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Beating the Odds: A Low Equalized Assessed Valuation Elementary School  
with High Standardized Test Scores

By

Brian Levin

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

Lindenwood University

2011

Beating the Odds: A Low Equalized Assessed Valuation Elementary School  
With High Standardized Test Scores

By  
Brian Levin

This dissertation has been approved as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of  
Doctor of Education  
At Lindenwood University by the School of Education

 Dr. Stephen Sherblom, Dissertation Chair	<u>2/18/2011</u> Date
 Dr. Vicki Hedges-Oldani, Committee Member	<u>2/18/2011</u> Date
 Dr. Michael Koebel, Committee Member	<u>3/8/11</u> Date
 Debra Weiler, Committee Member	<u>03/9/11</u> Date
 Lauren Chrome, Committee Member	<u>02/28/11</u> Date

Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

Full Legal Name: Brian Levin

Signature: Brian Levin Date: 3/8/11

## **Abstract**

This mixed methods study examines what makes Bluffview Elementary School a success as measured by the ISAT, the mandated state test of Illinois. Despite national reports of achievement gaps and low test scores, Bluffview Elementary has shown sustained success in educating children. This paper reviews how Bluffview Elementary students are achieving success, and what similarities exist among other highly successful, low equalized assessed valuation (EAV) schools. This study utilized a meta-analysis from more than 20 studies reviewing successful schools to first identify which characteristics contribute to the success of a low EAV school. The studies, most of which examined elementary schools, focused on schools with students who achieved at higher levels than their demographics would predict.

This study mixed qualitative and quantitative methods to establish if a relationship existed between the characteristics of successful schools discovered in the review of literature and the characteristics that made Bluffview Elementary students achieve. The quantitative part examined one year of data provided from 1,078 K-5 and K-6 Elementary Schools in Illinois to establish if EAV can be used as a predictor of student success on the ISAT.

At the time of this writing, Bluffview was currently scoring 10.6 points better than expected on the ISAT based on the district's EAV of \$62,035 for the 2008-2009 school year. Bluffview students achieve in the upper 75th percentile of elementary schools in Illinois while being in the lower 25th percentile of EAV in the state. What makes Bluffview successful is similar to the characteristics evident in the literature review, with the exception of parent and community support. Although much literature

claimed parent and community support as one of the most common characteristics of successful schools, Bluffview Elementary is able to succeed with limited support from parents and community. Teacher questionnaire responses and interviews demonstrated that a clear vision is apparent in the school, the standards and expectations for students and staff are high, and professional development is focused. The evidence supports that the key reason for Bluffview's success is the care and dedication the teachers have for the students at Bluffview Elementary.

## **Acknowledgments**

There are many people who have helped me along the journey of writing this dissertation and many thanks and credit should be given. First of all I would like to thank my great dissertation committee for their time and guidance throughout this process. I would also like to thank my wife for her support and for allowing me to lock myself in our home office for well over two years to write in peace and quiet. Last but not least, I would like to thank the amazing dedicated teachers, administrators, and staff members of Bluffview Elementary. Without your support and cooperation this research would be impossible.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

Schools today are faced with many challenging problems, and one such problem is the controversy about the unequal funding in the United States' school systems. Although education is usually seen as an equalizing force creating opportunities for students to overcome adversity, this is not the case in Illinois. Quality education is available to those who can afford to live in high property value areas rather than an opportunity for all students (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

According to Marzano et al. (2005):

Each school day more than 53.6 million students in the United States walk into more than 94,000 K-12 schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005-2006) in the hopes that during 13 years of schooling, the students' experience will dramatically enhance their chances of success in the modern world. Indeed, evidence of income in 2001 supports these hopes. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), the earning potential of a student who graduates from high school is \$19,900, compared with \$11,864 for a student who does not. If the high school graduate completes college, that earning potential increases to \$37,203; a master's degree increases the figure to \$49,324; a doctoral degree increases the figure to \$63,952; and professional licensure increases the figure \$71,606. (p. 1)

Before schools can be the door to financial advancement, they must be funded to run effectively. The issue of unequal school funding has now reached the courtroom. A lawsuit by the Chicago Urban League has been filed, naming the state of Illinois and the Illinois State Board of Education as defendants, "calling for the state's current school funding scheme to be declared unconstitutional and in violation of the Illinois Civil

Rights Act of 2003” (Chicago Urban League, 2008. para. 1). The lawsuit asserts that the state of “Illinois has, for decades, discriminated against families based on race and has deprived African American, Latino, and other minority children of a high quality education” (para. 1). The Chicago Urban League urged the court to “agree that the public education financing mechanism in Illinois violates the Illinois Civil Rights Act and Illinois Constitution and order the state to take necessary steps to eliminate the constitutional violation and remedy the statutory violation” (para. 7).

### **Background**

Many studies have shown that schools across the country are grossly under – funded, and Illinois is no different. A study by the “Education Funding Advisory Board (EFAB), a group created by statute in 1999 to make recommendations on the amount of funding it takes to ensure that each child in Illinois receives a quality education, determined that a minimum per pupil funding level of \$6,405 should be guaranteed” (Mangino, 2005, p. 1). “The state of Illinois’ current foundation level is significantly below the recommended amount providing just \$4,964 per pupil for the 2004-2005 school years” (Mangino, 2005, p. 1). According to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), \$6,119 is the foundation level for school year 2009-2010 (ISBE, 2009a).

Although it has been increased since the 2004-2005 school year, the amount is still less than the amount recommended by the Education Funding Advisory Board which has not published an updated amount since 2004-2005. This problem is nothing new, and Illinois has a decades-long history of under-funding its public schools. The state constitution states that “the state has the primary responsibility for financing the system of public

education” (Illinois Constitution, 1970, Article X). However, according to the People for the American Way, an advocacy group for education and a number of liberal causes:

Illinois only pays about 36% of all school expenses, far below the national average of 50%. Public education relies heavily on local property taxes, and on average, local property taxpayers fund about 53% of school expenses; the remaining 10% or so comes from federal aid. (Pathak, 2004, p. 1)

According to a survey conducted in the fall of 2003 by *Education Week*, when asked about the most pressing school finance issues in Illinois, state officials cited concerns about property taxes. Illinois’ system for funding schools creates enormous inequities between school districts, depending upon the area’s wealth or poverty. The average per-pupil spending in some Chicago collar counties (the districts surrounding Cook County) ranges from \$5,000 to \$15,000 per pupil (Pathak, 2004, p. 1). This is unfortunate for the schools commonly falling on the low side of the spending spectrum. Often these schools have a higher concentration of poverty and minority students and due to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), are often on the state’s watch list.

In the most recent National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), results indicated that in “three out of four math and reading tests, Illinois had the nation’s largest achievement gap between wealthy and poor students” (Pathak, 2004, p. 5). Additionally, according to NCLB, “more than 40% of Illinois’ 3,919 public schools have failed to meet the annual requirements for student achievement” (Pathak, 2004, p. 5). Recent data from the ISBE does not show improvement. In 2009, 41% of schools in Illinois did not meet annual requirements for student achievement (ISBE, 2009b). Critics of the school funding system claim “the funding mechanism does not support the goals of

NCLB. Instead, by favoring the wealthier school districts, Illinois leaves the poor ones behind to be penalized under NCLB's unreachable accountability measures" (Pathak, 2004, p. 5).

It appears to be a never-ending cycle. Schools that do not have the appropriate funding must cut back programs, layoff teachers, or eliminate services for the students. Quite often, those are also the schools and students who need the most services due to the low socioeconomic standing of the families and surrounding communities. Because of the financial situation of the districts, many schools use referendums as an additional funding source. However, there is strong opposition to referendums, and they often fail because of high local taxes.

Despite the poor financial situation of many Illinois districts, many high performing schools in Illinois and across the country are making great differences in the lives of students with limited resources. "Becoming a high performing school takes years of sustained commitment, and there is no single factor a school can implement to ensure high student performance" (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007, p. 3). Shannon and Bylsma (2007) found high performing schools have many characteristics in common. Various characteristics of schools that are in stages of improving and those that are already effective schools have been identified in the literature. "Educational reformers and theorists have developed programs and processes for assisting school administrators in creating and maintaining those conditions to help increase student learning" (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007, p. 3).



**Equalized Assessed Valuation**

For this study, EAV will be tested as a potential predictor of students' success and a measurement of poverty. If the relationship is established, the expected level of student achievement on the ISAT for Bluffview Elementary will be predicted and then compared to the actual student achievement. Although research shows that both EAV and socioeconomic status (SES) can be used as predictors for academic success, EAV will be used in this study due to the current school funding formula that is used in Illinois. Local property tax wealth, or EAV, is the basis for about 53% of the schools' funding.

According to data from the 2000 census, the 15 northern counties in Illinois (which for this study are defined as the counties north of Interstate 80), have a median SES of \$59,308, median home value of \$128,773 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), and a median EAV of \$112,566 (Illinois Interactive School Report Card [IIRC], 2009). The southern counties in Illinois (which for this study are defined as the 30 most southern counties), have a median SES of \$40,848, median home value of \$58,790 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), with a median EAV of \$85,930 (IIRC, 2009). Illinois state median home value is \$130,800 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) with an average EAV of \$193,369 per student (IIRC, 2009). Bluffview Elementary is located in Southern Illinois which is unfortunately plagued by low median SES, low home values, and low EAV.

Although SES data cannot be collected for individual communities as far as a true dollar amount, free and reduced lunch counts for schools are often used as SES indicators and are available by the Illinois State Board of Education. The program is for children living in households meeting federal guidelines for free or reduced-priced meals under the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs (ISBE, 2008). Since the free

and reduced lunch program is based on the income levels of the households, it is directly based on the SES of the families (ISBE, 2008). Although EAV and SES are usually closely linked, there are some situations when a school district could have a low SES but still have a high EAV. This can be found in the St. Louis city school district. In most situations, however, schools with low SES will have a low EAV as well. This is the case with Bluffview Elementary.

### **Nature and Scope of Study**

NCLB required that 100% of students make adequate yearly progress on standardized state tests by the school year 2013-2014. The Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) is used for assessing individual student achievement as measured by the Illinois Learning Standards. According to the Interactive Illinois Report Card, "Curriculum experts and Illinois teachers have developed these standards in collaboration with the Illinois State Board of Education, and results are reported by subject according to four performance levels: exceeds standards, meets standards, below standards, and academic warning" (IIRC, What Students Should Know. 2010, para. 2). The ISAT is given to students in grades three through eight every year in March (IIRC, What Students Should Know. 2010, para. 1).

When the ISAT was first introduced in 1999 by the state of Illinois, the ISAT was given in reading and mathematics in grades three, five, and eight, and in science in grades four and seven. In 2006, for purposes of compliance with NCLB, the state of Illinois expanded testing in reading and mathematics to include all grades three through eight. Annual testing in consecutive grades allows educators and parents to assess students' year-to-year learning more closely. After being temporarily removed in 2005, the writing

test was reinstated and again tested in grades three, five, six, and eight. Social science was dropped from the testing schedule in 2006 at all levels from elementary through high school.

According to the Interactive Illinois Report Card, in order for the state of Illinois to determine the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) of a school or school district for NCLB purposes, “only the results of reading and mathematics tests are included in the calculation for a given school or school district” (IIRC, What Students Should Know 2010, para. 6). Additionally:

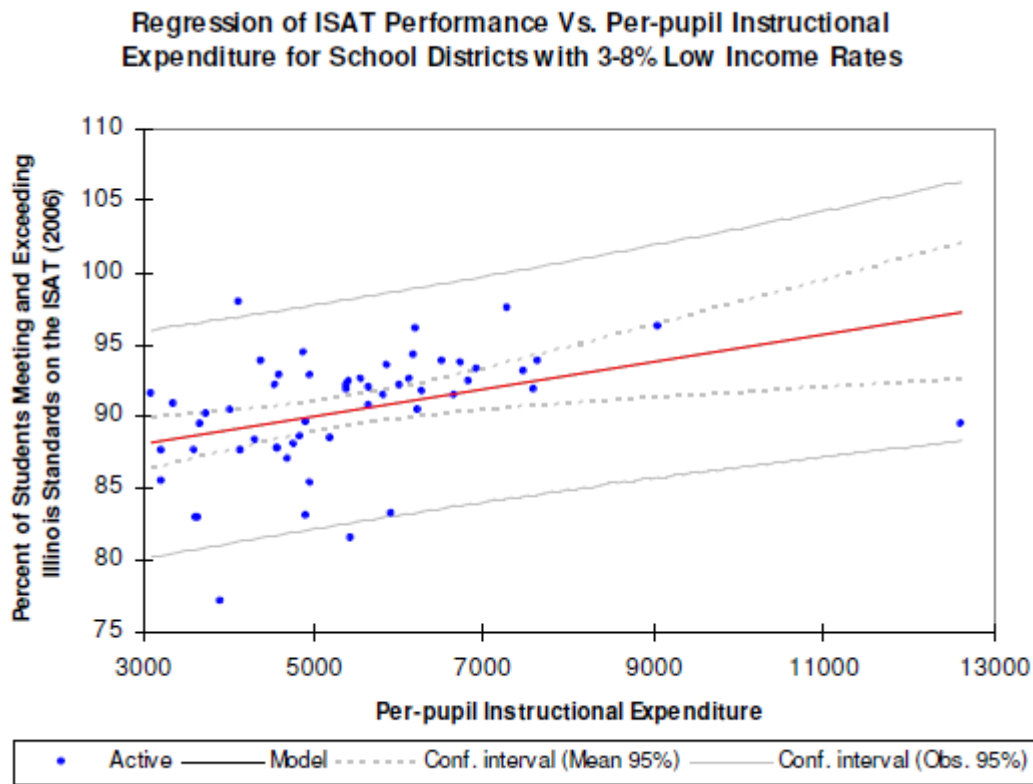
Only those students enrolled in the school or district by May 1 of the prior school year are included in the calculation of school or district AYP score, although those test performances are included in the overall ISAT results for their school (IIRC, What Students Should Know 2010, para. 6).

EAV is a proxy for a school district’s local property wealth available to be taxed. The state requires real estate property to be assessed at 33.3% of fair market value, and this procedure is used in calculating the base cost figure plus an adjustment for at-risk pupils. “After a county assessor makes the assessment determination for his or her county, the Illinois Department of Revenue ensures the total assessment meets the 33.3% threshold” (Martire, Manchini, & Kaslow, 2008, p. 8). There are many reports that have shown a correlation between higher EAV and SES of families and children’s success on state standardized test scores such as Grymes (2009), Hughes (1992), and Johnson (2005). SES depends on a combination of factors, including income, wealth, residence, and occupation. Basically, the more wealth a family and surrounding community has, the greater success the children will experience in school. A study done by the French

government dealing with well-controlled adoptions discovered transferring an infant “from a family having low SES to a home where parents have high SES improves childhood IQ scores by 12 to 16 points or about one standard deviation” (Wahlsten, 1997, p. 76).

A report by Martire et al. (2008), showed how strong the connection is between a high EAV and academic success.

When it comes to instructional expenses, flat grant districts spend \$2,324 more per student on average than do foundation formula districts. Hence, the disparities in available resources, academic performance, and teacher quality are at least somewhat related to spending. The big question remaining, however, is whether increased investment in instruction generates better academic performance. Put another way, does money matter? As Figure 1 graphically illustrates, the answer appears to be a resounding yes. (Martire et al., 2008, p. 11)



*Figure 1.* Regression graph of ISAT performance versus per-pupil instructional expenditure for school districts with 3-8% low income rates. Reprinted from (“Money Matters: How the Illinois School Funding System Created Significant Educational Inequities that Impact Most Students in the State,” by Martire et al., 2008, Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, p. 11. Copyright 2008. Reprinted with permission

Figure 1 illustrates a regression analysis tracking academic performance compared with instructional expense. Illinois school districts with low poverty are represented by a blue dot. The bright red line predicts test score results a school district should obtain at a given level of instructional expenditure, based on the actual expenses and performance of this set of low poverty districts at the time of analysis (Martire et al., 2008) used. According to Martire et al. (2008):

Spending levels up to \$5,000 per student in instructional expense, roughly half the school districts perform as predicted or better and half perform worse. As the instructional expense increases to \$7,000 per child, however, student performance

also increases to the point that substantially all the districts perform at or above the predicted level—that is, academic outcomes improve with an enhanced instructional expense of between \$1,000 to \$2,200 per child. Flat grant districts currently spend \$2,324 more per child on instructional expenses than do foundation formula districts—which are charged with educating almost 80 percent of the state's K-12 student body. (p. 11)

Flat grant schools are those that have strong EAVs and receive only the base amount of state educational funding (Martire et al., 2008, p. 14). There are 52 flat grant schools and of the 52 schools, 49 are located north of Interstate 80, which are the wealthy suburbs of Chicago

The school districts that are not flat grant schools must rely on General State Aid (GSA) as a key source of funding. GSA involves a four-step process:

First, the General Assembly establishes the minimum foundation level amount of funding per child every school district should receive. Second, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) determines how much of that minimum amount per student should be covered by local revenues generated from property taxes. Third, ISBE identifies that difference between (a) local support per child and (b) the foundation level amount. Finally, ISBE determines the amount the state must cover, by multiplying the applicable school district's average daily attendance (ADA) times the difference between the foundation level, and the portion of the foundation level covered by local property taxes. (Martire et al., 2008, p. 6)

Figure 2, as shown below, is the Illinois formula for GSA. This formula is used in Illinois schools that are not flat grant school to calculate state funding.

$\text{Available Local Resources} = (\text{GSA EAV} * \text{RATE} + \text{CPPRT}) / \text{ADA}$
$\text{Budget year EAV} * \text{Rate}$
$(2.3\% \text{ Elementary, } 1.05\% \text{ High School, } 3.0\% \text{ Unit District})$
$\text{Rate of Corporate Personal Property Replacement Tax} *$
$\text{Average Daily Attendance}$

*Figure 2.* The calculation for General State Aid (GSA). Adapted from “Illinois State Board of Education General State Aid Overview,” Copyright 2010. Adapted with permission.

According to the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability (CTBA), “Flat grant districts, on average, spend 36% more money for operational expenditures and 33% more for instructional expenditures, than do downstate school districts south of Interstate 80” (Martire et al., 2008, p. 14). On the 2006 ISAT, flat grant districts scored an average of 8 points higher in math, 7 points higher in science, and 6 points higher in reading than downstate districts (Martire et al., 2008, p. 14).

Although some studies have linked a very strong correlation between money and test scores, a few studies claim other factors are better predictors of academic success. One of those studies was released in 2007, and the authors concluded:

Many schools that lack Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) attendance and membership are also schools with low standardized test scores. While the lack of PTA attendance and membership does not cause low test scores, it suggests that there may be a connection between parental/community involvement and achievement. (Jeter-Twilley, Legum, & Norton, 2007, p. 8)

A 2007 story from a Missouri newspaper, the *Columbian Missourian*, covering the Show-Me Institute’s conference reported that “more money does not affect student achievement” (Spalding, 2007, para. 1). University of Washington Professor Hill spoke at the conference and claimed “money is not the main barrier to performance,” and Costrell,

an economist at the University of Arkansas, asserted that there was “no consistent amount of money per student that a school district can spend in order to get the student to reach a target test score” (Spalding, 2007, para. 6).

The connection between wealth and schooling is nothing new in the American education system. Prior to the 1840s, education was something that was available only to the wealthy. Public education did not begin to expand until reformers such as Henry Barnard and Horace Mann started to push for all children to gain the benefits of education. An article by Thattai (2001) entitled *A History of Public Education in the United States*, stated:

Mann started a publication called *Common School Journal*, which took the educational issues to the public. . . . The common-school reformers argued for the case that common schooling could create good citizens, unite society, and prevent crime and poverty. (para. 4)

Because of the reformers’ efforts, by the end of the 19th century, there was free elementary-level public education available for all. Massachusetts was the first state to pass compulsory school attendance in 1852, followed one year later by New York. All states had mandatory elementary school attendance by 1918.

The first publicly supported secondary school in North America was the Latin School in Boston that was founded in 1635, but due to the specialized curriculum, attendance was low. Benjamin Franklin started a new kind of secondary school in Philadelphia called the American Academy. Eventually, high schools replaced Latin grammar schools, and the rise in high school attendance was one of the 20th century’s most striking developments in education. “From 1900 to 1996 the percentage of



teenagers who graduated from high school increased from about 6% to about 85%” (Thattai, 2001, para. 5). Later in the 1920s and 1930s, progressive education was the trend; however, in later decades the focus shifted to intellectual discipline and curriculum development projects (Thattai, 2001, para. 5).

The literature review in the next chapter will include 20 studies that focused on schools where students achieved at better than expected levels on standardized tests. Many of the reports used for this study were meta-analyses, while other studies investigated high performing schools in specific economic situations with precise student demographics. A thorough examination was done of each study to discover which characteristics were most commonly found among high achieving schools. Achievement was measured in all studies by improved scores on standardized state tests, often in spite of high poverty and low income levels. There was no single factor identified in any study that created success or improvement. Instead, the researcher found the research indicated that the high performing schools often have many common characteristics that help make the students successful. The five common characteristics were clear focus, community collaboration, high standards and high expectations for all students, focused professional development, and high levels of community and family involvement.

The research aspect of this project focused on Bluffview Elementary school, a local example of a school outperforming expectations. This project explores why this school succeeds within a community and district with a low EAV , while other schools in the district are not meeting state standards for student achievement. At the time of this study, Bluffview Elementary was a pre-kindergarten through 6th grade school with 747 students and its staff was composed of 51 certified and non-certified staff members.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is to uncover the characteristics that make Bluffview Elementary able to succeed in a low EAV community. Although funding, EAV, and SES have proven to be key predictors of educational success in schools, other factors and characteristics may be able to make up or fill the financial gap left by the unequal funding of schools within Illinois. This study is also significant because many districts around the state are experiencing huge disparities between the achievement levels of their elementary students and their high school students. The strategies that make elementary students successful could also possibly be applied to high school students in the same community.

**Research Question**

What attributes are evident at Bluffview Elementary that make it exceptional and allow students to achieve with better than predicted outcomes on the Illinois Standard Achievement Test when considering the EAV of the district?

**Statement of the Problem**

The problem researched in this study was to identify how Bluffview Elementary school is able to overcome unequal funding and exceed expected outcomes on standardized testing when battling a low EAV. This study surveyed and interviewed certified staff members to acquire their perceptions and experiences regarding why this school succeeds in an environment where most schools would fail.

**Definitions**

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)— was signed into law January 8, 2002. Federal law which was created in 2002 to ensure that every child in America could meet the state learning standards regardless of where he or she resided (ASCD, 2010).

Equalized assessed valuation (EAV)— includes all computed property values, less homestead exemptions and adjustments for tax abatements, upon which a district's local tax rate is calculated (ISBE, 2009b).

Foundation level of funding (FLF)—Minimum level of financial funding for a school.

Flat grant—A funding formula that is used with school districts that are able to cover 17% or more of the current foundation level per student educational cost with local property tax revenue (ASCD, 2010).

Alternative formula—a funding formula that is used with school districts able to cover 93% to 175% of the current foundation level per student educational cost with local property tax revenue (ASCD, 2010).

Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)—The governing body of school boards for the state of Illinois.

General state aid (GSA)—The amount of money school districts receive on a formula basis regardless of the programs being offered. Components of the formula include pupil attendance, the district's EAV, and a foundation amount (ISBE, 2009b).

Socioeconomic status (SES)—An individual's or group's position within a hierarchical social structure. SES depends on a combination of variables, including occupation, education, income, wealth, and place of residence (ISBE, 2009b).

ISAT—Illinois Standard Achievement Test measures individual student achievement relative to the Illinois Learning Standards (ISBE, 2009b).

### **Limitations/Delimitations of Study**

**Delimitations.** The delimitations for this study were the limited number of certified staff and interviews that were conducted. The elementary school used in this study had less than 50 certified staff, and there was only one elementary school within the Dupon District. Interviews were conducted with staff members who were chosen by random selection. There were a limited number of veteran teachers within the school due to a large number of novice teachers in response to the large number of staff members who retired.

**Limitations.** The biggest limitation to this study was how openly and honestly the staff members answered the questions. The researcher is employed by the same school district in which Bluffview is located in which could influence some of the answers of the participants. Since the questionnaire was composed of open ended questions and a series of questions answered using a Likert-type scale, participants could easily skip the open ended questions and review the questions scored on the Likert-type scale with very little reflection. Validity of the interviews depended on the honesty of the participants. The questionnaire was created by the researcher and has not been used by in any other studies.

### **Summary**

Funding for public schools in the United States comes from a combination of federal, state, and local sources, but due to the overreliance on local property taxes, the system creates large funding inequalities between wealthy and economically challenged

communities. The funding inequalities within the current education system have created unequal education for students across the nation as well as the state of Illinois. There are 49 flat grant schools north of Interstate 80, while only three exist south of Interstate 80. Although these inequalities exist, some schools are able to beat the odds and not only meet the state standards on standardized tests, but are able to excel and achieve at levels that are unexpected given the EAV of the districts where the schools are located. The goal of this study was to find characteristics existing at Bluffview Elementary that help its students achieve at higher than expected levels, and use that information to transform other schools with similar economic conditions. Chapter 2 is a review of studies that have examined successful schools to find common themes and characteristics that are found within the schools.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

Public schools in the United States during the beginning of the 19th century were viewed as institutions that serve the local people and community. Therefore, the schools were funded by voluntary contributions which, at the time, needed very little funding. By the end of the 19th century, funding schools through local property taxes was common and widespread. This tradition was common place and had many advantages because many families were living in small, rural, isolated communities with similar economic situations.

Over time, fewer people lived in the small rural isolated communities. Instead, more people moved into major cities, and after achieving success, moved out to the suburbs that came to surround American urban cities. As the suburbs grew, the local citizens retained the status quo of funding public schools through local property taxes, which created a flawed system. As more people moved to upscale suburbs, they were willing to fund well-staffed, well-equipped schools for their own children, but only with the standard that public schools should be funded locally. Taxpayers in affluent suburbs saw no reason to pay additional taxes to fund schools for impoverished students in major cities or rural towns, thus creating a difference in the education quality of education for the children in America.

The issue of unequal funding has been such a concern in the United States that it has now reached the judicial branch in most states across our nation. According to Columbia University, “lawsuits challenging state methods of funding public schools have been brought in 45 of the 50 states” (National Access Network, 2008). Both Illinois and Missouri have been in litigation concerning the current funding schemes. The Illinois

Supreme Court rejected plaintiffs' challenges to the state's education finance system, based on the courts separation of power principal, despite the state constitution's education clause. In both cases, the states' Supreme Court rejected the challenges because the judicial system did not want to get involved in a legislative matter. While rejecting quality-of-education and equity claims in *Committee for Educational Rights v. Edgar* (1996), the court held that school funding reform must be done in a legislative forum and not in the courts (National Access Network, 2008). In *Lewis E. v. Spagnolo* (1999), the court rejected the plaintiffs' attempt to distinguish its 1996 decision from their adequacy claims, and characterized the case as once again asking the court to adjudicate Illinois public school policy (National Access Network, 2008).

Missouri has fared no better in the courts when trying to change the current tax formula for schools. The Committee for Educational Equality, a group of more than 500 schools, have filed a number of lawsuits challenging the way Missouri distributes educational funding. The committee argued that Missouri's public school finance system is unconstitutional because it does not allocate 25% of state revenue to support public schools. The trial court ruled that certain receipts did not constitute state revenue for purposes of the calculation, and that the state had appropriated more than the required minimum amount. The court upheld the constitutionality of the funding scheme, and all appeal cases have been decided in favor of the state of Missouri.

The milestone United States Supreme Court case dealing with educational finance was *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* (1973). "Although *Rodriguez* was not the first federal constitutional challenge to inequitable school funding schemes, it was the first that made its way to the United States Supreme Court" (Koski & Levin,

2000, p. 481). The facts of the case were compelling. Texas, like many other states, funded its schools with a combination of primarily local property tax revenues as determined by the tax burden each community wants to impose upon itself and, significantly, by the property wealth of the community, coupled with a relatively minimal foundation contribution from the state. This primary reliance on local property taxes resulted in dramatic inequities (Koski & Levin, 2000, p. 481).

The plaintiffs in *Rodriguez*, a class of children living in districts with low property wealth, alleged that the state's educational finance scheme, which resulted in huge inequalities, violated the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause. A three-judge U.S. District Court panel agreed with the plaintiffs. The panel found that the funding scheme deserved strict judicial scrutiny because it impacted education, a fundamental interest under the Constitution, and because it discriminated on the basis of wealth, a suspect classification (Koski & Levin, 2000, p. 481). The 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution sets forth the equal protection clause which is the basis of the strict scrutiny standard of the judicial. The strict scrutiny is often used by federal courts to determine whether certain types of government policies are constitutional. The U.S. Supreme Court has applied this standard to laws or policies that impinge on people's rights, such as the right to vote, which is explicitly protected by the U.S. Constitution. The Court has also identified certain rights that it deems to be fundamental rights, even though they are not enumerated rights stated in the Constitution. Applying the strict scrutiny test and unable to find any compelling state interest to support the educational finance scheme, the District Court invalidated it. Perhaps taking their cues from the California Supreme Court's decision in *Serrano v. Priest* (1971), the judges effectively held that equal



protection of the laws under the 14th Amendment required that the level of funding for a public school district does not have to be equal (Koski & Levin, 2000).

The plaintiffs' victory was short-lived; however, as the Supreme Court on direct appeal from the three-judge panel's decision and in a narrow five-to-four opinion disagreed with the District Court. Although recognizing the inequality produced by the Texas educational finance scheme, the Supreme Court refused to apply strict scrutiny to the scheme. First, the court was not convinced students in poor school districts were a suspect classification because correlations between property wealth, family income, and race were far from perfect. Second, although the court recognized that "education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments" it refused to find that education was a fundamental right under the Constitution and, therefore, worthy of greater judicial scrutiny (Koski & Levin, 2000, p. 482). Refusing to apply strict scrutiny to the Texas educational finance plan, the court easily found that the plan was rationally related to a number of legitimate state goals, including the goal of maintaining local control over educational decisions making (Koski & Levin, 2000, p. 482).

Among the elements leading to the Supreme Court's "rejection of the decision of the lower court was a skepticism that expenditure disparities resulted in damage to students and that state-imposed minimum expenditure levels failed to assure children an adequate level of schooling" (Koski & Levin, 2000, p. 482). The court specifically cited disputes among scholars and educational experts on the relationship between educational expenditures and the quality of education and thereby sidestepped the issue of whether dollars make a difference. Extensive studies over the past 25 years have attempted to measure the relationship between school spending and school performance, trying to shift

from an emphasis on equity per se to adequacy in school funding as a guideline to achieving greater equity (Koski & Levin, 2000, p. 482).

### **Effect of Poverty on Students' Academic Performance**

Since Coleman's 1966 landmark study, SES has been proven as a key predictor of student achievement. The Coleman report claimed "the influence of student background was greater than anything that goes on within schools" (Coleman, 1966). SES and poverty are debilitating factors for children in the United States. Findings from the *Luxembourg Income Study* (Rainwater & Smeeding, 1995) showed that:

During the 1990s families of children in the United States had lower real income than families of children in almost every other nation. Although the poverty rate of people under 18 years old dropped from 16.9% in 1999 to 16.2% in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), American children remained the poorest population by age group. Of these approximately 12 million children, one third lived in extreme poverty in families with income below 50% of the poverty line. (Rainwater & Smeeding, 1995, as cited in Thomas & Stockton, 2004, p. 1)

It has been well documented that beginning early in life, a child's academic performance and development is impacted by poverty; this impact can extend through high school years (Engle & Black, 2008, p. 2). Risks occurring in the preschool years can have long-lasting consequences, such as students entering kindergarten when they are ready for school positively impacts future success. "School readiness is critical to later academic achievement because differences on school entry have long-term consequences" (Engle & Black, 2008, p. 2).

Lee and Burkman (2002) found that if a student is behind when he or she begins school, that gap will most likely never be closed. “School readiness has been shown to be predictive of virtually every educational benchmark such as achievement test scores, grade retention, special education placement, and dropout rates” (Engle & Black, 2008, p. 21). Failures early in a student’s school career increase likelihood of truancy, dropping out, and delinquent behaviors. Estimates are that between 30% and 40% of children entering kindergarten in the United States are not ready for school (Engle & Black, 2008, p. 2).

A report entitled “How Do Rural Schools Fare Under a High Stakes Testing Regime?” published in the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, examined the issue of poverty and low property values and the effects on education. The study concluded that “factors such as the percentage of students who are poor, percentage black, and the property values within a district explain over 70% of the variance in school outcomes” (Beck & Shoffstall, 2005, p. 1).

There is a well-established connection between poverty and low academic performance (Murnane, 2007). American children growing up in poverty often do not graduate from high school, and their potential earnings declined 16% from 1979 to 2005, averaging slightly over \$10 per hour earning in inflation-adjusted dollars (Murnane, 2007). “Children in chronically impoverished families have lower cognitive and academic performance and more behavior problems than children who are not exposed to poverty, partially explained by a lack of stimulating behaviors and home experiences among low-income families” (Engle & Black, 2008, p. 2).

A 2009 report by Berliner pinpointed seven out-of-school factors that greatly influenced school achievement. Berliner stated that “students spend about 1,150 waking hours a year in school versus about 4,700 waking hours in their families and neighborhoods” and because of this influence, all schools have limits to their effect (Berliner, 2009, p. 3). Negative out-of-school factors are often concentrated in schools serving poor and minority children (Berliner, 2009). Out-of-school factors that impede education include the following:

1. Birth-weight and non-genetic prenatal influences;
2. Lack of medical care;
3. Poor diets, hunger, and food insecurity;
4. Polluted/unsafe home environments;
5. Family relations and violence;
6. Neighborhood crime and violence; and
7. Lack of extended learning opportunities (summer and after school programs). (Berliner, 2009, p. 8)

### **Tax Inequality**

There is no single policy issue in Illinois that has generated more controversy—and less action—than school funding reform (Martire et al., 2008 p. 5). For well over 30 years, many attempts have been made to reform the education funding system, and while they generate heated discussion and intense media coverage, little has changed. Illinois has not adequately funded education from state revenue, ranking 49th out of 50 states for state funded education (Martire et al., 2008, p. 5). Due to this system of education

funding, school quality and spending disparities have been created due to local property wealth.

Supporters of reform have argued that over-reliance on local property taxes hurts poorer communities by underfunding schools, with a result that children living in poorer areas receive inadequate educations. Opponents claim that additional tax dollars will not generate better academic outcomes, and the schools have all the resources they need. Due to the state's complex education funding system, it is difficult for policymakers and citizens to determine what system of funding creates the best education for students in Illinois.

### **Tax Burden on Illinois Residents**

Illinois has a foundation level approach to K-12 education funding. This means that each year the General Assembly establishes the minimum per student amount of basic education funding that should be available to all schools (Martire et al., 2008, p. 5). A study was conducted by the Education Funding Advisory Board (EFAB), a group that was created by statute in 1999 to make recommendations on the amount of funding necessary to ensure that each child in Illinois receives a quality education. The EFAB determined that a minimum per pupil funding level of \$6,405 should be guaranteed (Mangino, 2005, para. 2). The state of Illinois' current foundation level is significantly below the recommended amount, providing just \$4,964 per pupil for the 2004-2005 school years (Mangino, 2005, para. 2), leaving a difference of \$1,441 per student. However, the per student foundation level is not necessarily an amount sufficient to cover all the costs of education. In fact, the foundation level is only intended to cover instructional costs such as academic programs and teacher salaries, and does not account

for other necessary expenses such as transportation and special education. Instead, the foundation level is the basic building block of school funding, upon which other education funding items are layered (Martire et al., 2008, p. 5).

School districts are divided by the ISBE into three funding categories,—flat grant, alternative formula, and foundation level districts—after the school year’s foundation level is set. Flat grant districts have the highest amount of available local property wealth and alternative formula districts have the second highest amount. Foundation formula districts include most school districts with available property wealth ranging from very low to just above average (Martire et al., 2008). Following this, the ISBE uses different funding formulas according to the type of district to see if the state will pay the district base level per student or if it will be paid by the local property taxes. With the current funding formula in the state of Illinois, most of the foundation level is funded by local property taxes. This creates a system in which poor communities have low funding while wealthy communities with a strong tax base have strong funding.

Because education is not an enumerated federal constitutional right, the right of education is reserved to the states. The Illinois constitution states that “the state has the primary responsibility for financing the system of public education” (Illinois Constitution, 1970, §1, Art. X). However, Illinois pays only 30% of all school expenses, which is far below the national average of 50% (Martire et al., 2008, p. 5). The state taxes local property heavily, and on average, a little over 60% of school expenses are funded by taxpayers. The remaining 10% comes from federal aid. Even with federal aid, discrepancies still exist between wealthy and poor districts.

Foundation formula districts are determined by the ISBE as those that can cover less than 93% of the per child foundation level annually set by the General Assembly (Martire et al., 2008, p. 6). Under this formula, 870 school districts (81%) receive general state aid for basic education (Martire et al., 2008, p. 6). Over 1.6 million students (77%) of Illinois' K-12 students live in foundation level districts (Martire et al., 2008, p. 6).

The non-foundational level school districts have sufficient property wealth and tax revenue to cover more than 93% of the foundation level support. These districts may be categorized as either alternative formula or flat grant, and such designation is dependent upon the district's overall wealth. These districts may still receive some funding from the state (Martire et al., 2008, p. 6).

A district must be able to provide between 93% and 175% of the school year's foundation level in order to be designated as an alternative formula district. With this formula, a district will receive general state aid at about 5% to 7% of the current foundation level (Martire et al., 2008, p. 6). Alternative formula districts account for approximately 15% of all school districts, and about 18% of all students in Illinois (Martire et al., 2008, p. 6).

The districts with sufficient property wealth are designated as flat grant districts, and these districts have enough property tax revenue to provide 17% or more of the per student foundation level. There is no formula-based aid for these districts, receiving a state grant of \$218 per student instead (Martire et al., 2008, p. 6). Out of Illinois' 870 school districts, approximately 5% are designated as flat grant districts. Approximately 94,885 (4.5%) of the state's K-12 students attended school in flat grant districts in 2007-

2008 (Martire et al., 2008, p. 6). Operational and instructional expenditures in flat grant schools are higher than other Illinois schools by approximately 36% for operations and 33% for instruction (Martire et al., 2008, p. 14). Forty-nine of the 52 wealthy flat grant schools are north of Interstate 80, with only three in central Illinois and no flat grant schools south of Springfield. The following map of Illinois shows the division of school wealth found in the state. Note the bold black line in Northern Illinois is Interstate 80.

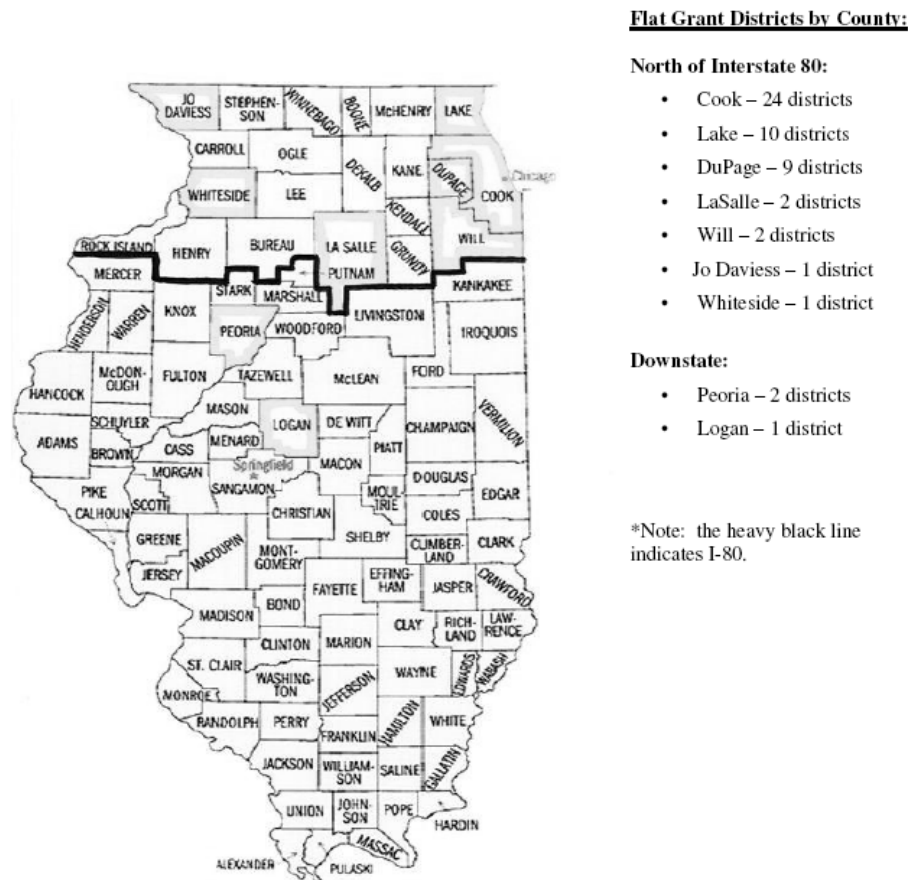


Figure 3. Flat grant districts by county. Reprinted from “Money Matters: How the Illinois School Funding System Created Significant Educational Inequities that Impact Most Students in the State,” by Martire et al., 2008, Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, p. 13. Copyright 2008. Reprinted with permission.

There are some key differences between flat grant, alternative formula, and foundation formula districts. Property taxes comprise the bulk of district revenues in flat



grant and alternative formula districts: 83.25% for flat grant districts, and 75.58% for alternative formula districts (Martire et al., 2008, p. 7). Because flat grant and alternative formula districts have such strong support from local property taxes, they can overcome the state's shortfall on school funding and provide quality education for those children in affluent communities.

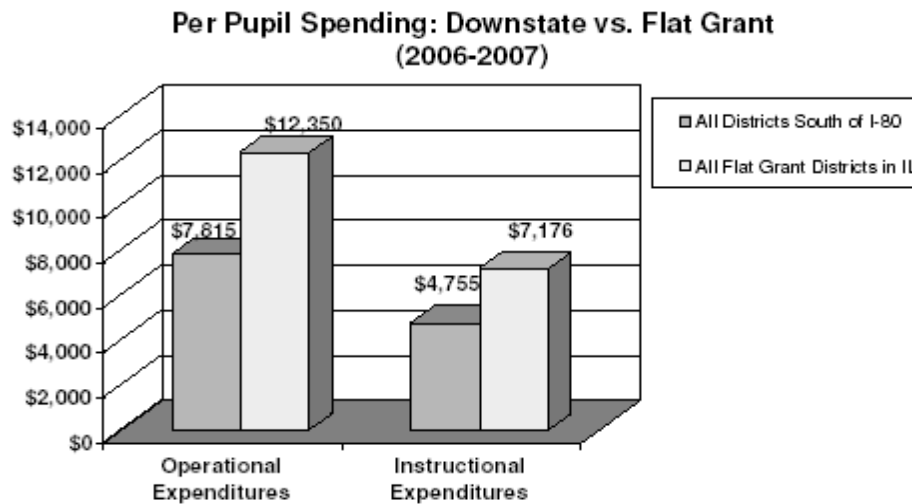
EAV is used to determine how much of a district's local property wealth can be taxed. Illinois requires that all real property be assessed at 33.3% of fair market value, using a formula for calculating the base cost figure plus adjusting for at-risk pupils. Once the county assessor determines the overall county assessment, the Department of Revenue makes sure that the overall county assessment meets the 33.3% threshold (Martire et al., 2008, p. 8). If not, a multiplier is applied to the assessment by the Department of Revenue to meet this threshold, in order to equalize assessments amongst the counties across the state at 33.3% percent of each county's fair market value. The differences between district types for EAV is the largest between foundation formula and flat grant districts. In flat grant districts, the per student EAV is approximately five times larger than that in foundation formula districts (Martire et al., 2008, p. 8).

According to Martire et al. (2008), "educational property tax rates are almost four times greater in foundation formula districts than in flat grant communities, and are more than double the rates in alternative formula areas" (p. 8). Economically challenged communities often have very high property taxes and struggle with collecting taxes from their residents. The high property taxes are caused by the local community voting to increase taxes. Because many of the residents in economically challenged communities, rent and do not own their own property, they vote to increase taxes. Therefore, business

and industry have no benefits for remaining in the low income areas paying high property taxes. It is more conducive for the business to move to wealthier areas with lower property taxes and better schools.

Illinois' failure to adequately fund education has transferred costs to local property taxes, burdening both homeowners and businesses, and contributing to the state's regressive tax structure, which has become one of the 10 states with the most regressive tax policies (Martire et al., 2008, p. 8). When adjusted for inflation over the last 15 years, growth of Illinois' property tax revenue has "outpaced real growth in income by almost 20 times" (Martire et al., 2008, p. 8).

Due to the unequal funding found in Illinois, there are vast discrepancies in instructional per student expenditures across the state. There is a difference of \$2,324 in student instructional expense when comparing flat grant districts with 4.5% of the state's K-12 students, and the foundation formula districts with 77% of the state's K-12 students. The largest difference between flat grant and foundation formula districts is \$2,421 per student, and these foundation formula schools are primarily located south of Interstate 80 (Martire et al., 2008, p. 14).



*Figure 4. Per pupil spending: Downstate versus flat grant for 2006-2007. Reprinted from “Money Matters: How the Illinois School Funding System Created Significant Educational Inequities that Impact Most Students in the State,” by Martire et al., 2008, Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, p. 14. Copyright 2008. Reprinted with permission.*

There are some exceptions when dealing with low EAV schools. Some schools qualify for extra funds through state and federal grants due to high enrollment of minority students. One such school is the East Saint Louis district 189. The district is 99.6% African American and Hispanic students with an EAV of \$12,355. Although the EAV is very low, the operating expenditure per pupil is \$12,274, which is \$1,857 over the state average (ISBE, 2009a). The reason behind the high operating expenditure per pupil is due to the federal and state grants that are given to the school due to the economic situation of the community and community demographics. Even with the grant money, the students within the East Saint Louis district are still struggling with an average composite ACT of 15.2, which is 5.4 points behind the state average of 20.6 (Illinois School Report Card, 2008). This would suggest that schools such as East Saint Louis may be at a disadvantage because they may not have the mechanism for improving their financial status. Also, grant money is often unreliable from year to year and is not a permanent solution.

### **SES as a Predictor of Academic Success**

Many studies link a correlation between SES and student achievement. One such study is by Johnson, a state policy studies manager for the state of Mississippi. He found that “it is a system where inequity in the distribution of human and financial resources mirrors inequity in the distribution of measured academic achievement” (Johnson, 2005, p. 10). The study also reported that “lower achieving Mississippi school districts served student populations with the state’s highest concentrations of children in poverty and

operate in communities that have the lowest income levels, lowest adult educational attainment rates, and highest unemployment rates” (Johnson, 2005, p. 10). Johnson’s study concluded that when comparing the 20 highest and 31 lowest achieving districts, money played a role in student achievement. Johnson found that the 31 lowest-achieving districts had an EAV of

\$21,653 (40%) per pupil less in local property tax base, \$459 (21%) per pupil less in local revenues, nearly 2.5 times the rate of households in poverty, more than double the adult unemployment rate, and 75% higher rate of adults without a high school diploma. (Johnson, 2005, p. 8)

The most notable facts are the composite achievement scores on the state achievement tests for the two groups, a composite score of 52% for the 31 lowest-achieving districts and a composite score of 82% for the highest-achieving students (Johnson, 2005, p. 5). The most privileged students in the Mississippi Public School District scored 30% better than the poorest students.

Scott and Teddlie did a study for the Educational Leadership Foundation in 1987, and although 20 years old, the study displayed similar results as more recent research. The study included a sample of 76 public elementary schools in Louisiana, 76 principals, 250 teachers, and 5,289 third grade students. In the study, three theoretical models were developed and tested; the models explored the relationship between achievement and a combination of student SES, expectations, and attributed responsibility. The linear structural relations procedure was used for analysis of the data, and was applied to each of the three models. In all models “student SES was the best single predictor of

achievement” (Scott & Teddlie, 1987, p. 25). The effect of student SES on expectations was significant in all three models, but in the student model it was a negative predictor.

A study by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research examined SES and its effect on the family. The study stated that “nowhere was the effect of family SES more apparent than in students’ achievement levels at school entry” (Benson & Borman, 2007, p. 28). The researchers reviewed both reading and math, and found that students entering school from low SES families were approximately one standard deviation behind their classmates from families with a high SES. The one standard deviation turned out to be around “4.5 months of school year reading growth and 5 months of school year math growth” (Benson & Borman, 2007, p. 28). The researchers also suggested that the “gaps that accumulated during the entirety of elementary school equaled to or exceeded the gaps at school entry” (Benson & Borman, 2007, p. 28).

The same study also analyzed the differences in achievement growth during the summer season. Without surprise, the study showed that students in all SES groups learned more slowly during the summer, particularly in reading and math. This was not surprising because summer learning is usually not a priority. However, summer achievement rates did not slow equally for all students:

Students from low SES families dropped below zero, indicating that these students were losing ground during the summer months. On the other hand, students from high SES families continued to grow in reading achievement during the summer, albeit at a much slower pace than during the school year. (Benson & Borman, 2007, p. 28)

The Northwest Evaluation Association released a study in 2006 that examined achievement gaps among students in grades 3 through 8. The researchers reported:

It becomes apparent that individuals in schools with greater poverty, African-American students and Hispanic students make less growth than their peers who begin with the same skill levels . . . Students from poorer schools and minority students also grow less or lose more ground over the summer than peers who start with the same score. (McCall, Hauser, Cronin, Kingsbury, & Hauser, 2006, p. 41).

### **Free and Reduced Lunch Count as Predictor of Academic Success**

Free and reduced lunch number count is often used as a predictor of family wealth within the community as well as student success. The program is aimed children from households meeting federal guidelines for free or reduced-priced meals under the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs. The following household size and income criteria are used for determining eligibility:

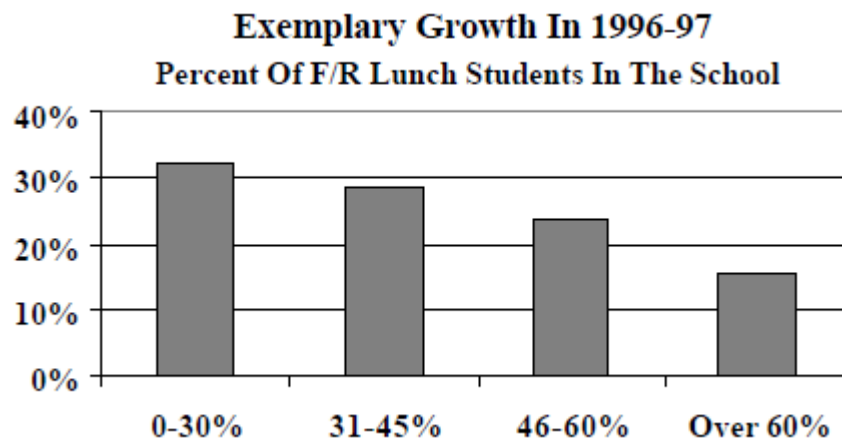
Table 1

#### *Reduced Price Meals.*

Household Size	Annual	Month	Twice Per	Every	Week
1	\$20,036	\$1,670	\$835	\$771	\$386
2	26,955	2,247	1,125	1,037	519
3	33,874	2,823	1,412	1,303	652
4	40,793	3,400	1,700	1,569	785
5	47,712	3,976	1,988	1,836	918
6	54,631	4,553	2,277	2,102	1,051
7	61,550	5,130	2,565	2,368	1,184
8	68,469	5,706	2,853	2,634	1,317
For each additional family member, add:	+6,919	+577	+289	+267	+134

*Note.* Adapted from “Illinois School Board of Education Income Eligibility Guidelines,” Copyright 2009. Adapted with permission.

Since the free and reduced-price program is based on the income levels of the households, it is directly based on the SES of the families. According to a North Carolina study that examined the relationship between poverty and status, “having an above average proportion of free and reduced lunch students increases the likelihood to a school not meeting growth (targets for student achievement established by state formulas) by 27%” (Johnson & Ward, 1998, as cited in Wake County Public School System, 1999, p. 3). The lower percentage of students taking advantage of the food program, the wealthier the families. As the food program percentage increases, the families SES lowers.

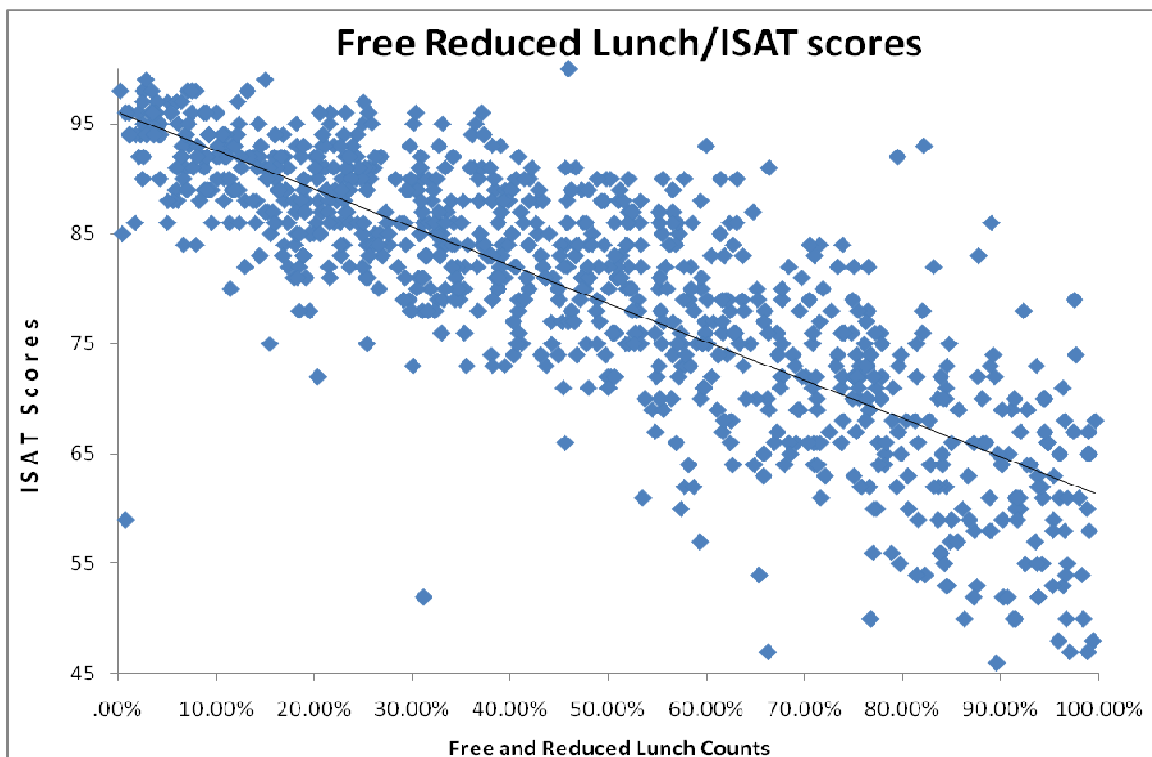


*Figure 5.* Exemplary growth of lunch students in the school in 1996-97. Reprinted from “The Impact Of Poverty Upon Schools,” by Johnson & Ward, 1998, as cited in Wake County School System, 1999, Evaluation and Research Department, 99.20, p. 3. Reprinted with permission.

A study by the Iowa Department of Education entitled *District Characteristics: What factors impact student achievement*, showed similar results as Johnson and Ward’s (1998) study of North Carolina schools. The Iowa Department of Education conducted a study to examine what district characteristics are associated with success on state-wide standardized tests. The goal was to create a district profile for each school to “determine

if any association exists between a particular district's characteristics and the test scores of 11th grade students" (Pennington, 2006, p. 4). Variables researched were: socioeconomic indicators, enrollment, diversity, and per pupil expenditures. The results of the study found "across all regression models, the percentage of student eligible for free or reduced lunch predicted achievement results" (Pennington, 2006, p. 4).

Figure 6 shows the correlation between free/reduced lunch percentages and ISAT scores for the 1078 schools that will be used to study the effects of EAV and SES on ISAT scores in the state of Illinois. Each school will not be examined individually; instead this figure demonstrates the performance of all schools in the state of Illinois.



*Figure 6.* Free reduced lunch/ISAT scores. Adapted from, "Illinois School Board of Education," 2009, Copyright 2009. Adapted with permission.

As shown in Figure 6, as the percentage of free/reduced lunch students increases, the overall composite ISAT score decreases. Although 1,078 schools were used in this



study, only 885 schools throughout the state of Illinois took part in the free/reduced lunch program. The 183 schools who did not take part in the free/reduced lunch program had an average EAV of \$328,908 and an average ISAT score of 88%. The 895 schools that did take part in the free/reduced lunch program had an average EAV of \$168,065 with an average ISAT score of 79.7%. That is a difference of EAV over \$160,000 per school when comparing schools that use the program and those that do not.

### **EAV as a Predictor of Academic Success**

In the state of Illinois there is an overreliance on local property tax to fund schools. This system places a huge burden on the local tax payers as well as creates a system of unequal funding for many throughout the state. The main reason why EAV is so important in the state of Illinois is because EAV is used in the school funding formula which determines how much state funding a school will receive. It is also important to note the difference between EAV and SES. EAV is the fair market value of the homes and other structures within a community while SES is the socioeconomic situation of a family. Often SES is used to make references as to the wealth of a family. A study by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute reported:

Students at the bottom-tier [defined as the 30 lowest achieving schools in the state] high schools are much more likely to come from districts with lower property values than those at top-tier [defined as the 30 highest achieving schools in the state] school districts.

School districts in the top tier had, on average, a property value of \$698,429 for every student enrolled in 2003-2004, compared to \$326,650 for every student enrolled in bottom-tier districts.

The statewide average property value per student in 2003-2004 for K-12 was \$394,510. The Wisconsin Department of Revenue calculated an equalized assessed valuation EAV for every school district in the state, as a way to determine how much state aid a district received. In general, districts with higher property values receive less state aid than districts with lower property values. The state's 426 school districts have varying property values, so one way to compare the relative wealth of one district to another is to calculate its equalized value per student. (Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, 2006, p. 12)

EAV inequality is also a major issue in Virginia. Grymes (2009) suggested that this state is economically divided because Northern Virginia is known as “the economic engine of the state economy” (para. 2) and can raise revenue because of relatively high salaries, the basis for income taxes sent to the state, and high property values, the basis for real and personal property taxes sent to local cities and counties. The report concluded with the following:

Those communities with high property values and high tax rates can generate vast sums of money for the public school system, while communities with a less-robust economy struggle to provide basic facilities and to pay a living wage to teachers. The result is a great inequity between the quality of a public education. (Grymes, 2009, para. 2)

Due to the over-reliance on property taxes as the dominant mechanism to fund local schools, a huge per student expenditure disparity has been created. This issue has been around for years. A study published in August 1967 by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare Office of Education reported “the average amount of

property tax per pupil increased as total valuation per pupil increased, indicating ability to give liberal support to schools” (Grinnell, 1967, p. 32). In 1988, the Decision Resources Corporation studied the relationship between districts’ wealth and equal educational opportunity among students attending public schools in the United States. The study concluded “it is safe to say that a moderate or even a high correlation between property wealth and operating expenditures is the norm” (Moskowitz & Schwartz, 1988, p. 26). The same study also went on to conclude, “it is certainly not rare for states to exhibit moderate correlations between property values and teacher/student ratios, meaning districts with greater property wealth tend to have more teachers per 1,000 pupils” (Moshowitz & Schwartz, 1988, p. 26).

A 1992 report by Hughes analyzed the factors that contribute to the differences in local education funding in 55 counties in West Virginia. The study reported “the value of assessed property in each county is a reflection of the fiscal capacity of that county to generate revenue to support local schools” (Hughes, 1992, p. 4). In West Virginia for the 1991 tax year, total assessed valuation of property per student in net enrollment ranged from a low of \$38,112 in Lincoln County to a maximum of \$209,625 in Pleasants County (Hughes, 1992, p. 4). The per pupil property wealth of Pleasants County is 5.5 times greater than the per pupil property wealth of Lincoln County (Hughes, 1992, p. 4). This difference in property wealth creates a huge variation in local support for the schools with ranges from a low of \$492 per student in Lincoln County to a maximum of \$3,473 in Pleasants County (Hughes, 1992, p. 6).

A study by North Carolina State University found “large differences across North Carolina in the amount of money spent on education. The top ten counties spend \$1,294

more per child than the bottom ten counties” (Tomaskovic-Dewey, 1995, p. 1). This variation in school spending partly reflects differences in the wealth—the tax base—of different counties. Poor counties have poor schools (Tomaskovic-Dewey, 1995, p. 1). There was a vast difference in 10th grade standardized test scores in North Carolina when comparing the top 10 wealthiest counties to the poorest 10 counties. The top 10 wealthiest counties have an average score of 51.23 on reading and 53.14 for math on state standardized tests, while the poorest counties scored an average of 46.65 on reading and 45.07 on math on the same standardized tests (Tomaskovic-Dewey, 1995, p. 2). That was a difference of 4.58 on reading and 8.07 on math. The author stated:

As school spending goes up, so do test scores. In fact, if spending in all school districts were brought up to the average of the high spending districts, our children’s educational achievement would be above the U.S. average, at least measured by standardized test scores. (Tomaskovic-Dewey, 1995, p. 3)

When dealing with EAV and success in school there seems to be some cause and effect. According to Max, senior writer for *CNN Money*, “the idea of houses near good schools sell for a premium is widely accepted. What is unclear is whether top-notch schools boost values or whether rising home values (and property tax revenue) boost school performance” (Max, 2004, p. 1). A study reported in the *Columbus Business Journal* in 2000 examined 77,578 home sales in seven urban areas including 310 schools districts around Columbus, Ohio. The study correlated home prices in the districts with the percentages of students passing all five sections of the proficiency test in the areas of mathematics, reading, citizenship, science, and writing. The study found “an increase of

about 20 percentage points in a school district's passing rate on the ninth grade proficiency test boosted housing values in the district by about 7%" (Bell, 2006, p. 1-2).

A study by The Reinvestment Fund (TRF), a national company specializing in capitalizing distressed communities and stimulation economic growth for low and moderate-income families, found school quality in Philadelphia impacted the value of residential real estate. The findings indicated that:

Elementary school test scores play a significant role in the prediction of sales price, even after controlling for neighborhood and individual home conditions. For every level of school quality improvement, the housing price increases 0.52 cents per square foot in average. For a 900 square foot home, a 10 point increase in school quality translates into a \$4,500 increase in sales price. (TRF, 2009, p. 1)

This idea that better schools drive higher real estate prices was also proven to hold true in the St. Louis. Researchers in another study found:

Increases in school test scores of a half standard deviation results in a house premium of about 11% or about \$16,000 at the mean price. A half standard deviation increase is equivalent to an increase of 4.6% in the math MAT index. (Chiodo, Hernandex-Murillo, & Owyang, 2010, p. 195)

Although research shows a link between tax support and students' academic success, there are schools that are able to overcome lacking economic support. Studies used for the literature review were reports that focused on how schools overcame economic issues and created schools where students succeed. Research shows characteristics of successful schools are: clear focus, community collaboration, curriculum, and instruction aligned with standards, focused professional development,

and high levels of community and family involvement. The literature review covered 20 studies, which have in turn reviewed hundreds of schools on every level.

Table 2

*Characteristics of Successful Schools*

	Clear & Shared Focus	High Standards & Expectations	Effective School Leadership	High Levels of Collaboration Among Staff	Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment Aligned w/ Standards	Frequent Monitoring of Teaching & Learning	Focused Professional Development	Supportive Learning Environment	High Level Family & Community Development
No Excuses! Lessons from 21 High Performing Poverty Schools (Carter, 2000)						X	X		X
Characteristics Between Rural and Urban Elementary Schools (Reuter, 1992)									*
Comprehension School Reform: Five Lessons from the Field (Dahlkemper et al., 1999)	X				X	X	X		X
Poor Schools, Poor Students, Successful Teachers (Gehrke, 2005)		X							
Academic Success Among Poor Minority Students (Borman et al., 2001)	X	X	X			X			X
Closing the Achievement Gap: Views from 9 Schools (NC Dept. of Public Inst., 2000)	*	X	X			X			

*Note:* X = explicitly identified as key finding(s) or in finding(s) discussion; \* = inferred or indirectly identified in descriptions.

Table 2 *continued*

Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
A Case Study of 6 High-Performing Schools in Ten (Craig et al., 2005)		X		*					X
Characteristics of Improved School Districts (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004)			X	X					X
Principals and Student Achievement (Cotton, 2003)	X	X		X			*		X
Dispelling the Myth: High Poverty Schools Exceeding Expectations (Barth et al., 1999)		X			X	X	X		X
Hope of Urban Education (Charles A. Dana Center, 1999)	X			X	X		X		X
Turning Around Chronically Low Performing Schools (Doherty & Abernathy, 1998)	X	X							X
Key School Reform Strategies (Visher et al., 1999)		X		*		X	X		X
Turning Around Low Performing Schools (Institute of Education Science, 2008)		X	X		X		X		X
Implementing School wide Programs: An Idea Book on Planning (US Dept. Of Ed., 1998)		X					X		X

*Note:* X = explicitly identified as key finding(s) or in finding(s) discussion; \* = inferred or indirectly identified in descriptions.



Table 2 *continued*

Successful School Restructuring (Neumann & Wehlage, 1995)	*			X			X		X
Show Me the Evidence (Slavin & Fashola, 1998)					X		X		X
Exceeding Expectations (Northern Illinois University, 2006)	X	X	X	X		X	X		X
Why Some Schools Beat the Odds (Center for the future of Arizona, 2006)	X		X	X	X				
<b>Totals</b>	10	12	7	9	7	8	12	1	17

*Note:* X = explicitly identified as key finding(s) or in finding(s) discussion; \* = inferred or indirectly identified in descriptions.

The first characteristic of successful schools is a high level of family and community involvement that was identified in 85% of the studies. The education of students is a shared responsibility of teachers, school staff, and community, as well as the students themselves. Families and other adults can be involved in the education of young people through a variety of activities that demonstrate the importance of education, show support, and encourage students' learning. The research is clear that family involvement is a key factor in a students' improved academic performance (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). "This relationship of family involvement holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic and educational backgrounds as well students at all ages" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 24). The benefits for students include higher GPAs, enrollment in classes that are more challenging, better attendance, improved behavior, and better social skills (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Clinton's (1996) appropriately titled book, *It Takes a Village*, demonstrated the importance of family involvement in school programs. This involvement starts in the home with the parental figure. "Children have advantages when their parents support and encourage school activities" (Constantino, 2003, p. 7). Also, "programs and interventions that engage families in supporting their children's learning at home are linked to higher student achievement" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 25). High performing schools are generally located in wealthier areas where education is a focal point and a key component of their daily lives. All parties, teachers, parents, and the community work together for the good of the students and the school.

The second and third characteristics from the literature review are curriculum and instruction aligned with high standards tied with focused professional development.

These two characteristics were identified in 60% of the studies. The standards movement has demonstrated the purpose for schools in academia. Performances levels set the required level of achievement for students to meet. Many educational lobbyists, community leaders, and post-secondary educators are vying for stronger academic requirements, when dealing with middle and high school pupils. These groups desire more rigor in work so the students might be better prepared for later schooling and the workforce (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007).

Improving student learning requires both the teachers and the students to believe in their ability to learn to high academic standards. According to Saphier (2005), effort based ability is:

The belief that all students can do rigorous academic work at high standards, even if they are far behind academically and need a significant amount of time to catch up. Educators who carry this belief into their practice are not unrealistic about the obstacles they and their students face. They simply have not given up. And we know for sure that they will get results if they translate this belief into appropriate practice. (Saphier, 2005, p. 86)

Research suggests that teachers tend to have lower expectations for Black students and poor students than for White students and more affluent students. “Teachers’ attitudes and expectations, as well as their knowledge of how to incorporate the cultures, experiences, and needs of their students into their teaching, significantly influence what students learn and the quality of their learning opportunities” (Banks et al., 2005, as cited in Shannon & Bylsma, 2007, p. 34). Students of color and poor students are more often assigned to remedial or low track classes and rarely have access

to coursework necessary for college entry. Researchers noted that Black students are more affected by teacher perceptions than are White students (Banks et al., 2005, as cited in Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Students are aware of the differences in the way teachers treat students they believe to be high and low achievers, and some students see the differential treatments as biased and inappropriate, as do some parents and teachers (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007).

These issues could be addressed in focused professional development identified in 12 of the 20 studies. Professional development for instructors usually focuses on-the-job preparations and training; in-service and staff development are terms often used to describe professional development. Many believe this on-site training will help educators learn new teaching techniques to improve student achievement. Since NCLB has been put into place, funding specifically for professional development has been provided by the government to schools which do not make AYP (Shannon and Bylsma, 2007).

The effectiveness of professional development is demonstrated by the improvement of students learning. Standards for staff development, developed by the National Staff Development Council, explicitly call for a focus on improvement of learning for all students. Three key areas should be addressed: context, process, and content. Context standards include organizing adults into learning communities and requiring leadership and resources. Process standards include use of student data, multiple sources on information and research for decision making, and include applying knowledge about human learning and change. Content standards address equity for all students, quality teaching, and family involvement (National Staff Development Council, 2001, as cited in Shannon & Bylsma, 2007).

The fourth characteristic is a clear and shared focus identified by 50% of the studies. A clear and shared focus helps identify the main goals of any organization including effective school systems. Effective systems with good organization are consistently connected with the focus and are more likely to impact student's achievement positively than uncoordinated fragmented systems (.Shannon & Bylsma, 2007)

The fifth common characteristic is collaboration and was identified in 45% of the studies. Within the context of collaboration among school practitioners, the following definition is particularly appropriate:

Collegiality is the presence of four specific behaviors, as follows: Adults in schools talk about practice. These conversations about teaching and learning are frequent, continuous, concrete, and precise. Adults in schools observe each other engaged in the practice of teaching and administration. These observations become the practice to reflect on and talk about. Adults engage together in work on curriculum by planning, designing, researching, and evaluating curriculum. Finally, adults in schools teach each other what they know about teaching, learning, and leading. Craft knowledge is revealed, articulated, and shared. (Barth, 1990, p. 31)

Researchers call schools that continuously work together to seek and share learning, communities of practice or professional learning communities. Professional learning communities are built on collaboration and communication.

If there is anything that the research community agrees on, it is this: The right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of

teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting. (Schmoker, 2005, p. xii)

### **Leadership Characteristics**

Leaders are vital to successful organizations, communities, and schools. School leaders come in many forms, serve many functions, and exhibit many different styles (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). As a result, management and organizational literature is rich with descriptions of leadership types: formal, informal, assumed, assigned, autocratic, democratic, team, dispersed, collaborative, servant, primal, and contrarian leadership to name a few (Bolman & Deal, 1997 as cited in Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). In school settings, educational leaders range from lead teachers, assistant principals, principals, superintendents, and many other leadership positions found within a school. According to Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009):

There are universal characteristics that commonly surface when considering qualities of effective leaders: sense of vision, ability to set goals and plan, personal charisma, strong communication skills (particularly verbal and negotiation abilities), strong sense of self and personal convictions, relationship and empathy skills, and the ability to motivate and influence others. (p. 2)

Based on the finding of Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009) in three case studies of leadership practices in high performing, high-poverty schools, the following major conclusions were made. First, effective leadership was found to be an important factor for student achievement and school performance. Formal leaders, who positively impact student achievement, share leadership responsibilities with others, facilitate change, and focus on instructional improvement for all students (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009).

Second, leaders in successful schools maintain a school-wide focus on instructional and high expectations, develop multiple support systems for students with varying needs, and capitalize on strengths of teachers to enhance student outcomes. They discover ways to utilize and stretch resources to help students, regardless of location or lack of funding (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009).

Third, despite the many constraints and challenges of high-poverty schools, educational leaders utilize a variety of leadership practices to develop formal and informal linkages with multiple community sources to help accomplish their mission (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009).

Another study echoed the findings of Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009). The study was a meta-analysis by Harris from the University of Warwick and Thomson from the University of Nottingham, both located in the United Kingdom. Harris and Thomson (2006) presented a critique of literature relating to leadership in challenging high-poverty schools and identified many of the same leadership characteristics as Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009).

According to Harris and Thomson, “successful principals who work in high-poverty schools invest primarily in relationship building and survive the daily demands by sharing leadership through an extended leadership team and through distributing key responsibilities to teachers” (Harris & Thomson, 2006, p. 6). These dedicated leaders find time and money to allow teachers to pursue professional knowledge productions. School leaders in high-poverty areas work to build their staff into a team and often grow strong friendships with them. Harris and Thomson (2006) also identified qualities of an effective leader as follows:

- Accessibility
- High visibility
- Consistency
- Integrity and an ability to engender trust
- Creating a common sense of purpose
- Focus on students' academic achievement and new instructional strategies
- High academic standards. (p. 7)

Although there are many research studies that have linked district and family wealth as a predictor of achievement, there are schools across the country that have beaten the odds and have students achieving regardless of the socioeconomic situation of their family or the EAV of the district in which they reside.

One of these schools is Bluffview Elementary in Dupo, Illinois. Bluffview Elementary has always met the ISAT expectations with an EAV of \$62,035 for the 2007 assessment (Illinois School Report Card, 2009). The average EAV for Illinois K-6 schools (1,078 schools) is \$195,369; the median EAV is \$94,053, putting Bluffview Elementary in the lower 25% of Illinois schools. Although Dupo has a low EAV, the district only has 55% of the students taking part in the free and reduced lunch program. Dupo, Illinois, is a small suburb of St. Louis, Missouri with a population of 4,766 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). There are four schools located within the community: Bluffview Elementary, Dupo Junior High, Dupo Senior High, and the Apostolic Learning Academy. As of the 2008-2009 school year, there were 1,240 students attending the three public schools in the community (IIRC, 2009). The demographic makeup of the school consists of 93.6% Caucasian, 3.2% African American, 1.1% Asian, and 2.1% multiracial (IIRC,



2009). Dupo has an unemployment rate of 5.2% and a median income of \$47,434 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), and could be described as a community of blue collar middle class with heavily unionized jobs and working poor families.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented five characteristics of schools that succeed. These characteristics are based on the research and theory discussed earlier. The five characteristics are: clear focus, community collaboration, high standards and expectations for all students, focused professional development, and high levels of community and family involvement. Although the research shows successful schools have these characteristics, what helps achieve success varies among districts. The goal of this study was to find what characteristics make Bluffview Elementary successful in order to apply those characteristics to other schools within the same district.

Although there is no clear cut solution to the education funding crisis in Illinois, research shows that with strong leaders, dedicated staff, and a supportive community, students can achieve academic success regardless of the economic situation of the community. Although the five common characteristics of successful schools identified in the research show what works for most schools, each school or district is unique and other factors could also influence success.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Bluffview Elementary students have a history of meeting and exceeding expectations on the ISAT, although the junior and senior high schools in the same district do not have corresponding levels of success with the same students later in their educational careers. Bluffview has not been named as an honor roll school by the Illinois State Board of Education because the students have constantly achieved and always met or exceeded expectations on the ISAT—the honor roll is for schools that have shown improvement. However, Bluffview started out with outstanding scores and has improved over the years. Even though Bluffview has not been recognized as an honor roll school by the state of Illinois, the school should soon be honored as a Blue Ribbon school due to outstanding test scores and economic standing of the community. The Blue Ribbon award is considered the highest honor a school can achieve. In this study, the researcher first established expected student achievement results using EAV as a predictor, then analyzed existing characteristics and attributes present at Bluffview Elementary, followed by a comparison to characteristics and attributes described for successful schools within the review of literature.

The purpose of this study was to gather information concerning the perceptions of teachers and staff at Bluffview Elementary regarding characteristics that help the students' achieve with better than predicted outcomes on the Illinois Standard Achievement Test when considering the EAV of the district.

#### **Research Method and Design**

This study was both qualitative and quantitative. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was calculated to establish the degree of association between the

EAV and student achievement as represented by test scores on the ISAT. The population for the study will be all K-5 and K-6 schools in Illinois, which takes in over 1,000 schools. A randomized sample of 40 schools was used in the calculation. See Appendix B for schools used in the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient random sample. After the degree of relationship between EAV and student achievement was established, a regression analysis was used to establish a baseline for comparison to Bluffview's actual level of student achievement on the ISAT.

The researcher sent questionnaires to all 40 certified staff members and two administrators who were currently employed at Bluffview, and interviews were then performed based on voluntary participation. The researcher performed the questionnaire and interviews at Bluffview. The questionnaires were composed of four open response questions and five Likert scale questions. Analysis of the literature review provided information on expected characteristics of successful schools. Open response questions based on those findings were as follows:

1. Do you think that Bluffview's outstanding reputation for exceeding on the Illinois State Achievement test contributes to the success of the students?
2. What key traits do you feel the teachers possess at Bluffview Elementary that help their kids succeed?
3. What key traits do you feel the administrators possess at Bluffview Elementary that help the kids succeed?
4. How does Bluffview Elementary keep the parents and community involved with the school?

The five Likert-type scale questions were based on the five common themes that popular research claims schools should have to be successful:

1. The school has a clear sense of purpose.
2. Teachers and administrators work together for a common goal.
3. Teachers and administrators have high goals for all students.
4. Effective professional development for teachers within the school.
5. Parents involved within the school.

The interview consisted of seven questions, designed parallel to questions in the previous questionnaire, for the teachers with an eighth question included for the administrators. The questions for the interview process were the following:

1. What characteristics do you think are present in Bluffview Elementary that have led to the success of the students on the ISAT?
2. What are the most important ways in which the teachers and other staff members help the students be successful?
3. How does the administration help with the success of the students at Bluffview Elementary?
4. What is your understanding of student success? Do you feel that staff members and administrators at Bluffview generally share this understanding of student success and goals for the school? If so, how are these goals instilled within the staff?
5. In what ways does collaboration between the teachers help the students succeed on the ISAT?

6. Does the district or do administrators encourage staff members to participate in professional development? How does this benefit the students within the school?
7. In your opinion, does the community and do the parents support the school? In what ways? How does community and parent support help students succeed?
8. How much grant money does Bluffview Elementary receive from various state grants? How many teachers/services are hired or paid for by this grant money? Does that set Bluffview apart from other elementary schools?

The purpose of the questionnaire and interviews was to study the perceptions of the certified staff members concerning characteristics of Bluffview that allow academic success in a low EAV community. The goal was to find common trends in the perceptions the staff had on student successes on the ISAT. Bluffview was chosen for this study due to its outstanding history of meeting and exceeding expectations on the ISAT.

This study compared the questionnaire and interview responses from the staff members at Bluffview to characteristics provided by other studies conducted at successful low EAV schools across the United States to check for similar characteristics. Research has shown that the most common characteristics among academically successful schools are a clear focus/vision, community collaboration, high standards and expectations for all students, effective professional development, and a high level of community involvement.

Responses to questionnaire and interview questions were analyzed through a theme analysis.

Specifically, this study attempted to assess and answer the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics at Bluffview Elementary that makes it exceptional and allows students to exceed the predicted outcomes on the ISAT based on the EAV of the district?
2. What characteristics are present in the school that help Bluffview succeed?
3. What relationship exists between the following variables:
  - a. Clear focus/vision
  - b. Community collaboration
  - c. High standards and expectations for all students
  - d. Focused professional development
  - e. High levels of community and family involvement

### **The Population**

The population for this study included all 40 certified staff members at Bluffview as well as the two administrators involved with the school. The superintendent of the school was included, even though he was not involved with the day to day operations of the school. All the staff members involved had completed at least one semester with the students, and administrators had completed at least two years in the current position, with the exception of the superintendent who was new to the district. Interviews were conducted with certified staff members who were willing to take part in the interview process. Selection of interviewees was a random selection from those responding to an

email requesting an interview which was sent to all certified teachers at Bluffview Elementary. Those who responded, and agreed to take part, were included in the interview process.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The initial questionnaire was sent to the 40 staff members and administrators on Monday March 9, 2009, during the regular monthly teachers meeting at Bluffview Elementary. After a brief explanation of the questionnaire, the researcher explained why Bluffview was chosen for this study and explained how the school's students were exceeding standards on state tests. This is an assessment descriptor used by the state of Illinois as a measure of the quality of work produced by a student. Students are either below standards, meet standards, or exceeding standards. Due to NCLB regulations, all students in a school must meet or exceed standards by 2014.

While I was giving the directions for the questionnaire, a non-certified staff member passed out the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained a consent form and release explaining the purpose of the research, handling instructions, and an envelope that was to be used to seal the questionnaires. The consent forms and questionnaire were collected in boxes placed by the exit doors so participants could return the forms as they left the teachers meeting. No names were written on the questionnaire in order to insure anonymity.

A total of 38 out of 40 questionnaires were returned for a 95% return rate. This return rate was sufficient to make a reliable analysis of the perceived success and characteristics of Bluffview from the perceptions of the staff. Interviews were conducted with 12 certified employees of Bluffview: nine current teachers, the current building

principal, current district superintendent, and one former teacher/administrator, now employed within the same district as a high school principal. Selection of interviewees was a random selection from those who responded to an email requesting an interview sent to all certified teachers at Bluffview Elementary. Those who responded who agreed to take part were used in the interview process. The interviews consisted of seven questions for the teachers based on the questionnaires and research; administration interviews consisted of the same questions with an additional one regarding state grants given to the district. Interviews were conducted at Bluffview Elementary and were performed between the dates of October 1, 2009 and October 28, 2009, with follow up interviews taking place during the week of December 7 through 11, 2009.

### **Questionnaire Development**

The questionnaire was developed after a careful review of the pertinent literature that highlighted the importance of the following areas: a clear focus/vision, community collaboration, high standards and expectations for all students, effective professional development, and a high level of community involvement.

Having reviewed the literature, a questionnaire using a Lickert scale was developed to measure the perceptions of staff members and administrators at Bluffview. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: the first section was used to collect demographic information, including gender, years of experience in teaching, current education levels, years working in Bluffview, and primary role within the school. The second section was composed of four open-ended response questions to gather information concerning how the staff members perceived the success of the students and how and why the students succeed at a high level with a low EAV. In the third section,



information was gathered using the Lickert scale concerning the staff's perceptions when compared to the five common characteristics reviewed in the literature of other successful schools. The Lickert scale was a zero to five scale with zero being *No Basis to Judge* to five which was *Agree Completely*. The interview questions were based on the questionnaire to gather ideas and opinions concerning Bluffview's success. See Appendix A for the questionnaire.

### **Study Validity**

**Internal validity.** The questionnaire was reviewed by five high school teachers within the same district as Bluffview, and the district superintendent. The goal was to check for understanding and misleading questions. Any issues found were changed before the questionnaire was given to the Bluffview certified staff members.

**External validity.** While property wealth varies tremendously among sections of the state, the variations within specific areas are also significant. The differences in wealth within geographic regions of the state spawn inequitable resources, resulting in differing opportunities for students. According to the Illinois State Board of Education, the EAV average for the southern Illinois region is \$85,930, with a high of \$322,871 and a low of \$10,920 (ISBE, 2009b). Southern Illinois is defined as the 30 southern-most counties in Illinois.

Bluffview Elementary is located in St. Clair County in southern Illinois. The county EAV and demographic characteristics are similar to the EAV and demographics found throughout the southern Illinois region. According to the Illinois State Board of Education, the average EAV per pupil for the southern Illinois region is \$85,930; however, within St. Clair County, the average EAV for all K-5 and K-6 is \$71,383 (St.

Clair County averages were compiled from the ISBE, 2009b). For this study, out of the 95 schools in St. Clair County, 33 were used for the average EAV because only K-5 and K-6 schools were used for the comparison. Mascoutah Elementary was also excluded. Due to its close proximity to Scott Air Force Base, most of the elementary students living on base attend Mascoutah Elementary. Federal Governmental aid is given to the school, which does not show on the EAV of the district. The district shows an EAV of around \$53,000 with test scores showing over 90% meet or exceed on the ISAT. The average ISAT score for all elementary schools in Illinois for 2008 is 79, which is very similar to the St. Clair County's K-5 and K-6 schools with an average of 78.88 (ISBE, 2009b).

Table 3 shows the average EAV and average ISAT score for all Elementary Schools located in St. Clair County. The Elementary Schools in St. Clair County with an average EAV of \$71,383 are well below the southern Illinois average of \$85,930. The lower EAV schools are located within areas of economic hardship such as Miles D. Davis Elementary and Nelson Mandela Elementary which are both located in East Saint Louis, Illinois. Other schools such as J. Emmett Hinchcliffe Elementary and Laverna Evans Elementary are located in O'Fallon, Illinois, which is a much wealthier area, and also produces better ISAT scores. According to the ISBE state school report card, the average ISAT score for all elementary schools in the state is 79.8%, which is one point lower than the average for St. Claire County at 78.8% (ISBE, 2009b).

Demographic statistics are also similar within a comparison of Illinois, St. Clair County, and Dupo. In all three, White was the dominant race ranging from 73% within

the state to 97% in Dupo (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Bluffview is similar to other schools within St. Clair County in regards to EAV and demographic makeup.

Table 3

*Elementary School EAV and Average ISAT Score*

School	EAV	Score
Katie Harper Elementary	11,586	52
Donald McHenry Elementary	11,586	56
Centerville Elementary	22,102	60
Manners at Bush Elementary	11,586	62
Huffman Elementary	22,102	64
Alta Sita Elementary	11,586	65
Annette Office Elementary	11,586	68
Hawthorne Elementary	11,586	69
Miles D. Davis Elementary	11,586	71
Lalumier Elementary	22,102	73
Nelson Mandela Elementary	11,586	73
Elizabeth Morris Elementary	22,102	76
Marissa Elementary	49,883	76
Maplewood Elementary	22,102	77
Henry Raab Elementary	94,543	78
Edgemont Elementary	11,586	78
Lilly-Freeman Elementary	11,586	79
Franklin Elementary	94,543	82
Laverna Evans Elementary	137,152	82
Estelle Kempmeyer Elementary	137,152	84
J. Emmett Hinchcliffe Elementary	137,152	85
Westhaven Elementary	94,543	86
Jefferson Elementary	94,543	88
Bluffview Elementary	62,035	88
New Athens Elementary	86,109	89
Marie Schaefer Elementary	137,152	89
Abraham Lincoln Elementary	94,543	90
Union Elementary	94,543	90
William Holliday Elementary	347,579	90
Wolf Branch Elementary	160,225	91
Roosevelt Elementary	94,543	92
Delores Moye Elementary	137,152	92
Douglass Elementary	94,543	93
Averages	71,383	78.88

(ISBE, 2009b)

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

To analyze the relationship between EAV and student achievement on the ISAT, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used. The relationship was used to establish a baseline for comparison of Bluffview's student achievement success. Correlation is a quantitative index and statistical measurement of the degree of relationship, or association, between two sets of numbers (variables) to describe how closely the variables track or are related to one another. Correlation does not necessarily imply causation because no direction of influence is known or can be assumed; in fact, often both variables are caused by an independent variable not being measured (Franzblau, 1958). Research shows that variables that help make low EAV schools successful are as follows: a clear focus/vision, community collaboration, high standards and expectations for all students, effective professional development, and a high level of community involvement. It is not known if these are present in Bluffview Elementary or if some other variables are a major contribution to the success at Bluffview.

Correlation is most commonly measured by a Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (commonly shown as the symbol  $r$ ), calculated as a number ranging between -1.00 and +1.00. A measure of +/- 1.00 represents a perfect positive or negative correlation, indicating that the two sets of numbers form an identical pattern. A measure of -1.00 represents perfect negative correlation, indicating that the two sets of numbers form a perfect inverse relationship, while a measurement of +1.00 represents perfect positive correlation, indicates that the two sets of numbers form a perfect direct relationship. A correlation of 0.00, or very close to 0.00 means there is no relationship whatsoever between the variables (Franzblau, 1958).

The correlation coefficient  $r$  is measured on a high to low scale as follows:  $r$  ranging from 0 to about .20 may be regarded as indicating no or negligible correlation;  $r$  ranging from about .20 to .40 may be regarded as indicating a low degree of correlation;  $r$  ranging from about .40 to .60 may be regarded as indicating a moderate degree of correlation; and  $r$  ranging from about .60 to .80 may be regarded as indicating a marked degree of correlation. The highest correlation would be an  $r$  ranging from .80 to 1.00 (Franzblau, 1958).

For a linear regression, the EAV of the school is the independent variable and the student ISAT score is the dependent variable. Minitab version 15 will be used to run the linear regression line. Once a baseline score for Bluffview's academic achievement is established through the regression prediction using its EAV, it can be established whether Bluffview Elementary is indeed exceeding expectations. Then, qualitative data will be gathered, as described earlier in the chapter, to support the likely characteristics that promote such success.

### **Summary**

The goal of this study was to find out why Bluffview has been able to succeed on the ISAT even though the school district's EAV is below the southern Illinois state average. Using questionnaires and interviews the aim was to determine what characteristics are present within Bluffview or the teachers who work there that helps the students succeed above expected scores on the ISAT. The literature review has shown what makes schools successful, and the purpose of this research was to investigate if Bluffview is similar to other schools in what makes it successful, or if other factors are also responsible for the success of the school.

## **Chapter 4. Results**

Bluffview Elementary was chosen for this study because of its history of meeting and exceeding expectations on the ISAT, even though the community has a EAV. The goal was to (a) find out what correlation existed between test scores and EAV to provide a baseline for Bluffview's expected student success, and (b) explore the reasons for Bluffview's success. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to show if any relationship existed between the EAV of a random sample of similar Illinois districts and the ISAT composite scores. Staff and administrators were interviewed to discover why they feel Bluffview has been able to succeed in a low EAV district where the other schools within the same district have not shown the same success.

### **Data Collection Process**

The questionnaire and interviewing process took place between March 9, 2009 and December 11, 2009. A total of 38 participants from Bluffview Elementary completed the questionnaire, and out of those 38 participants, nine took part in interview process. Selection of interviewees was a convenience sampling selection by requesting an interview via emailing all certified teachers at Bluffview Elementary. Only nine from Bluffview Elementary responded as willing to take part in the interview process. Two administrators who did not take part in the questionnaire participated in interviews and one former Bluffview assistant principal who is now employed as a high school principal within the same district, participated in interviews for a total of 12 interviews. The two current administrators and one former administrator were purposefully selected due to their role in the schools and district. All school test score data was collected from the 2009 ISBE School Report Card.

## Data Analysis

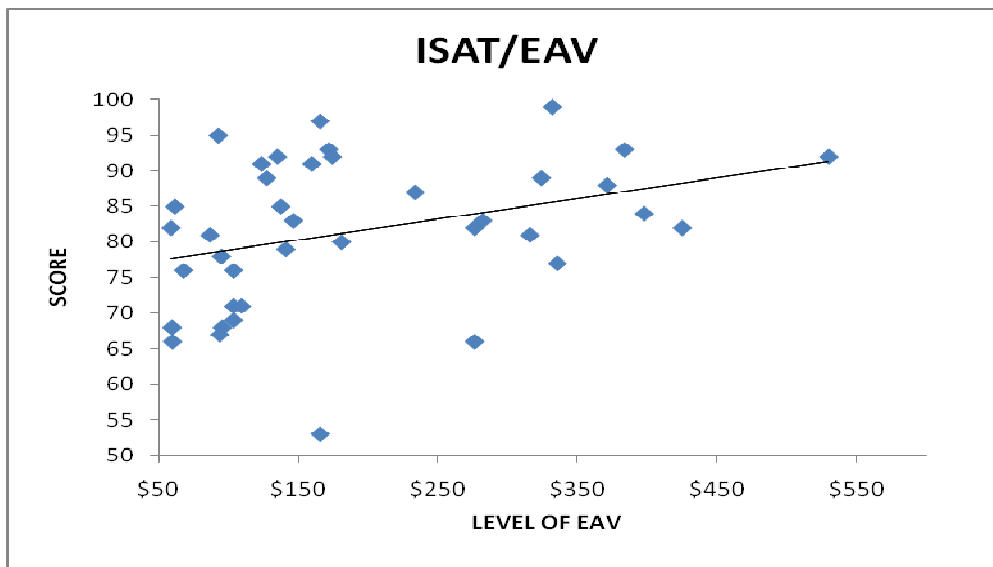
The data analysis is divided into four sections: quantitative analysis using the Pearson product moment correlation coefficient to show if a correlation existed between the EAV of a random sample of similar Illinois districts and ISAT composite scores; theme analysis from the open ended questions in the questionnaire; an examination of patterns within a frequency table of the Likert scores from questionnaire; and analysis of the interview responses.

**Quantitative analysis.** For a linear regression of the sample schools,  $X$  is the independent variable and  $Y$  is the dependent variable. The least-squares line approximating the set of points  $(X_1, Y_1), (X_2, Y_2), \dots, (X_n, Y_n)$  follows the model  $Y = a_0 + a_1X$  where the constants  $a_0$  and  $a_1$  are determined by solving simultaneously the normal equations for the least square line (Spiegel & Stephens, 2008).

For the EAV data, the ISAT score was the dependent variable and the EAV was the independent variable. Following establishment of a relationship between EAV and student achievement through calculation of the Pearson correlation coefficient, a linear regression was calculated and found the following as indicated in Figure 7. The linear regression equation is  $Y = 75.5894 + 0.00002856X$ . Examination of Dupo's EAV of \$62,035 and composite ISAT score of 88, yielded an outcome that was unusual because the predicted score would be 77.4. The 77.4 score was calculated by taking the base line score without the effect of EAV throughout the state and adding in a multiplicative factor of what EAV contributes to the overall student success as measured by the ISAT.

The null hypothesis for the Pearson product-moment correlation calculation was: There will be no relationship between EAV and student achievement on the ISAT. Using

Minitab version 15, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was 0.340 which shows a positive mild correlation between the EAV and test score. As EAV was the X variable, the sample mean  $\bar{X}$  for EAV was \$195,369. The sample mean for the scores was  $\bar{Y}$  or 81.117. Bluffview is 0.62 standard deviation above the mean on ISAT with a score of 88.4 and a standard deviation of 11.742. With a score of 88.4, Bluffview's score was higher than the median score of 84, almost scoring in the upper 75th percentile of the elementary schools in Illinois, yet the EAV for Bluffview was \$62,035—on the lower end of EAV schools in Illinois. The average EAV for Illinois K-6 schools, which includes 1078 schools, is \$195,369. The median EAV is \$94,053, which would put Bluffview in the lower 25 percentile of EAV's of Illinois schools with an EAV of \$62,035. Bluffview is 0.89 standard deviation below the mean for EAV in the state of Illinois. Minitab used the values, X variable for EAV and Y variable for test scores in the computations for correlation coefficients, standard deviation, and variance in the linear regression.



*Figure 7.* Regression analysis: ISAT versus EAV. Adapted from, “Illinois School Board of Education,” 2009, Copyright 2009. Adapted with permission.



Table 4

*Descriptive Statistics for the EAV Data and Score Data*

Variable	N	N*	Mean	StDev	Minimum	Q1	Median	Q3
EAV X	39	1	185211	119922	58503	94543	140718	276025
Variable Maximum = 529940								
Score Y	39	1	81.117	9.862	53.000	76.000	82.000	89.000
Variable Maximum = 100.000								

\*Indicates the number of schools removed as anomalies.

**Qualitative analysis.** Theme analysis was very difficult on the open ended response questions on the questionnaire due to the wide variety of answers reported by the teachers. There were no underlying themes that appeared among the responses to the four questions.

Theme analysis of the open response questions showed mixed results on question 1, but consistent results on the other three.

**Question 1.** Do you think that Bluffview's outstanding reputation for exceeding on the Illinois State Achievement tests contributes to the success of the students?

Results were mixed with 17 yes responses (44.7%), 15 no responses (39.5%), and 6 no opinion (15.8%). The majority of the yes responses were because teachers felt parents stress the importance of the test to their kids. Most of the no responses were because teachers felt students did not follow or know about the reputation of Bluffview's success. This was indicated by teachers' written responses to the open question.

**Question 2.** What key traits do you feel the teachers possess at Bluffview Elementary that help the kids succeed?

This question stimulated the most response from the teachers; most likely because the staff were able to discuss their own ideas within bounds of teacher characteristics and school success. The majority of the responses (68.4%) claimed that the teachers care about student success and their dedication to the students was the reason for the success of the school. Other responses were teachers' high expectations for the students, common plan time for teachers, and teachers trying new techniques.

**Question 3.** What key traits do you feel the administrators possess at Bluffview Elementary that help the students succeed?

Responses on this question were not as extensive as those for question 2. Twelve of the 38 (31.5%) responses discussed how the administration helps keep teachers focused on teaching and gives direction for the school. Nine of the 38 (23.6%) said that the administrators helped kids succeed by having high expectations for the staff and always looking for improvement; 7 of 38 (18.4%) felt that the administrators helped kids succeed by trying new ideas and keeping teachers informed regarding new educational research or methods; and 6 of 38 (15.8%) mentioned the dedication of the administrators and their desire to help kids.

**Question 4.** How does Bluffview Elementary keep the parents and community involved with the school?

Seventeen of 38 (44.7%) surveyed responded that the Parent Teacher Association was the main way they keep parents and the community involved. Weekly letters home were reported in 15 of 38 (39.4%), and the remaining few responded that phone calls or

parent nights were the main way that teachers kept in contact with parents and the community.

**Likert analysis.** Analysis of the Likert scale proved to be very similar to what the literature review found to be characteristic of successful schools. The questions were designed based on the five common characteristics from the literature review to determine if the characteristics were evident or important at Bluffview. Characteristic 1 was investigated by a series of seven questions (See Appendix A) exploring the concept that Bluffview has a clear focus shared by all staff members. Over 90% of the staff members agreed mostly or completely that a clear and shared focus was important to the success of the school, and that administrators and staff need to be committed to achieving the school's goals.

Table 5

*Frequency Table of Questionnaire Responses for Clear Mission/Focus*

Question	No basis to judge	Do not agree at all	Agree slightly	Agree Moderately	Agree Mostly	Agree Completely
A Clear sense of purpose					18	20
B Teachers understand schools goals				1	14	23
C Teachers share a common goal			3	5	15	15
D Administrators share a common goal			1		16	21
E Teachers are committed to goals			2	9	16	11
F Schools put emphasis on learning				2	11	25
G Administrators are committed to goals				2	10	26

Characteristic 2 was investigated by a series of seven questions (see Appendix A) dealing with the belief that community collaboration among staff members is important

to the success of the students at Bluffview. Over 90% of the staff members agreed mostly or completely that community collaboration among staff members was important to the success of Bluffview.

Table 6

*Frequency Table of Questionnaire Responses for Importance of Staff Collaboration*

Question	No basis to judge	Do not agree at all	Agree slightly	Agree Moderately	Agree Mostly	Agree Completely
A Teachers discuss issues				2	18	18
B Teacher work together on school issues				4	17	17
C Teacher teams increase learning			2	2	10	24
D Teachers plan together	1				7	30
E Teachers have contact with parents				5	18	15
F Teachers and administrators trust one another			2	6	20	10
G Administrators work together on school issues	1		2	3	16	16

Characteristic 3 yielded results similar to characteristics 1 and 2. Characteristic 3 was composed of four questions dealing with the idea that Bluffview was able to succeed because staff members have high standards and expectations for all students. Again, over 90% of the staff agreed mostly or completely that teachers were dedicated to help all students meet high academic standards and all students were expected to meet or exceed the standards on standardized tests.

Table 7

*Frequency Table of Questionnaire Responses for High Standards and Expectations*

Question	No basis to judge	Do not agree at all	Agree slightly	Agree Moderately	Agree Mostly	Agree Completely
A All students are expected to succeed				2	19	17
B Teachers are dedicated				2	13	23
C Teachers believe students can learn			1	4	27	6
D Teachers help those who need it				3	21	14

Characteristic 4 consisted of four questions dealing with the importance of focused professional development. This question scored lower on the Likert-type scale with about 84% of the staff agreeing mostly or completely that a focused professional development was important to the success of the school.

Table 8

*Frequency Table of Questionnaire Responses for Professional Development*

Question	No basis to judge	Do not agree at all	Agree slightly	Agree Moderately	Agree Mostly	Agree Completely
A Focused professional development				5	23	10
B Teachers get help	1		2	12	16	7
C Teachers can grow professionally			4	7	18	9
D Staff lifetime learners	1		1	4	23	9

The lowest scoring question in the series was whether teachers have enough opportunities to grow professionally, where only about 60% of the staff agreed mostly or

completely with the idea that they had opportunities to participate in professional development within the school.

The last question centered on the idea that parents and community are important to the success of the school, and although the literature claims that parent and community involvement are key in the success of schools, this was the one which scored the lowest with only 70% agreeing mostly or completely with the question.

Table 9

*Frequency Table of Questionnaire Responses for Parental and Community Involvement*

Question	No basis to judge	Do not agree at all	Agree slightly	Agree Moderately	Agree Mostly	Agree Completely
A Family support help students			1	1	19	17
B School works with community		2	5	17	12	2
C School aids struggling students			1	4	15	18
D Teachers contact parents				6	17	15
E School provides information to parents			3	7	12	16
F Panel volunteer in school		8	9	7	10	4

**Interview Analysis.** Although the questionnaire was useful in exploring the staff's opinions regarding why Bluffview was successful, the nature of the questionnaire did not allow the teachers to express how this success was accomplished. The interviews that were conducted at Bluffview were performed between the dates of October 1, 2009 and October 28, 2009, with follow up interviews taking place during the week of December 7 through 11, 2009. The interview population was composed of nine current teachers, the current building principal, current district superintendent, and one former teacher/administrator who was employed within the same district as a high school

principal. The participants were selected by the researcher in order to obtain a wide variety of teaching experiences and backgrounds. All participants signed a consent form to be a part of this study and no monetary payment was made to the participants.

The questions used during the interviews were constructed based on the questionnaire conducted at Bluffview on Monday, March 9, 2009. Both the questionnaire and interview questions were based on the research that claims successful schools will have: (a) high levels of parent involvement, (b) teacher collaboration, (c) high expectations, (d) clear focus, (e) curriculum aligned to standards, and (f) focused professional development. The interviews were conducted to see if any, or all, of the five characteristics were present at Bluffview, or if some other characteristic was proposed as the reason for the success of the students.

Seven questions were asked of the nine teacher participants during the interview process. The administrator participants were also asked the same seven questions with the addition of an eighth question that explored grant money awarded to the school.

1. What characteristics do you think are present in Bluffview Elementary that led to the success of the students on the ISAT?
2. What are the most important ways in which the teachers and other staff members help the students be successful?
3. How does the administration help with the success of the students at Bluffview Elementary? Although very similar to question 1, the goal was to check for similar themes among the answers.

4. What is your understanding of “student success? Do you feel that staff members and administrators at Bluffview generally share this understanding of student’s success and goals for the school?
5. In what ways does collaboration between the teachers help the students succeed on the ISAT?
6. Does the district or do administrators encourage staff members to participate in professional development? How does this benefit the students within the school?
7. In your opinion, does the community and do the parents support the school? How does community and parent support help the students succeed?
8. (for the participating administrators only): How much grant money does Bluffview Elementary receive from various state grants? How many teachers/services are hired or paid for by this grant money? Does that set Bluffview apart from other elementary schools?

Four main themes appeared during the interview process that were repeated by both teachers and administrators. The themes were as follows: (a) teachers care about the students’ success, (b) high expectations of the students and staff, (c) curriculum alignment, and (d) collaboration among the staff members.

The first theme centers on the idea that Bluffview is successful because the teachers care about the students’ academic and personal development. The practice of teachers caring about the students’ success was apparent the first time I entered the school to conduct a teacher interview. I entered Bluffview Elementary at 3:30, which



was an hour after the students were released for the day to go home. With the number of students present in the school and the number of parents waiting to pick up students, I was unsure what the students' release time actually was. It amazed me that such a large number of students stayed after school, not just for sports' practice, but for tutoring, attending academic clubs, or just spending extra time working on assignments with the teachers in the classrooms.

One of the teachers interviewed, Teacher A, who was a veteran history teacher who had spent almost 30 years in the district, said the reason for the success of Bluffview is because "all teachers are willing to go the extra mile. Have them stay after school or take some of the teachers' free time to help them out. We are here for them." During the 45 minutes spent in this interview, it was obvious Teacher A truly cared about the students at Bluffview. The interview was interrupted a number of times because students entered the room to ask questions about assignments or just to stop by to say hello; even a past student, who is now in high school, stopped in. The teacher was quick to acknowledge this student by name and ask about his high school classes. The student was apparently a good student in Teacher A's class- but had not experienced the same success in high school, so the teacher gave him some words of encouragement and invited him to stop by again if he needed help with anything.

During the interview process, every teacher mentioned the teachers' care about the students, and many shared the history teacher's ideas as to why the students succeeded at Bluffview. Teacher B said, "We see them first as children and then as our students." The teachers at Bluffview have common planning time at the end of the day which is useful for tutoring, homework help, or just guidance and advice on different

issues. Teacher C said, “Teachers care about their students as people and I also think they actually take the extra time that the kids need to help them understand what needs to be done.” Teacher D said, “Teachers are friendly to be around and school is better than most of their home lives.” When I asked Teacher E why he thought Bluffview was successful, he said, “The one thing that makes Bluffview successful is our staff because they love their kids. We love every kid that walks through the door.”

The follow up interview took place with one teacher and two administrators. The one teacher was chosen at random by sending out an email out to the nine teachers who participated in the interview process asking for a follow up interview. Only one email came back with agreement to a follow up interview. The follow up interview consisted of two questions:

1. What does caring look like
2. How do teachers show the kids they care?

These two follow up interview questions were chosen due to the number of times the theme of caring was mentioned during the initial interviews. Although the theme of caring was not mentioned in the literature review, it was apparent during the interviews.

Teacher F, who had spent almost 30 years in the district and agreed to a follow up interview, mentioned a number of times during the initial interview that students succeeded at Bluffview because the teachers care about the students and their success.

When asked to describe caring, she responded:

A lot of high fives and rewards at the end of the week. We take time to listen to the students’ stories. Usually the things they want to say are things that they need to get off their chest so it is really important to listen. Most kids will not come in

and say they had a rough night but they will say just enough to let you know that something is wrong.

Both administrators agreed to the follow up interviews. The goal was for both teacher and administrators to expand on some statements made during the initial interview. During two attempts for a follow up interview with Administrator A, we were interrupted a number of times and Administrator A was called out of the interview for other business. During the second follow up interview, all questions were completed, so a reschedule was not necessary.

Administrator B had a very similar answer when asked to define teacher care. He said:

Caring means going the extra mile, asking them “How was your weekend?”

Showing them that there is a part of teaching outside of what goes up on the chalkboard. Making notes when they have something that is outstanding such as a basketball game or a play. If their grades are slipping in other subjects you can mention that you noticed, little things above the normal expectations.

When asked “how do the students know the teachers care?” Administrator B responded,

I view a kid a little like a dog. A dog knows if you like it or are afraid of it, they just know this. If a dog thinks you are afraid of it, they will become dominant and kids are the same way. They know the teachers at Bluffview are genuine.

During the same interview, Administrator B was asked to pinpoint what makes Bluffview successful and he responded, “It all goes back to caring, and the teachers are the front line.”

The second theme that became evident during the interview process was the high expectations that the staff set for the students and themselves. Teacher G said, “We have high expectations for the kids even though it is a low income area.” Teacher H said, “Success. We expect that of them. We set high goals and make the kids believe in themselves. Give them a lot of positives and tell them over and over they can do it.” There is also a character education program within the school that covers a number of topics, one of which is building confidence and steps to achieve goals.

When I asked Administrator A about high expectations, he said “we do not make excuses for students coming from poverty. We expect the same out of our students that other schools expect of theirs.” Not only does Administrator A demand success from the students, he expects the same from the staff. Teacher E said, “The administration sets high standards for all teachers which make the students work harder. [Administrator A] is up on the current reading so we are always striving to do the best we can.” Teacher F shared the same ideas as Teacher E when discussing the administration; saying, “They have high expectations of the teachers as well as the students.” In the follow up interview, I asked Administrator A about his daily routine in the school, and he responded:

Make a checklist of what is priority and always walk the halls at least two times a day to see what is going on in every classroom. A couple times a week the administrators will actually jot down what is observed and send that to the teachers so they know the administrators are watching what they are doing. The key is letting the teachers and kids know that we care and that school is important.

During the interview, Teacher A said. “He [Administrator A] peeks in the windows and comes into class to verify we are doing what we should be doing.” Teacher A was asked if some teachers would view this as a threat or someone looking over their shoulder, and he responded: “[Administrator A] is a very open and honest with the staff and due to his relationship with the staff he is not seen as a threat and is a welcome fixture in the classrooms.”

The third and fourth themes are teacher collaboration and curriculum alignment, and both themes appeared to be integrated. Because the teachers are given collaboration time, the result is a school that has the curriculum aligned from pre-K through sixth grade. All nine teachers interviewed discussed how collaboration and curriculum alignment is important, not only for the students but for the teachers to check for curriculum gaps. Teacher I said, “[Administrator A] has us work together and do mapping charts to cover everything before the ISAT is given.” Teacher I thought the key for success at Bluffview was that “we all work together to align our curriculum with what is on the ISAT.” The early grades collaborate more than the later grades because the teachers teach all the subjects, and all the teachers teach the same curriculum on the same day. Consequently, the five first grade teachers all teach the same lesson on the same day. Although all the teachers share common planning times, only the lower grades share the same curriculum because those classes are self-contained, and one teacher teaches all the subjects in the classroom. Fourth grade is when teachers specialize, and the students switch classes. Due to the small size of the school, there is only one teacher per class per subject, (i.e., one math teacher for fourth grade, one for the fifth grade, and one for the

sixth grade). The teachers collaborate and curriculum is aligned, but the teachers do not teach the same topic on the same day as in the lower classes.

All three administrators felt that collaboration was important to the success of both the teachers and students. Administrator B said “It allows the teachers to see where the kids were at in their previous grade level and allows the teachers to learn from each other and share their own ideas with one another.” Although Administrator A was given the credit for the idea of common planning time, this happened by accident. Due to money issues, the school had to cut back on fine arts, and with this change, Administrator A decided to rearrange the daily schedule and make common planning time at the end of the school day for all teachers. The students are released at 2:30, so the teachers’ planning time is from 2:30-3:30 each day. This change also allowed teachers to help students needing tutoring or extra assistance.

Although the district does not have a curriculum director, Administrator A takes on the job. When asked about this position he responded: “I am the director, but as a director I let the people under me do all the work. My job is to organize the system and the teachers themselves do the creating.” A key part of Bluffview’s curriculum is the reading program, and Teacher D gives Administrator A credit for the success of the school. “He is really good with curriculum and he is really into the reading program.” Administrator A is an advocate of reading across the curriculum and this push for more reading can be found throughout the school.

When Administrator A was asked about the reading program and how it developed, he replied:

We do everything based on research, not history. We have trained everybody to get that accomplished. We test, we analyze students and constantly check their progress and change the teaching to make them successful. The reading program is a three part system. The first part is “whole group” reading, which is when the whole class is together either in discussion of a topic, listening to stories on a tape or some other group activity. Part two consists of students breaking up into smaller tracked reading groups. The third part of the program is for students who need extra assistance to receive it from a literacy teacher.

Because of the program’s success, Administrator A plans on developing a math curriculum with the same three part format.

Throughout the interview process, the teachers never mentioned the ISAT test scores; instead all nine teachers discussed student success in regards to individual achievement and growth, not test scores. Although test scores are important to all public schools, the teachers do not use test scores as the main goal at Bluffview. Instead, the staff focused on developing the student’s individual academic and personal growth, which in return shows as success on the ISAT. From the time a student enters a class in the fall to when they leave in the spring, all achieve some academic and personal growth. It becomes apparent when spending time with the teachers at Bluffview that their goal is to take struggling students who are not reading or achieving at grade level and bring them to grade level or beyond. This can only be done with a staff who are attentive to the students and recognize students’ academic strengths and weaknesses.

When asked if all staff members shared a common belief of what student success was, all teachers thought they were the exception to the common belief because all the

teachers thought the “common belief of student success” was in terms of academic success only. Teacher H defined student success as, “when a student comes in the classroom in August and by the time they leave in May, they have matured as a person academically and mentally.” When asked if all staff members shared the same understanding of student success, Teacher H responded, “I think a large group of teachers think it is academics only.” Teacher D shared the same feelings on the topic of student success, saying, “Each student has their own personal success with their grades and how well they do on tests. It is strictly individual. I do not base it on test scores.”

What makes the students succeed on the ISAT when the tests are not a key focus for the teachers at Bluffview? Although most teachers at Bluffview do not think success shows on standardized test scores, they all understand the importance the scores have for the school and to the state of Illinois. The teachers do more than just teach the students, they instill confidence in children. The vast majority of the students have little to no exposure to reading or extra educational influences at home. The staff shows them the importance of education to help bring out their full potential. Teacher F said:

Student success is the success of the whole person, if they are happy and healthy. If the students are doing well academically but they are miserable, they are not going to feel successful. They have to feel good about what they are doing. Even mediocre students can be successful because they are feeling well and they are doing their best.

The teachers notice the students’ strengths and weakness and build on the strengths.

Of the three administrators, only Administrator A defined student success in the terms of test scores, but he was quick to mention success does not always appear on the



school report cards. Administrator A said, “Every kid will not pass the test, but we would like to get some credit for those who do not pass but grow as a person.”

When asked about professional development and if the administration encourages staff members to participate, there were mixed responses. While all agreed the district or administration pushes teachers to take part in professional development, some of the more experienced teachers thought that professional development was mostly “repackaged ideas” that had been used in the past and were just renamed and reintroduced again. Others thought professional development benefitted both teachers and students. Teacher C said professional development “does benefit students because we learn the newest techniques and we tweak each new technique we learn to fit the needs of our students.” Teacher I shared similar ideas, saying, “Professional development does help someone become a better teacher.” Later in the interview, Teacher I said that “professional development conferences are a great way to recharge my batteries.”

Although the benefits of professional development received mixed reviews from some of the staff members, overall there were more positives than negatives mentioned about professional development and the benefits to the students. The positives were the possibility of a new idea that might help students on the ISAT, or just a new way of teaching a topic in the classroom. The negatives seemed to be the repetition of the professional development.

Administrator A agreed that professional development was important for both teachers and students but claimed “sending one teacher to a workshop is a waste of time and money.” Instead, he preferred to send groups of teachers who then come back and

teach the others or bring the presentations into the school. The other two administrators also agreed that in-house staff development was of greater benefit than sending one or two to a workshop.

Research shows that parent and community support is a key characteristic helping to make schools successful. Most of the questionnaire participants responded that parent and community support was low overall, although the interviews revealed different results. Five of the teachers interviewed said both parents and community supported the school, while four teachers responded that the school received little or no support from the parents. Of the teachers who responded positively, all five either grew up in Dupo or currently lived in the community. Teacher B said, “Living in the community lets the parents and students see you outside the classroom setting, thus making them feel more comfortable when in school.” The comfort level that parents felt with Teacher B could be attributed to the fact that many have met her outside of the school setting, making parents more comfortable and more willing to participate in school events such as parent teacher conferences or open house.

The administrators also had mixed views on this topic. Administrator B answered “Yes, they support the school in the aspect they are readily available to come in to meet with our staff to improve their child’s learning.” But he also went on to say “it is more at the grade school than high school.” Administrator C, a former assistant principal at Bluffview and now a high school principal, had very similar views on this topic, saying “[the parents] support the grade school more than the high school because the parents are younger and more involved.” Administrator A had a very different view of what parent involvement is. While most might think parent involvement is attending open houses,

PTA meetings, and parent teacher conferences, Administrator A defined parent involvement as “rising them right, putting them in a clean household and keeping them away from drugs and alcohol.” Even though parental support was questionable at best, Administrator A felt the parents trusted the school and teachers, and knew that the school would do what was best for their children.

Since Bluffview is located in a low EAV district, the state of Illinois gives grants to help with school expenses and operating costs. The dollar amount varies from year to year depending upon community poverty levels. The three administrators were asked if Bluffview would still be successful without the state grant money, and the responses were mixed. Administrator B and Administrator C thought the school would still be successful without the money because of the system and teachers that are in place. Administrator B said, “Without the money, I think they would still be successful because they have not had the money in the past,” although he was quick to point out that having reading specialists—paid for by grants—was a key component to the school’s success. Administrator A was not as optimistic as the others, and said “Without the grant money the district would be done.”

### **Interview Summary**

To understand what makes Bluffview Elementary successful, one must first understand the building principal, Administrator A. Before we started the interview we discussed basketball due to Administrator A’s coaching career before becoming a school administrator. Although he no longer coaches basketball, he still uses his coaching ideas to help build a strong committed team of teachers. When I asked Administrator A to define teamwork he said, “Teamwork is when everybody has a voice toward a common

goal.” His idea of teamwork was mentioned a number of times throughout the interviewing process and not a single person ever talked about themselves as the reason for the success. Everyone interviewed used “we” rather than “I” when referencing the school’s success. I believe this idea of “we” is due to the coaching mentality that Administrator A has instilled into the culture of the school and the staff members.

He also has the ability to turn a negative situation into a positive. When the fine arts program was cut due to budget issues, Administrator A was forced to make major schedule changes and created common planning time at the end of the day for all teachers. When students get into trouble and discipline is necessary, Administrator A uses the library and has the students read after school instead of suspension. Although current research reports that parent participation is the number one predictor of student success (Carter, 2000), at Bluffview, Administrator A has proven that success can be achieved with or without parent involvement. This leads back to the question, why are the students so successful at Bluffview?

Bluffview’s success is founded on the leadership of the administrators and dedicated team of teachers that are employed at the school. The staff understands the community and the community trusts the school to do what is in the best interests of the children.

While there are many influences that facilitate success—such as focused professional development and the reading program—four themes were mentioned over and over again throughout the interview process: high teacher and student expectations, curriculum aligned from pre-K through sixth as well as across the grade sections, collaboration among all staff members, and the caring and compassionate staff at

Bluffview. The final question for Administrator A was “Why do you think Bluffview is successful?” and he replied without hesitation that “The one thing that makes Bluffview successful is our staff because they love their kids. We love every kid that walks through the door.” The faculty is truly committed to creating outstanding students who want to learn and they foster an environment that promotes learning.

### **Research Questions**

Five research questions guided this study:

1. What are the characteristics at Bluffview that makes it exceptional and allows students to exceed the predicted outcomes on the ISAT based on the EAV of the district?
2. What characteristics are present in the school that help Bluffview succeed?
3. What relationship exists between the following variables:
  - a. Clear focus/vision
  - b. Community collaboration
  - c. High standards and expectations for all students
  - d. Focused professional development
  - e. High levels of community and family involvement

The answers for each question are presented in this section.

**Question 1.** The students at Bluffview succeed on the ISAT because of the clear focus shared by the students, parents, staff, and administrators. The questionnaire showed a 90% mostly or completely agreed response that Bluffview has a clear focus that is shared by everyone.

**Question 2.** The students at Bluffview succeed on the ISAT because of a high level of community collaboration among the staff members. This research question was found to be true—90% of the staff agreed mostly or completely on the questionnaire. This was also one of the four main themes that became apparent when interviewing the teachers and administrators.

**Question 3.** The students at Bluffview succeed because the curriculum and instruction are aligned with Illinois standards. This research question was found to be true as reported in both the questionnaire and interviews. Over 90% of the staff agreed mostly or completely when surveyed, and this is also one of the four key themes that emerged from the interviews.

**Question 4.** The students at Bluffview succeed on the ISAT because of the focused professional development of the staff. This research question was found to be null because focused professional development for the staff does not affect the students' achievement levels on standardized tests. This question had an 84% response for agreed or completely agreed, and mixed feelings from the teachers emerged during the interviews.

**Question 5.** The students at Bluffview succeed on the ISAT because of the high levels of community and family involvement. This research question was found to be null because high levels of community and family involvement does not affect students' achievement levels on standardized tests. A low level of community and family involvement became apparent in the questionnaire and was later echoed during the interviews. Only 60% of the questionnaire agreed or completely agreed, and community and family involvement was not one of the key themes that emerged during the interview process.

**How Bluffview Overcomes the Effects of Community Poverty**

The effect of community poverty on education success has been well documented. Although most research shows a direct negative link between community poverty and educational success, Bluffview has been able to overcome the effects of family poverty and have created a school that is able to motivate students to succeed. During the interview process, many of the veteran teachers mentioned how they have taught several of the students' parents as well as many other family members. This understanding the teachers and staff have for the community helps them understand the challenges faced by the students on a daily basis. Due to the challenging home life that many students have, the teachers and staff make a conscious effort to make Bluffview Elementary an inviting place that students and parents see as a haven of stability and support. Many students show up early in the morning before school and often stay late after school because Bluffview Elementary provides a friendly and rewarding environment for the students to succeed.

To compensate for the lack of school readiness, Bluffview provides a pre-kindergarten program to help prepare students for kindergarten as well as providing a reading program and literature teachers to provide students with extra assistance. The teachers and staff at Bluffview have high expectations for all students to succeed, regardless of economic conditions of the community. During the interview process, Administrator A mentioned. "The only difference between students at Bluffview and other surrounding more affluent communities is about \$50,000 in family wealth." The teachers and staff do not let poverty be an excuse for not succeeding. Although

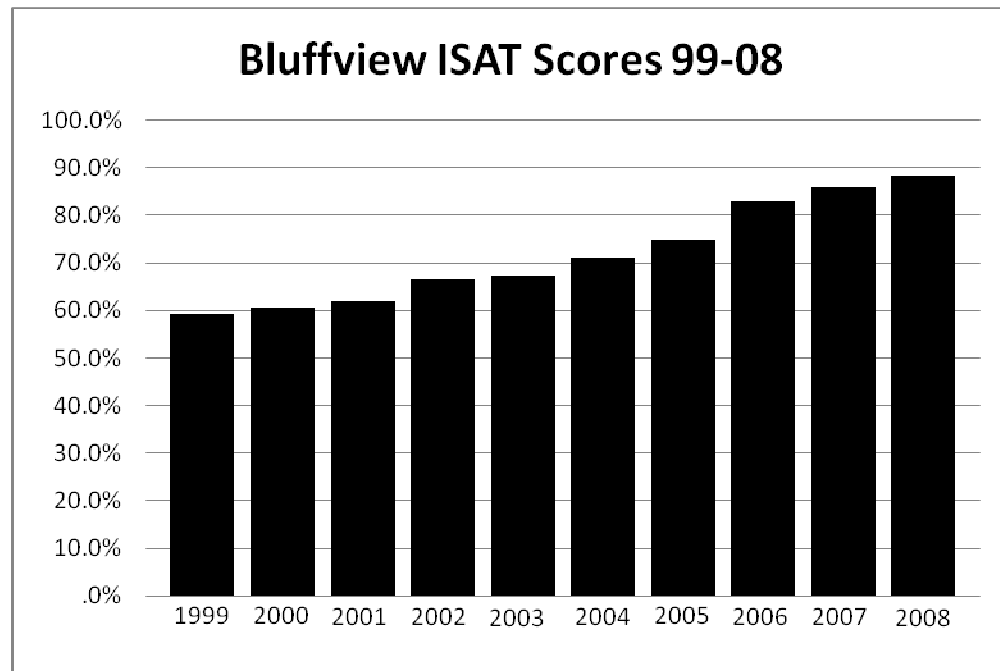
community poverty is an issue with many families, the teachers and staff at Bluffview Elementary do not let it become an obstacle for the educational success of the students.

### **Bluffview's History of Success**

Bluffview has a history of success since standardized testing began with the implementation of NCLB in 2002, and has always met the mandated AYP. The story of Bluffview's success came to light while meeting with the former superintendent of Dupo Community School District in 1999 when the poverty grant was established for schools in the state of Illinois. The grant provides funding for at-risk or low-income students by using family income as an indirect measure for being at risk of failure. The state does not allocate dollars based on the actual number of students failing, but rather uses their family income to predict how many are likely to fail (ISBE, 2008). This system seems unusual but was established to void creating monetary incentives for school districts to fail kids. In 1999, the former Dupo School District Superintendent met with Administrator A, who at the time was principal of Dupo Grade School (one of three former elementary schools before Bluffview was built in 2000). They met to discuss how to better meet the needs of the elementary level students and how to use the poverty grant to fulfill the needs of the students. The decision was made by Administrator A to focus on reading thus creating the extensive reading program that is currently found at Bluffview. The key use of funding due to the poverty grant is apparent when comparing Bluffview's ISAT scores over the past decade. In only 10 years, the composite ISAT scores have increased almost 30 points in part due to the focus on reading within the school. According to the former superintendent, the middle school and high school



standardized test scores are now starting to see the benefits of Bluffview’s reading program.



*Figure 8.* “Bluffview ISAT scores for 1999 through 2008,” Adapted from, “Illinois School Board of Education”, 2009, Copyright 2009. Adapted with permission.

### Summary

At the time of this writing, Bluffview was currently scoring 10.6 points better than expected on the ISAT based on the district’s EAV of \$62,035 for the 2008-2009 school year. This statistic by itself is not unusual, but what makes Bluffview extraordinary is the fact that the students achieve in the upper 75th percentile of elementary schools in Illinois while being in the lower 25th percentile of EAV in the state. What makes Bluffview successful appeared to primarily be the same characteristics evident in the literature review, with the exception of parent and community support. Teacher questionnaire responses and interviews demonstrated that a clear focus and vision is apparent in the school, with high standards and expectations for

students and staff, and focused professional development. The evidence supports that the reason for Bluffview's success is the care and dedication the teachers have for the students at Bluffview Elementary.

## **Chapter 5. Implications and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to inquire into what makes Bluffview Elementary students successful on the ISAT, despite the community's low EAV . There were two reasons for this study. The first reason was to identify characteristics that can overcome the lack of wealth in poor districts and help students achieve on standardized tests. The second reason for this study was to identify the characteristics that help make Bluffview students successful and apply those same characteristics to the high school located within the same district.

Because the Bluffview students later become students at Dupo High School, the idea behind this study was to take the practices that work at Bluffview and apply them to the High School to improve Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) scores. Curriculum in every classroom within the Dupo district is aligned with the appropriate state standards, therefore, the transition for the high school teachers would be more of a mind-set and teamwork change than a change in curriculum or programs.

Research shows the five common characteristics of successful schools are as follows: a clear focus, teacher collaboration, high standards and expectations for all students, focused professional development, and high levels of community and family involvement. The questionnaire and interviews have shown that all characteristics were present at Bluffview except for a high level of community and family involvement.

All of the teachers and administrators felt the reason for the success of the students at Bluffview was due to the caring and dedicated staff. The teachers and staff members know the community and are dedicated to the students who walk through the doors of Buffview.

## **Implications of the Findings**

**Characteristics of Bluffview.** The characteristics that make Bluffview successful are evident and obvious after spending time with the teachers and administrators. A clear focus of student success is led by Administrator A and echoed by all staff members. Ninety percent of staff members surveyed, mostly or completely agreed that a clear focus is important for the success of the students at Bluffview. Administrator A's idea is to focus on reading. With the increased reading time, improvement would also follow in other subjects, such as social studies and science. Administrator A's theory is "if a kid cannot read, how do you expect them to pass a test." This focus on reading has led to student success across all subjects.

Due to budget issues that have plagued many Illinois schools, Bluffview, had to cut programs. With cuts in music and art programs, Bluffview was able to give grade level teachers common planning times that gave teachers time to collaborate and share ideas. Even though program cuts were made at Bluffview, Administrator A did not drop the high standards and expectations for students or staff. Ninety percent of teachers and staff surveyed, mostly or completely agreed that teacher collaboration was important for the success of the students at Bluffview. This was also one of the main themes repeated many times during the interview process. Because the teachers were given collaboration time, the result is a school that has the curriculum aligned from pre-K through sixth grade.

The third characteristic that makes the students at Bluffview successful is high standards for all students and staff. Research shows that students who attend schools located within low socioeconomic areas often do not experience the same success as

those students who attend schools in wealthier areas. This is not the case with Bluffview: 90% of the teachers and staff mostly or completely agreed that high standards and expectations for all students is an important characteristic for students' success. This was also one of the main themes that was discussed by many of the participants of the interview. Many of the teachers gave credit to Administrator A for setting and maintaining the high expectations for both students and staff. Administrator A said, "We do not make excuses for students coming from poverty. We expect the same out of our students that other schools expect of theirs."

The fourth characteristic that makes Bluffview successful was focused professional development. Eighty-four percent of the teachers and staff mostly or completely agreed that focused professional development was important for the success of the students at Bluffview. During the interview process, professional development received mixed views. While many of the younger teachers liked the training and thought it was useful, some veteran teachers thought professional training was repetitive and a waste of district funds. All three administrators who took part in the interview process all agreed that in-house staff development was of greater benefit than sending one or two to a workshop.

The last characteristic found in successful schools was high levels of community and family involvement. This characteristic scored the lowest on the Likert scale with only 70% of teachers mostly or completely agreed, although much research claims this characteristic to be the most important found in successful low EAV schools. The teachers had mixed feelings on this topic. Many of the questionnaire participants responded that parent and community support was low overall, although the interviews

revealed different results. Five of the teachers interviewed said both parents and community supported the school, while four teachers responded that the school received little or no support from the parents. Of the teachers who responded positively, all five either grew up in Dupo or currently lived in the community. One of the issues with this question was defining what parental involvement was. Most teachers thought of parental involvement as parents attending and taking part in school events such as parent teacher conferences, open house, and attending school functions. Administrator A defined parent involvement very different from the teachers. He defined parental involvement as “raising them right, putting them in a clean household and keeping them away from drugs and alcohol.” Even though parental support was questionable at best, Administrator A felt the parents trusted the school and teachers, and knew that the school would do what was best for their children.

**Influence of the Administrator.** Bluffview has a history of success since standardized testing began with the implementation of NCLB in 2002, always meeting the mandated AYP. The current principal, Administrator A has been employed as building principal of Bluffview since the 1999-2000 school year and has dealt with the challenges of NCLB since its inception.

Administrator A’s title at Bluffview is building principal, but in smaller school districts such as Bluffview, a building principal takes on many duties outside the realm of just overseeing daily operations of the school. Aside from being the principal, he is also the curriculum director and special educational director. While spending time with Administrator A during the interviewing process, he mentioned many times that he is not

the person who deals with the daily curriculum and special education issues; instead he oversees the programs and hires great teachers to implement new ideas.

Administrator A has many personal characteristics that help make the school successful. The first characteristic is his ability to take something that is commonly seen as a negative and turn it into something positive. One example of this was when budget issues meant that programs had to be cut, Administrator A created a common planning time for all teachers, thus giving the teachers time to collaborate and share ideas.

The teacher collaboration/common planning time has created a culture that is committed to student success and a process to make that happen. Administrator A was quick to give his teaching staff all the credit for the success of the school, most of whom he has hired during his time at Bluffview. Many teachers have retired in the past 10 years, creating a mix of veteran and younger teachers. Administrator A has used this turnover and challenged the veteran teachers to mentor and become leaders to the younger teachers. The leadership roles held by the veteran teachers, and the mentoring relationships formed with younger teachers appear to help avoid the burn out experienced by many teachers. Two side effects have emerged from this system: a close group of coworkers who are also friends outside of work, and a staff focused on providing the best possible education for Bluffview students.

In his role as curriculum director, Administrator A does take credit for the change made to the reading program, implementing a three-part reading program to ensure struggling readers get extra assistance when needed. He stressed the importance of a reading program many times during the interview when he mentioned “you cannot expect a student to pass a test when they cannot read it.” The focus on reading emerged as a

common theme during the interviewing process. Teachers and staff never talked about test scores; instead they always mentioned doing what was best for the students' education and focusing attention on teaching and student learning; high test scores are an outcome of this focus.

Administrator A's second personal characteristic that helps make Bluffview successful is his leadership style: he is available to everyone at all times. During passing periods, Administrator A is in the halls talking to students and staff about daily issues and observing what is taking place within the building. This time also helps him to stay apprised of issues, giving him opportunities to see potential problems. Due to his visibility in the school and availability to parents, Administrator A has developed a trust with the parents in the community.

Because of this trust the school has developed with the community, the school is the hub of the community and is supported by the parents whose children attend. Dupont is considered a poor to lower middle class bluecollar community that has numerous parents with shift work jobs and many parents working multiple jobs. Because of this, for some students school is the only place where they experience mentoring, adult supervision, help with homework and in some cases a positive structured environment. The teachers at Bluffview understand the situations facing many of the students and try to fill that void in the children's lives with a positive school environment.

Overall, Administrator A possesses most of the characteristics found in research literature describing the leadership characteristics of administrators in successful schools. Administrator A is an effective leader who believes in sharing leadership with teachers and other staff members. He is always accessible to students, teachers, or parents, and



always has a presence in the hallways during passing time and in the classroom to help foresee issues before they become problems. He has helped created a common vision of doing what is best for the students within the school and has a focus of high standards for all students and staff members.

Although research and published literature has confirmed the idea that standardized test scores are positively correlated with the property and family wealth of the district and the community that surrounds the school, this is not the case at Bluffview. The 1,078 K-5 or K-6 Illinois elementary schools used in this study have a median EAV of \$94,053. The Dupon District has an EAV of \$62,035, but the elementary school is scoring over 10 points higher on the ISAT than expected; consequently, 88.4% of the students are meeting or exceeding the state standards on the ISAT. Based on this research, it seems there might be a relationship between EAV and student achievement. Due to the feedback from the questionnaire and interviews conducted with Bluffview staff and administrators, it is evident that the reason for the students' success is due to high teacher and student expectations, curriculum alignment, teacher collaboration, and the caring and dedication of the staff.

After spending hours with the principal, teachers, and other staff members, it is not surprising the school's secret of success is non-financial. The characteristics that make Bluffview successful are all achieved through the hard work and dedication of the staff. Throughout the research on successful low EAV schools showed, there was an underlying theme that emerged in the literature, all of the successful schools had staff that worked tirelessly to help students. It may be that the greatest motivation for the teachers and staff members to give so much of their time outside of teaching is because they know

that the smallest act of kindness or assistance means so much to the students. This element of generous giving is found throughout Bluffview's staff.

The characteristics that make Bluffview successful are non-financial and can be instituted in any school with a strong staff that wants to see change regardless of the economic situation. To institute high teacher and student expectations does not add any extra financial cost to the district; it is very simply raising the bar of what is an acceptable level of achievement and what is expected from everyone involved. Curriculum alignment goes with raising the bar of what is expected from the teachers. The last three characteristics, teacher collaboration, clear focus, and a dedicated staff are all issues dealing with school culture. School administrators must create an environment to help foster these characteristics, and must create time within the school day to allow teachers to meet to discuss ideas and teaching methods. Administrators themselves must make teaching and learning the top priority within the school, and this focus must be maintained by everyone in the building at all times.

What makes Bluffview students successful is the outstanding certified staff members employed by the district, not the EAV of the community or from overwhelming support from parents within the community. Even though EAV is generally a predictor of academic success, Bluffview is a clear example of a school beating the odds, overcoming economic disadvantages, and succeeding on state standardized tests.

### **Recommendations**

After completing this research, further research needs to be done in three areas. The first area that should be studied is the state of Illinois school funding policies and the discrepancies created by the current policies. The second area of study should be a

review of the Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE), because the same students who are tested on the elementary level are also tested their junior year in high school with very different results. The ACT is part of the PSAE which is also a key component for college entrance. There seems to be a trend across the state of Illinois where elementary schools are achieving at high rates, but high schools are falling behind and are not making AYP. Only 34.7% of the high school junior level students at Dupo High School are meeting or exceeding expectations on the PSAE (IIRC, 2009). What is the reason or cause for this lack of success in the high school? Dupo is not the only school district in Illinois that is dealing with this issue.

Elementary schools across the state are very successful on standardized tests while the high schools are not meeting AYP which could lead to school choice for the students, supplemental educational services, corrective action by the state, or restructuring. There are six elementary schools that are similar to Bluffview in regards to the composite score (80% or more meets or exceeds) on the ISAT, 50% or more low income, and EAV (\$60,000-\$70,000) as seen in Table 10. Of the six elementary schools that would be considered successful low EAV schools, none of the high schools within the same districts meet AYP (IIRC, 2009).

Table 10

*Successful Low EAV Schools*

School	Comp. Meets and Exceeds	EAV	Low Income
Bluffview Elem.	86	65,808	50
Bluford Elem.	84	66,102	48
Industry Elem.	82	65,909	42
Lincoln Elem.	82	65,485	49
Midwest Central	86	65,026	45
Opdyke Attendance	81	61,291	48

*Note. Successful Low EAV Schools.* Adapted from “Illinois Interactive Report Card,” Copyright 2009. Adapted with permission.

Therefore third area of study should be to diagnose potential flaws in the Illinois high school testing system. While the elementary schools use a standards-referenced test, the high schools use a norm-referenced test, also known as a criterion-referenced test. Standards-referenced tests are tests that states and districts have amended. According to FairTest, a National Center for fair and open testing, they are paired with standards for the school or district detailing what students should be able to do in different subjects and grade levels. Tests are based on the standards and the results are reported in terms of these levels, which represent human judgment. In Illinois, performance standards have been increased and students have to increase their knowledge to meet the same level (FairTest, 2007)

Criterion-referenced tests are made to compare test takers to each other. On any given criterion-reference test, test takers would be compared as to who knew most or

least on a given test or topic. Scores are reported as a percentage rank with half scoring above and half below the mid-point.

On a standardized criterion-reference test, the passing score is usually set by a committee, while in education the teachers set the passing score. The passing score is subjective, not objective and sometimes passing has been set in a way that increases the number of students who pass or fail a certain test. A small change in the passing score could increase or decrease the pass rate (FairTest, 2007). Some criterion-reference tests are not based on specific curriculum, but on the premises of what students might be taught and may not match the curriculum (FairTest, 2007).

Since NCLB, all states must measure each public school and district's achievement and establish annual achievement targets for the state. For the 2009 school year, the annual achievement target was 70% of students meeting or exceeding on the standardized tests. The overarching goal is for all students to meet or exceed standards in reading and mathematics by 2014. This would be possible if all schools would use a standards-referenced test, but in Illinois, only the elementary schools use this type of test. Illinois high schools use the PSAE which is a criterion-referenced test and does not give an accurate measure of the ability of the junior level students who take the test. Due to the design of the criterion-referenced test, it will be impossible for Illinois high schools to reach the 100% meeting or exceeding on state tests by year 2014. If the tests do not change, soon all Illinois high schools will be failing.

As the system is currently set, there is no motivation for non-college bound students to attempt success on the test. For those who want to further their education after high school, the motivation is a high ACT score on their transcript that is sent to the

educational institution the student wishes to attend. Those high school students who forgo college and enter the workforce, have no reason to succeed on the ACT. The scores of the students do not affect the students, but reflect the success or failure of the school in which the students attend.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This research suggests there may be a relationship between EAV/SES and student achievement on standardized tests. This research used a one year study of EAV/SES and standardized test scores. A multiple year study is recommended to better understand the relationship between EAV/SES and standardized test scores. The scope of the study did not take into account the views of the students at Bluffview, only the views of certified staff and administrators were used. Further research should be done to see what the students feel are the reasons for the success within the school. It would be beneficial to interview the parents of the community to see if their perceptions align with the perceptions of the teachers.

More research should be done regarding the design of the PSAE. Criterion-referenced tests cannot be used to check how well students acquire the skills and knowledge described in the Illinois Learning Standards. If the purpose of the test is to check accountability for NCLB, a standard-referenced test should be used at both the high school and elementary levels.

If Illinois keeps the testing system that is currently in place, the state should adopt an equal funding policy throughout the state. Although some schools such as Bluffview are able to overcome the funding short falls, most schools do not. Because the state of Illinois is not properly funding the schools, the tax burden falls on local property taxes to

finance the schools. The current system works for the wealthier regions of the state but is hindering the education systems in the poorer regions, who serve a population of students in need of services.

### **Summary**

Poverty is not an excuse for the lack of students' success on the ISAT, and school leaders can make the changes necessary within an elementary school without extra funds. All five characteristics found to be evident in successful low EAV schools are all issues involving school culture. Because the culture of a building starts with the ideas and practices of leadership and trickles down to teachers, staff, students, and the community, it is up to the school leaders to provide guidance. It is very easy for school leaders to blame academic failure on a lack of funding or a lack of community support, but Bluffview is an example of a school that not only succeeds, but is one of the elite schools within the state of Illinois with a low EAV and extraordinary high test scores.

Bluffview should serve as a model to other elementary schools on how to succeed in less than ideal economic conditions. It is a school that shows what staff can do when they are dedicated, work together, and truly care about the success and future of the students. This study echoes the same common characteristics that were found to be true in other successful schools: clear focus, teacher collaboration, curriculum and instruction aligned with standards, and focused professional development.

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### Appendix A: Staff Questionnaire of School Characteristics

To improve school quality and help students learn, school personnel need to identify their strengths and areas needing improvement. Obtaining your views about your school is an important part of this process.

It will take you about 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire. To ensure your responses remain anonymous, your ratings will be combined with other staff and reported as a group. Completing the questionnaire is voluntary; although we encourage you to respond honestly to help your school get a complete understanding of staff views.

**Questionnaire Scale:** The questionnaire on the following pages uses a 5-point Likert Scale, from 1 meaning you “do not agree at all” to 5 meaning you “agree completely.” Indicate the number that best describes your level of agreement about each statement. If you have no knowledge to make an accurate selection, mark 0 in the first column (“no basis to judge”).

Before taking the questionnaire, please complete the bottom half of this page. This information will be used for analysis purposes only, and results will not be reported for categories with have fewer than five (5) responses.

District \_\_\_\_\_ School \_\_\_\_\_ Date (month/year) \_\_\_\_\_

1. Your primary role (check only one):
  - Teacher
  - Other certificated staff
  - Building administrator
  - Para-educator
2. Years working in your current role:  0-3    4-7    8-15    16 or more  
(including work in other locations)
3. Years working in this school (check one):  0-3    4-7    8-15    16 or more
4. Grade(s) taught (circle all that apply): K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12   Not applicable

Open Response Questions

Please be honest when answering the following questions. Your answers are very important to this study and will be kept anonymous.

1. Do you think that Bluffview’s outstanding reputation for exceeding on the Illinois State Achievement test contributes to the success of the students?
  
2. What key traits do you feel the teachers possess at Bluffview Elementary that helps the kids succeed?
  
3. What key traits do you feel the administrators possess at Bluffview Elementary that helps the kids succeed?
  
4. How does Bluffview Elementary keep the parents and community involved with the school?

Think about Bluffview Elementary as you read each of the statements below. Then circle the number that best describes how much you agree with that statement.

	No Basis To Judge	Don't Agree At All	Agree Slightly	Agree Moderately	Agree Mostly	Agree Completely
1.						
a. The school has a clear sense of purpose	0	1	2	3	4	5
b. I have a clear understanding of what the school is trying to achieve	0	1	2	3	4	5
c. The teachers share a common understanding of what the school wants to achieve	0	1	2	3	4	5
d. The administrators share a common understanding of what the schools want to achieve	0	1	2	3	4	5
e. All teachers are committed to achieving the school's goals	0	1	2	3	4	5
f. The school's primary emphasis is improving learning	0	1	2	3	4	5
g. All administrators are committed to achieving the school's goals	0	1	2	3	4	5

	No Basis To Judge	Don't Agree At All	Agree Slightly	Agree Moderately	Agree Mostly	Agree Completely
2.						
a. Teachers discuss teaching issues on a regular basis	0	1	2	3	4	5
b. Teachers work together to solve problems related to school issues	0	1	2	3	4	5
c. The teachers work in teams across grade levels to help increase student learning	0	1	2	3	4	5
d. Teachers routinely work together to plan what will be taught	0	1	2	3	4	5
e. Teachers have frequent communication with the families of their students	0	1	2	3	4	5
f. Teacher and administrators trust one another	0	1	2	3	4	5
g. Administrators work together to solve problems related to school issues	0	1	2	3	4	5

	No Basis To Judge	Don't Agree At All	Agree Slightly	Agree Moderately	Agree Mostly	Agree Completely
3.						
a. All students are expected to meet or exceed on standardized tests	0	1	2	3	4	5
b. Teachers are dedicated and help all students meet high academic standards	0	1	2	3	4	5
c. Teachers believe all students can learn complex concepts	0	1	2	3	4	5
d. Teachers use effective strategies to help students who do not meet standards	0	1	2	3	4	5

	No Basis To Judge	Don't Agree At All	Agree Slightly	Agree Moderately	Agree Mostly	Agree Completely
4.						
a. Assessment results are used to determine professional learning activities	0	1	2	3	4	5
b. Teachers get help in areas in which they they to improve.	0	1	2	3	4	5
c. Teachers have enough opportunities to grow professionally	0	1	2	3	4	5
d. Instructional staff view themselves as learners as well as teachers	0	1	2	3	4	5

	No Basis To Judge	Don't Agree At All	Agree Slightly	Agree Moderately	Agree Mostly	Agree Completely
5.						
a. Teachers believes students learn more through effective family support	0	1	2	3	4	5
b. The school works with many community organizations to support its students	0	1	2	3	4	5
c. The school makes a special effort to contact the families of students who are struggling academically	0	1	2	3	4	5
d. Teachers have frequent contact with their student's parents	0	1	2	3	4	5
e. The school provides ample information to families about how to help students succeed in school	0	1	2	3	4	5
f. Many parents are involved as volunteers at the school	0	1	2	3	4	5

**Appendix B: Random Schools Used for Pearson Calculation**

Bartlett Elem School	\$134,810	92
Beecher Elem School	\$123,349	91
Belle Aire Elem School	\$529,940	92
C E Miller Elem School	\$371,046	88
Cannon Elem School	\$59,208	68
Carol Stream Elem School	\$315,686	81
Dundee Highlands Elem School	\$171,601	93
Enterprise Elem School	\$95,227	68
Eunice Smith Elem School	\$103,302	71
Field Park Elem School	\$331,740	99
Hanover Highlands Elem School	\$397,534	84
Harnew Elem School	\$281,879	83
Henry Raab Elem School	\$94,543	78
Hinckley-Big Rock Elem Sch	\$174,149	92
Husmann Elem School	\$233,471	87
Industry Elementary	\$61,264	85
J Emmett Hinchcliffe Sr Elem Sch	\$137,152	85
John Nelson Elem School	\$93,394	67
Lovejoy Elem School	\$103,302	69
MCCORMICK ELEM SCHOOL	\$165,380	53
MCDADE ELEM CLASSICAL SCHOOL	\$165,380	97
Nob Hill Elem School	\$109,078	71
North Elementary School	\$103,302	76
Park View Elem School	\$383,532	93
Paul T Wright Elem Sch	\$127,037	89
Schafer Elem School	\$335,289	77
Schneider Elem School	\$140,718	79
Shipman Elem School	\$58,503	82
Shipman Elem School	\$276,025	82
South Elementary School	\$59,503	66
South Jacksonville Elem School	\$92,417	95
Stevenson Elem School	\$159,376	91
Thomas Jefferson Elem School	\$86,446	81
Thomas Paine Elem School	\$146,189	83
Washington Elem School	\$424,856	82
Westview Elem School	\$180,703	80
Willow Bend Elem School	\$323,894	89
Wilson Elem School	\$67,456	76
Woodgate Elem School	\$276,025	66

### **Vitae**

Brian C. Levin currently serves as a Social Studies Teacher at Dupo High School, in Dupo, Illinois. Specific areas of interest are Geography, Civics, and Sociology. His career experiences over the past 11 years have included being a leader of the Social Studies department at Dupo High School, sponsor of the class of 2004, freshman basketball coach for 4 years, and continues to lead groups of students on European expeditions. His professional development has included attending St. Clair County Institutes from 1999 to present, taking part in the Teacher-To-Teacher Initiative, as well as mentoring two student teachers. In 2005 he won the distinct honor of being presented with the Emerson Excellent in Teaching Award, recognized twice as a member of the National Honor Roll for Outstanding Teachers, and has been nominated the past six years to the Who's Who among America's High School Teachers.

Educational studies have resulted in a Bachelors of Arts in Social Studies from Mckendree Univeristy (1999), Master of Arts Degree in Educational Administration from Lindenwood University (2005), and Educational Specialists Degree from Lindenwood University (2008). Brian is currently certified in educational administration from grades K-12 in Illinois and Missouri.