goals and practice requires the cooperation of a diverse set of actors over whom administrators have limited power of coercion or oversight. Because teachers lead their classrooms, they are innately part of the leadership team and decide what ideas succeed or fail. Therefore, some form of participatory leadership is necessary for a school to succeed. Teachers have the most contact with students and thus the most direct data on what is and is not working in the classroom. Administrators that make decisions without consulting this wealth of knowledge sacrifice on information and buy-in.

Teachers at Grantsville felt empowered. They felt trusted as experts with ideas to improve learning and school-wide programs. They were able and encouraged to innovate. This facilitated a greater sense of possibility from teachers, a greater confidence in and ownership of initiatives, and more purpose driven implementation.

Deensboro’s gridlock in making organization-wide change resulted from a contentious relationship between teachers and administrators. Teachers did not buy into the principal’s ideas and felt frustrated that their concerns were not heard. This communication breakdown meant that there was more animosity than cooperation between the administration and teaching staff. Teachers would follow instructions from the principal but were not purpose driven in their implementation. Teachers did not view solving school-wide problems as part of their role, and many felt that problems were unsolvable. Instead of embracing the ideas of a new principal, teachers guarded themselves from blame when (not if) his ideas failed.

In my study of two high schools striving to improve the education of their low-income students, I found that school performance was not driven by individual programs or leaders but rather by the ability of leaders and teachers to work productively together. The process of building this relationship of trust and partnership could be circumvented by a district that focused on short timelines for leadership to improve a school or else be replaced.

Because schools are systems with many parts, change relies not on the unilateral actions of a leader but on shifting the culture, improving information channels, and including teachers in critical decision making. For goals to be meaningful, they need to be set in conjunction with teachers who have the most direct contact with students every year. This inclusion increases investment. Administrators also gain good will by facilitating problem solving for teachers and finding resources or solutions wherever possible.
Second, while literature on the educational achievement gap assumes a goal of universal achievement, (Chall, 2000; Fincham, Hokoda, & Sanders, 1989; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009; Reardon, 2011; Roorda, 2011; Rosenholtz, 1985) I found that this is not a metric of success that is universally shared within schools. The function of schools, school success, and best strategies to achieve these ends are cultural beliefs/understandings of individuals in an institution. Institutional actors choose strategies based on their belief about what constitutes school success and how that can best be achieved. If teachers believe this is unattainable or inappropriate based on their view of student ability and the time and resources of the school, teacher strategies focus on how the available resources can be utilized to best serve the needs and abilities of students. This will mean focusing academic time and effort on those they believe are most likely to graduate.

For schools to change goals to high graduation rates teachers need to have the skills, resources, and buy-in. Investment arises in a culture where teachers believe universal graduation is the goal of school and is feasible. At Grantsville, leadership increased teachers’ feelings of efficacy when they partnered with teachers to solve problems that arose so the responsibility for student achievement was a shared endeavor. There was an ongoing partnership between leadership and teachers that included frequent discussions of barriers to success and solutions.

While the culture of an institution alone does not overcome the challenge of student attainment, it sets the foundation for success. Teachers who were effective at producing high attainment were invested in goals; understood the purpose of new initiatives; felt encouraged to shape initiatives to the needs of students; had the skills, resources, collaboration, and time to implement programs; and felt heard by administrators on what worked or did not work and what resources they needed to be effective.

Third, while there is a body of research supporting the positive impact of collaboration, (C. E. Coburn, 2001; C. E. Coburn & Russell, 2008; Conway, 1976; Fuller & Izu, 1986; Geijssel et al., 2003) I found that the most effective collaboration is an outcome of a collective work environment, not a cause. This means that for collaboration to make an impact, it cannot just be mandated by administrators but must feel useful to teachers. I found that collaboration was most valuable to teachers if the culture of the institution included collective responsibility for success and frequently utilized collective solutions to common problems. When teachers felt that their success and failure was largely individual and created by actions in the classroom not coordination across the organization, teachers only sought to collaborate if it met their individual needs.

Collaboration took on an intrinsic value when classroom preparation and problem solving was a collective process with weekly joint lesson planning and cross-classroom or cross-department initiatives that benefitted multiple actors in the institution. Additionally, collaboration had intrinsic value when teachers were active voices in selecting school-wide solutions. If teachers’ ideas have no impact outside of their own classrooms, collaboration loses value. Finally, teachers were most participatory in collaboration when the problems they were discussing were ones they believed were important.

When collaboration was rare in the institution, it fell off teachers’ radars as an avenue for solving problems that emerged in their classrooms. Instead, teachers at the non-collective school...
focused on individual solutions to problems and implemented the solutions in their classroom alone. This meant that teachers that were more experienced or skilled were better equipped to improve their classrooms than others. In the collective school, even weaker teachers benefitted from the ideas of stronger teachers. At Deensboro, classroom success was individual and uneven between teachers in the same institution.

Fourth, in low income schools, discipline and management can eclipse academic goals. This meant discipline was valued even if no academic goals were being achieved. It also stigmatized students and shifted the meaning of school for all involved. When discipline was primary, the goal of school for students became good behavior, not learning, and students were viewed by staff and administrators as delinquents, not learners. When this occurs, school becomes a disciplinary arm of the state whose goal is to police student behavior.

Discipline is necessary but not sufficient to produce student learning. On its own, discipline is not a metric for academic achievement. When administrators focused their time on discipline, not academic programming, this was a signal of a shift in the dominant values at the school. When classrooms valued quiet and therefore allowed students to sleep or wear headphones so long as they did not talk, this was another sign of the lessening importance of academic learning. Schools must be safe for students to learn, but when safety is achieved, focus needs to shift back to academic achievement if the goal is high graduation rates. With challenges in academic achievement in schools and the increased presence of police, good behavior can look like a more achievable and therefore more important goal. This shift ultimately contributes to low achievement because of where it focuses school time and resources.

Fifth, schools for low-income students that have high graduation and college attendance rates impart more than academic knowledge, they provide mentorship, support and the non-academic skills necessary to be effective in a school environment. For students from communities with limited knowledge about college attendance or college-track courses, the school filled in these gaps. There were multiple resource centers where students could go for support, not just guidance counselors, so students had a greater chance of connecting with an adult who would mentor them through graduation.

Schools must provide more than human capital for low-income students to succeed. They need to generate social capital that bridges students to resources outside of their immediate environments and they must teach students to be independent learners and advocates. Low-income students need more, sometimes much more, than middle class students to be successful. There is a non-academic “curriculum” that schools teach low-income students to help them be successful academics. The idea that students who come to school with such large deficits could be as successful as middle-class students just by being given the same resources is untenable—they need to be given more and schools are well-situated to perform some of these functions.

These findings add up to an interactive theory of school success. Schools run as systems where all parts impact achievement. This means that it is not leaders themselves but how they interact with teachers that matters. It is their ability to get teachers the training, support and resources they need to be successful. It is also teachers being positioned in the institution such that their ideas matter and they are innovators not just implementers. Teachers have the most knowledge of and interaction with students so their ideas should impact school policy. Leaders
cannot dictate change and expect to achieve it while maintaining a contentious relationship with their teaching staff. For the institution to be successful, administrators and teachers must have a shared understanding of goals and investment in their achievement.

Seeing a school get so many low-income students into college and still continuously working to improve shows what is possible, but it also highlights that this success cannot be replicated with just a few programs and bigger goals. School leadership was effective because it nurtured an effective culture and teaching body. Grantsville’s success emerged from its collective efforts not from any one particular action, program, initiative or individual.

**Some Policy Implications**

While there is no one fix to schools that struggle with achievement for low income students, I want to provide some thoughts from this study on areas schools can examine in their own quest for improvement. Quite often “failing” schools start the new year with new leaders and dramatic goals. In an era of school accountability where funding itself is tied to student achievement, districts are eager for fast changes. Leaders who can deliver on these changes, keep their jobs. Those who cannot are replaced. This practice contributes to contentious relationships between faculty and leadership and removes leadership continuity from the lowest performing schools who need it the most in order to build an effective organization.

Instead of hoping for instant change, schools and districts can set incremental year-to-year goals that are ambitious, but also feasible. Goals should be set with input from teachers and they should be implemented with a plan for what changes will make achievement levels higher than in years prior. Without the investment of most members of the organization and a plan for their achievement, goals are just lofty statements. Districts can support this by allowing improvement over a number of years rather than holding leaders to an immediate turn around.

Leaders that are struggling should start by examining their relationship with the teaching body of the school. They should look at how often they are communicating with teachers and departments and how many times teachers’ ideas are the ones that impact school practice. To be successful, principals need regular information on what is going on inside the classroom and what is and is not working. They also need a teaching staff that feels supported by the leadership. In schools where direct communication from teachers to leadership is rare and where the union is frequently engaged to mediate that relationship, leaders need to begin to build a more positive rapport with teachers.

Building this relationship involves more frequent communication and listening, more efforts to solve the problems teachers face, and more encouraging teachers to become leaders and idea generators. Teaching staff should play a role in setting goals and changing practice. This also has the effect of setting the tone for a collaborative institution from the top. This supports collaboration between teachers themselves because it means that their ideas will matter. Collaboration then has a clear purpose in the institution.

In addition to surveying their relationship with teachers, leaders should audit how administrative resources are being used to support the goals of discipline vs. academic programs. For academics to be of primary importance in a school, they have to be the focus of the most
time and resources. When administrators set the tone that the role of school is to police behavior, it impacts the metrics of success for teachers and stigmatizes students and their experience of school. Schools cannot expect academics to change while focusing predominantly on discipline.

Finally, low income schools should examine what students need outside of strict academics in order to make it to graduation and college and evaluate how well they are meeting these needs. Low-income students live in environments of resource deprivation and schools that want them to focus on academics need to take on some of these other deficits. Being aware of and willing to address material resource deficiencies is an important baseline to working with low income students. Students also need the soft skills necessary to navigate an academic environment successfully. This is especially important with low-income students who may be the first generation in their family to graduate high school or attend college. In this situation, schools are best positioned to provide the extra skills necessary to be successful in school.

Students also need mentorship and connection to make the transition from high school into college. Applying to schools and getting financial aid is key to students entering college and schools can lead these efforts for low-income students. In general, schools that are academically successful with low-income students occupy more of students’ time than just the traditional school day and take on more roles than those traditionally expected of a school. This is only possible when all parts of the school communicate, cooperate and work toward a shared vision of school success.

In general, I would like to see the research on the world of teachers grow to match that of leaders and leadership practices. Districts lean heavily on leaders to produce results in schools, but leaders have complex relationships with their staff, and it is the teachers themselves who produce academic outcomes in the classroom. We are still far from seeing academic outcomes of low-income students match those of their higher income peers so there is much more to learn about what is going on inside and outside of schools to produce these metrics.
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