

## LESS TESTS, MORE REDRESS: IMPROVING MINORITY AND LOW INCOME STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL ACCESS IN THE POST-BROWN ERA

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### Educational Access and Academic Achievement in Public Schools

Ten years after *Brown v. Board of Ed, Topeka Kansas* the Supreme Court passed the Civil Rights Act to further a more expeditious process of public school desegregation. Federal compensatory funds were allocated under the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to support these efforts. In 2002 changes in the ESEA legislation were made for the first time since its inception. In what was seen as "the most significant federal education policy initiative in a generation" by the States Education Commission, ESEA was revamped and is now more popularly referred to as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

In reality, the history of educational access for *all* children is peppered with social, political and legal resistance. For example, in *Brown*, the Supreme Court ruled against segregated schools, which, they decided, were inherently unequal. This ruling was handed down 58 years after the Court ruled in favor of separate but equal schools (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896). The *Plessy* ruling in favor of segregation exemplified White Americans' resistance to the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation which ended the institution of slavery, an institution that encompassed laws prohibiting the education of African Americans. In effect, the ruling in *Brown* was the first government action that asserted equal educational access as a right of all Americans since the 1867 Military Reconstruction Acts, which transitioned the Southern plantocracy into more democratic constitutional conventions (Anderson, 1988). Despite the Court's effort exemplified in *Brown*, however, resistance to moving every child forward prevailed then and now.

Legally enforced desegregation brought forth strong opposition. Some Southern states refused to obey the law and federal troops had to be brought in to protect the safety of the courageous African American families who pioneered desegregation's implementation. Cities in other states closed their schools and denied public educational access to all students rather than allow Black and White students to be educated together in the same schools. When the law was reluctantly followed, there were deliberate misinterpretations of the law's intent. For example, "deliberate speed" was interpreted as "slow" as exemplified in the fact that some districts eventually began their desegregation process in the early Seventies, over 20 years after the law passed. Further, most attempts to desegregate were often one-sided; that is, more African American students were bussed to White schools than the other way around. Lastly, at other times the law was interpreted with a caveat: Black and White students co-existed in the same schools but were educated in separate classrooms and had fundamentally different educational experiences with equally different achievement outcomes.

Today, access to a quality education remains elusive for many American children, in particular low-income and minority students. As detailed in the myriad reports and studies that have been published since *Brown*, educational disparities continue to exist between students from different races and socio-economic backgrounds: many African American, Latino and White students are still educated in highly segregated public schools to the detriment of economically-disenfranchised and minority students whose schools are often under-resourced; White students score higher on standardized tests than students of color (with the exception of Asian and Asian American students); all students from families with higher socioeconomic incomes attain higher test scores than students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; and, the disparity in academic achievement progressively worsens as students advance from elementary to secondary schools. In effect, these reports fundamentally have served to expose to the American public the dire state of K-12 public education for low socioeconomic and racial/ethnic minority students. They evidence the prevailing problem of inequitable access to quality education for these students.

Current policy responses to this prevailing problem are encompassed in the recently revamped Elementary and Secondary Education Act, more frequently referred to as President Bush's "No Child Left Behind Act." Four overarching themes dominate President Bush's educational agenda: Standards, testing, accountability, and school choice via vouchers (Reeves, 2001). This new bill requires annual state tests in reading and math for every child in grades three through eight beginning in the 2004-05 school year (<http://cnnfyi.com>).

Importantly, while there is some increase in federal monies for school districts, no new funding lines are created under the new appropriation. For example, in the literature disseminated through the school district in this study, Title 1 funds are targeted to implement many of the new mandates. These mandates include supplementary academic services through state-approved providers and transportation for students who choose to attend a higher performing school than the one they currently attend. However, even though an increase in funds is provided, redirecting Title 1 funds in this way, places other initiatives for students'

academic improvement in jeopardy-e.g., smaller classes and instructional aides for students with special needs also paid for with Title 1 funds. Moreover, though more federal dollars have been appropriated for education, these funds are awarded primarily through a competitive rather than a needs assessment process.

Despite the harsh realities faced by the majority of urban schools serving economically disadvantaged and minority students, more focus has been paid to increasing standardized tests since NCLB's inception. This focus has positioned increased testing as the end rather than as a means to the end result of more academic opportunities for students who are currently not afforded them because of the dire circumstances faced by their schools. The results of the survey on which this paper is based challenge the need for yet another set of costly indicators that will deflect resources away from real school improvements. Using survey data from one under-performing urban middle school we analyzed students', parents' and teachers' perceptions of their college access needs, and their school's ability to address these needs.

The questions explored in this paper are the following: a) What are the links between testing and providing quality educational opportunities for low-income and racial/ ethnic minority students in the past and present? b) If not more testing, what achievement factors have been indicated in the literature to have the most academic and occupational currency for these students? c) What are the findings from the survey data regarding one middle school's students' access to the achievement factors with the most academic and occupational currency? Finally, d) What can we learn from these students', parents', and teachers' perceptions of the reasons for their school's failure and their perceptions of what's really needed to create access to quality education in their school?

### **Testing and Quality Education for Low Income and Minority Students: An Overview**

Though the latest call for more standardized testing evolved into the recent bill earlier mentioned, the need for such tests became a policy outcry after the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* published by the National Commission on Excellence (Jordan & Johnson, 2002). This report, much like those released after the launching of Sputnik by the Russians in 1957, focused tremendous attention on the education system of America. Also similar to the effects of the earlier reports, this scrutiny of public education resulted in criticisms and demands. Criticisms in the wake of *A Nation at Risk* focused on declining test scores, the weak performance of U.S. students in comparison with those of other industrialized nations, and the growing number of functionally illiterate American adults. These criticisms were followed by demands for greater academic rigor, higher expectations for students, better qualified and better-paid teachers (Sadker & Sadker, 1997).

Efforts to reform education have continued since *A Nation at Risk*, and over the last ten years these efforts have focused specifically on restructuring America's public schools in terms of their organization, curriculum and instruction, as well as the professional development of school personnel (Boyer, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Perkinson, 1995). In the midst of these restructuring efforts, policy makers, social scientists, and educators have all agreed that urban schools-especially those serving primarily minority student populations and those schools in high poverty areas of cities-need more help than other public schools if they are to ensure that all of their students attain high academic achievement. Originally, however, these schools were served in a different way by standardized test results.

In addition to Sputnik in the late fifties, America was dealing with a rising discontent among the economically disenfranchised and racial minority members of society. These citizens were demanding long denied constitutional rights, particularly with regard to their children's education. In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, public schools came under another kind of scrutiny, and demands of a different nature were made. States were criticized for the unequal educational resources they provided to students of color and their resistance to desegregation after the *Brown* verdict. People of color and their White allies organized and demanded that equal educational access be afforded all students according to the Supreme Court's charge. In this highly charged political context, the government commissioned the Coleman Report.

Coleman et al. (1966) summarized findings based on responses to questionnaires completed by public school teachers, principals, district school superintendents, and students gathered in September and October of 1965, from 4000 public schools and over 645,000 students. Additionally, standardized achievement tests were administered to students in grades one, three, six, nine and twelve, to assess the educational opportunities for students offered by the schools they attended.

The authors of the Coleman Report describe a highly segregated system of public education. The report showed that conditions in the schools were better for White students than for students of color. In general, the average White student had fewer students in her or his classes in comparison to the average Black student. In terms of programs, White students were more likely to attend accredited schools with college preparatory curricula. Under such schooling conditions, the report found that White students scored higher on achievement tests than students of color, with Asian students being the exception. Furthermore, as students got older, the achievement gap between White and Black students widened.

Although, controversially, one of the insistent themes in the report is that variations in school conditions have little effect on

student achievement, the authors, nonetheless, state that "it is for the most disadvantaged children that improvements in school quality will make the most difference in achievement" (p. 163). In recent times, other researchers have found that taking school quality (measured by access to quality instruction, rigorous curriculum, and opportunity to learn) into account, disparities in performance assessment test scores are reduced between groups of students from different racial backgrounds who had access to a similar quality of education (Klein et. al, 1997; Camara & Schmidt, 1999).

The work of the researchers above illustrate the importance of the social context in which students are educated in determining how well they perform on standardized tests. Camara and Schmidt's (1999) commentary on the adverse influence of a disadvantaged social context, in which many inner-city public schools find themselves, is worth quoting at length. Based on the results of their studies the authors surmised that:

the stark differences across assessments and other measures collectively illustrate the inequities minorities have suffered through inadequate preparation, poverty, and discrimination: years of tracking into dead-end educational programs; lack of advanced and rigorous courses in inner-city schools, or lack of access to such programs when available; threadbare facilities and overcrowding; teachers in critical need of professional development; less family support and experience in higher education; and low expectations. (p. 13)

In short, given the adverse circumstances under which students are expected to learn and teachers are expected to teach, one would be hard-pressed to imagine that these communities would need more testing to confirm the lack of academic resources that exists in their schools. Thus, the idea of "exposing" the education travesties that exist in the schools serving these communities is now a misnomer, though this is one of the arguments touted in the news media in support of more standardized testing (see Mathews, 2001). However, if standardized testing in the contemporary public education system does not, for the most part, fulfill the purposes of generating new insights into students' academic performance, nor expose what is known to virtually everyone (especially the communities who live the day-to-day educational travesties) more attention needs to be paid to the achievement factors proven to have more educational and occupational currency for students. In the following section we summarize the literature on college access and preparation as important factors that affect the life opportunities of all students.

### **College Access and Preparation: Currency for Life**

For the last quarter century, a college education has been considered a necessary passport to occupational success. Yet, despite a generation of concerted policy and programmatic efforts and despite the substantial gains in educational attainment over the past fifty years, African Americans and Latinos remain decidedly underrepresented on the nation's college and university campuses (Horn & Chen, 1998; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). The factors most relevant to college-going are academic achievement, educational expectations, familial support, and an academically rigorous and supportive school environment. Each of these factors is discussed below with regards to the public school education of African American and Latino students.

For all students, academic achievement remains the most important determinant of whether and where they go to college (Alexander & Eckland 1979; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hearn, 1991; Karen, 1988; and Thomas, 1979). Yet, across all achievement levels, students from the lowest socioeconomic (SES) groups are less likely to apply to or attend college than are the highest SES students. Moreover, students of color and poor students are less likely to start or finish college (Levine and Nidiffer, 1996; Perna, 2000).

Students' educational expectations play a major role in college enrollment (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hearn, 1987) and oftentimes are the single strongest predictor of four-year college attendance (Thomas, 1980). Early college expectations, especially if developed by the eighth grade, stimulate planning for college as well as motivate students to maintain grades and engage in necessary extracurricular activities (Alexander & Cook, 1979; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997). Importantly however, is the nurturing of these students' educational expectations by influential adults. In their study of racial and ethnic differences in college choices among students, McDonough & Antonio (in press) found that for Latino students and African American students in particular, a nurturing relationship with teachers was a strong indication of whether or not these students chose to go to college. The expectations that teachers have of students are an important element to their development and maintenance of college aspirations. Too often, students are labeled early in their educational careers as "college bound" or "non-college bound" and those labels tend to have a profound impact on the choices students make, the options they see for themselves, and their ideas about what are realistic aspirations (Oakes, 1986). But college plans do not simply happen. They must be fostered and encouraged through a school's culture. Students who are expected to go to college, by and large, do so (McDonough, 1997). Those for whom the expectations do not exist are never given the chance to make it to college because they are denied the support, information, and resources necessary to get there.

In making college transitions, individuals potentially have two sets of resources: family and school. As Plank & Jordan (2001) have shown, the effectiveness of schools and families in advising students for college is interconnected and interdependent.

Parents and other influential family members are essential partners in ensuring students' college enrollment. Parental support is one of the strongest predictors of students forming early educational plans, of students maintaining college aspirations, of sustaining students' motivation and academic achievements, and of students' actual college enrollment (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996).

Another strong predictor of students' college aspirations is the environment of the school they attend. The school environment has a powerful influence on students' college aspirations and preparation. Four key components of the school organization have been demonstrated to have a tremendous impact on college attendance: A college preparatory curriculum; a college culture which establishes high academic standards and includes formal and informal communication networks that promote and support college expectations; a school staff that collectively is committed to students' college goals; and resources devoted to counseling and advising college-bound students (Akerheim et al., 1998; Boyle, 1966; Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993; Coleman, 1987; Cookson & Persell, 1985; Falsey & Heyns, 1984; Hotchkiss & Vetter, 1987; McDonough, 1994, 1997; Powell, 1996).

In summary, the keys to college access are having parents who expect you to go to college, having college plans by middle school, and attending a school with a college preparatory curriculum and a college culture that is embodied in adequate curriculum materials, well-equipped classrooms, and a supportive, knowledgeable staff. Moreover, students need to receive encouragement to attend college early enough in their educational careers (by eighth grade) for them to enroll in appropriate classes. Middle and high school teachers have important and irreplaceable roles to play in guiding each student's decision-making about whether or not a four-year college is an option. Thus, while test scores will act as one indicator of students' preparedness to attend college, more factors go into getting students to the college door.

These factors are in dire need of attention at many urban schools across the nation. Yet, many of these factors are not attended to directly in the current school reform movements that focus primarily on more testing in schools. Unfortunately, the focus of testing and accountability has pushed schools to attend more to students' test-taking skills, which is the least of the problems these schools face in improving students' scores. Using survey data from one middle school in an urban school district, we examine this school's ability to provide students with effective preparation to gain college access in the future as perceived by the members of the school community (students, parents and teachers). We examined the quality of education provided to students through an analysis of the factors that matter most to students' access to college.

## **The School District and Middle School Site**

Golden State Magnet Middle School (GSMMS) is one of two middle schools in a school district that served a total of 17,295 students in the 2000-2001 school year. There are 13 elementary schools, two middle, and two high schools. The District's student population is almost exclusively Latino (58%) and African American (41%). Many of the Latino students are recently immigrated to the U.S. from Latin America. Thirty-one percent of the families served by the School District were enrolled in CalWorks (California's Welfare-to-Work program), 61% of the students were on free and reduced lunch, and 36% were English Language Learners (ELL).

Golden State Magnet Middle School is a year-round school with a student population of 1272 students equally distributed across four tracks, A, B, C, and D. Mirroring the overall District statistics, the student population at Golden State is 65% Latino and 34% African American with the remaining percent consisting of Asian and Pacific Islander students. Twenty-six percent of the families served at Golden State were enrolled in CalWorks, 59% of the students were enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program, and 34% were English Language Learners. The Stanford 9 test scores at the school are dismal, with 72% of the students scoring below the 50th percentile in math, and 75% of the students scoring below the 50th percentile in reading at the time of this study.

There are 49 teachers at Golden State: Twenty-five are male and 20 are female. While Latino students comprised the majority of the student population, African American teachers comprised the majority of the teacher population (60%). At the time that these data were collected, 42% of the teachers were non-credentialed. Over the last five years the school has been out of compliance regarding the State's standards for educating English Language Learners (ELL). Ironically, the elementary schools in the District have been rated exemplary. However, parents who are able to do so, often remove their children from the District rather than place them in the middle and high schools, which have consistently ranked among the State's lowest performing schools.

## **Methods**

### *Study Instrument*

Three comparable questionnaires (student, parent, and teacher forms) were developed by the first and second authors with input from other faculty and staff involved with the project. The final versions of the instruments included the following content

areas: Expectations for college, beliefs about college access, discussions about college, perceptions of rigorous school instruction, learning environment, and academic resources. These content areas embody the cultural expectations that are most important to a quality education ultimately leading to college attendance (Gandara, 2001).

### *Data Collection*

Student and teacher data were collected over a two-day period in April 2002. Questionnaires were administered to all participants during the first and second periods of the school day by a team of graduate student researchers. Any student who was not present did not complete a questionnaire. Teachers who were not present the day of data collection were asked to complete the questionnaire when they returned to school. Parent data were also collected in April 2002 via telephone interviews.

### *Sample*

*Students.* A total of 1,027 students (84%) were surveyed. The sample was 63% Latino (n=647), 25% African American (n=261), and 6% mixed ethnicity (n=65). Thirty-three percent of the students were in 6th grade, 35% in 7th grade, and 32% in 8th grade. As GSMMS is a multi-track school, 20% of the students surveyed were on track A, 28% on B, 28% on C, and 24% on D. Twenty-three percent of the student sample reported attending an elementary school outside of the District.

*Teachers.* All of the teachers (n=49) at GSMMS participated in the study. Of these teachers, 45% reported holding a master's degree, 58% reported holding a credential, 23% an emergency credential, 4% were in an intern credential program, and 12% were enrolled in a pre-intern credential program. In terms of teaching experience, 41% of the teachers reported having more than 10 years of experience, 35% had 4 to 10 years, and 16% had less than 3 years. Sixteen percent of the teachers reported working at this school for more than 10 years, 36% worked 4 to 10 years, and 39% worked for 3 years or less.

*Parents.* A total of 70 parents were interviewed by telephone. It is important to note that the majority of the parent sample was recruited through an organized parent group and therefore, their level of involvement in school activities is not representative of the larger parent population at the school. For example, 90% of the sample reported being an active member of a parent group, with 31% having attended more than five parent activities at the time of the interview (approximately three quarters of the way through the school year).

These parents, however, are thought to represent the larger parent population with respect to their demographic characteristics. The parent sample was almost exclusively Latino (97%). Although 90% of the parents stated that they had immigrated to the U.S., 81% reported that their middle school child was born in the U.S. The majority (89%) reported Spanish as the primary language spoken at home. With respect to education, 34% of parents said they had completed only elementary school, 50% graduated from high school or obtained a GED, and very few parents (4%) reported attending school beyond high school. Reported family income was also very low, with 79% reporting an annual income of less than \$29,000. Eighty-nine percent reported that their child was eligible for free or reduced lunch, yet only 50% of the parents reported enrolling their child in the lunch program. Following are the results of the survey data presented under the content areas examined. These content areas are expectations for college, rigorous curriculum and instruction, and the school's ecology measured by learning resources available to teachers and students.

## **Results**

### **Expectations for College**

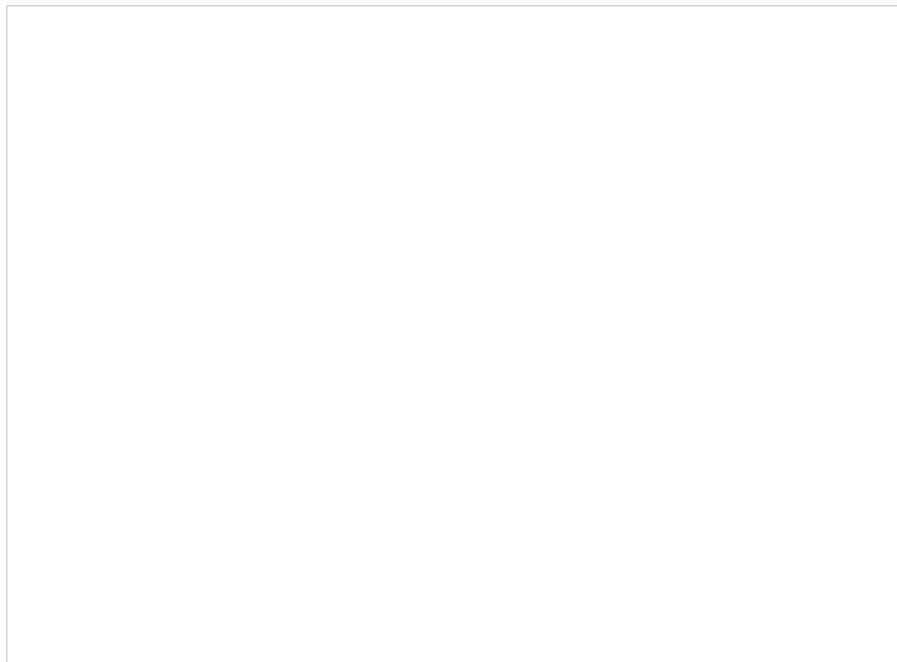
College expectations were measured by: students' expectations to attend college, parents' expectations for their children to attend college, and teachers' expectations for students to attend college. College expectations were also measured by the degree to which college going was discussed between students and parents, students and teachers, as well as parents and teachers. Lastly, discussions of anticipated barriers and strategies to overcome these barriers were also used as indicators of college expectations.

Figure 1 depicts students' expectations for a college education in their future. The majority (66%) of students indicated that upon finishing high school, they expected to attend a four-year college. None of the students believed that they would not finish high school. This is significant given the high school graduation rates for the District. Take for example the District's high school class of 2001. This class began with 1,025 freshman students. Four years later, the class consisted of 614 students. Of these, 552 students received a high school diploma—a 51% graduation rate of the original class of freshmen. This suggests that there is significant discord between students' expectations for themselves and the reality of student success in this District.

Students' indications of their friends' expectations for them to graduate were lower than the expectations they held for themselves (see Figure 1). Only 49% of students felt that their friends expected them to go on to attend a four-year college. This

drop in students' expectations may allude to their awareness of the actual graduation rate of their District's high schools, despite the seemingly high expectation rate that individual students held for themselves.

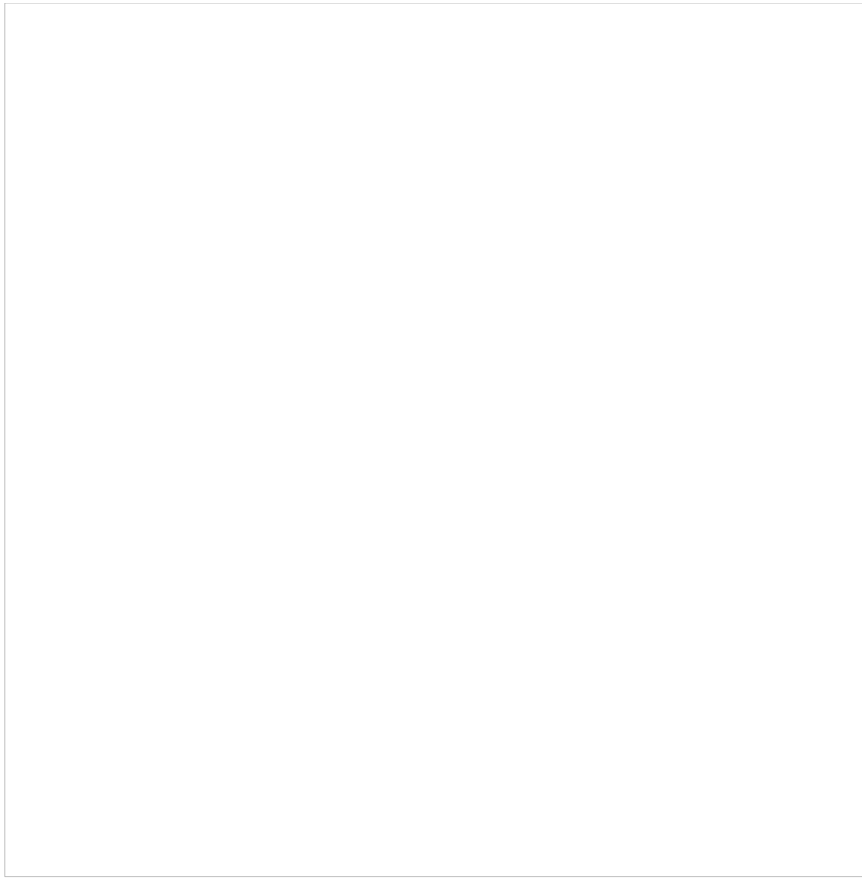
*Figure 1 - Student Expectations*



Data also provide insight into students' perceptions of what their families and teachers expected of them. The students in our sample were certain that their families expected them to attend college. Seventy-six percent reported that their families expected them to attend a four-year college and 6% to attend a two-year college (see Figure 1). This rate of parental expectations is higher than expectations which students held for themselves. Students' reports of their parents' expectations were confirmed in parent responses. Nearly all of the parents interviewed (94%) reported that they expected their child to attend a four-year college, and 80% of them believed that their children's teachers held similar expectations.

In contrast, students indicated that their teachers had lower expectations for them (55%) than their parents had for them or they had for themselves. As noted earlier, research literature indicates that teachers' expectations of students have a significant influence on their actual achievement. Teachers in this study were also asked to indicate their expectations for students at their school. Figure 2 presents teacher expectations of students with respect to college attendance. Even though teachers believed that 73% of the students would graduate from high school (a percent notably higher than the percent of students that actually graduate from the District's high schools), their expectations that these students would actually attend college were low. On average, teachers believed that only 35% of these students would attend college. Moreover, they believed that only 7% of the students who graduate from high school would attend a competitive four-year university such as the University of California. These findings are in stark contrast to the above findings regarding students' and parents' expectations of attending college, and parents' beliefs of teachers' high expectations for their children.

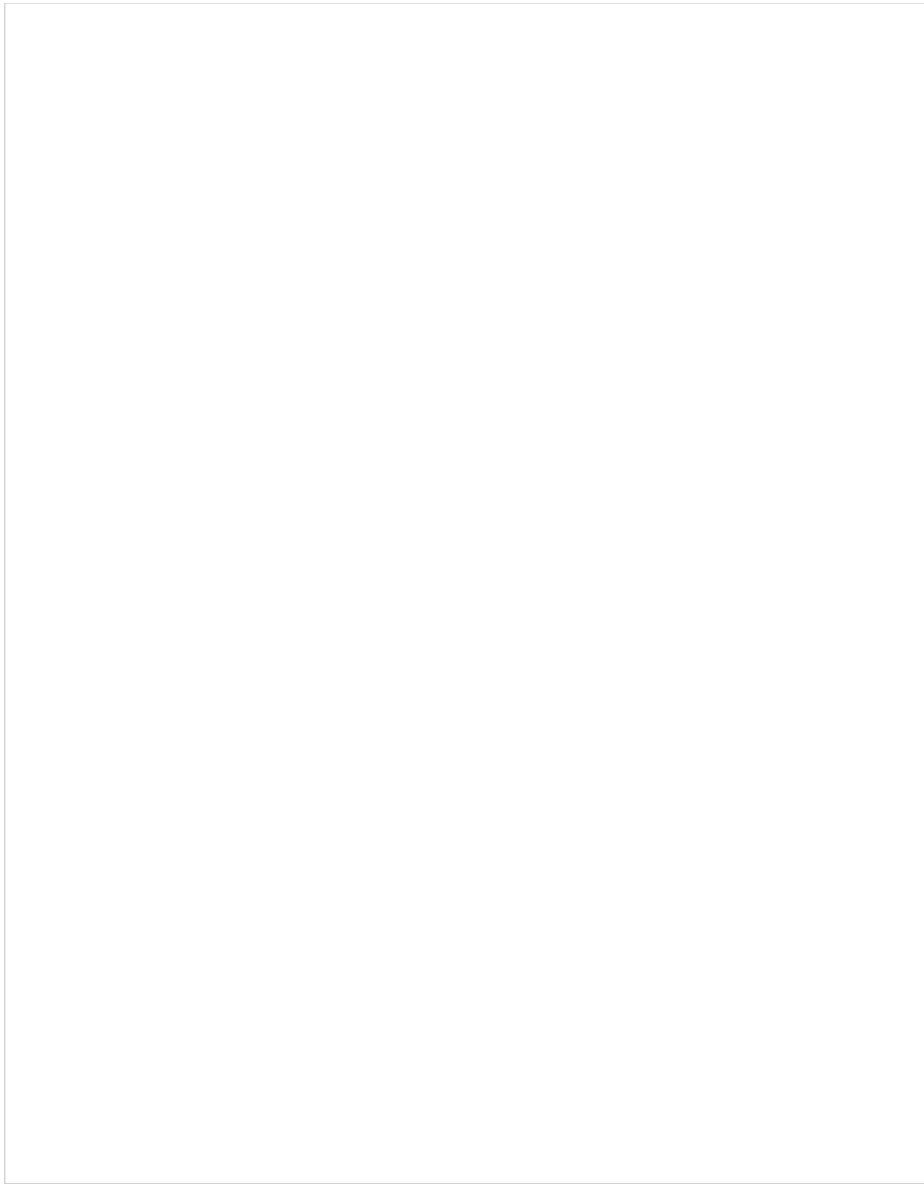
*Figure 2 - Teachers college going expectations for students that they believe will graduate from high school*



Teachers also did not believe that the majority of students were committed to high academic achievement. Data presented in Table 1 indicate that teachers believed that the parents at GSMMS were "good parents." However, 57% of them did not believe that these parents were able to engage or motivate their children's academic achievement. This is an interesting finding when compared to teachers' reports of their own low expectations for students' future college attendance.

In sharp contrast to how teachers viewed parental support of students' academic achievement, the parents surveyed believed in the teachers at GSMMS (see Table 1). Ninety-seven percent of parents believed the school was staffed with good teachers, 88% said that teachers were committed to their jobs, 82% said that teachers were committed to the students, and that they could build relationships with them. Almost all parents felt that the teachers were able to make an impact academically, that they were able to support literacy development, engage students in a rigorous curriculum, and that they required students to study hard.

*Table 1 - Teachers' perceptions of GSMMS parents and parents' perceptions of teachers*



Regarding discussions of college going, 83% of the students reported that indeed they talked to their parents about going to college. Families appeared to be more likely to talk to their children about college than did the teachers at Golden State. Of the students surveyed, only 52% reported discussing college with their teachers. Again, corroborating students' reports, all of the parent participants reported talking to their child about going to college. Eighty-two percent of parents said they have talked to someone at the school about college admissions. This figure is significantly higher than what teachers reported regarding the percent of parents that talked to them about college. As noted earlier, parent participants in this study were selected from a parent group formed at the school through a special program geared toward increasing the number of students who eventually attend college. Thus, it would follow that more of these parents would have spoken to someone about college at the school site, but not necessarily a teacher, and more likely, a representative from the college preparation program.

College expectations were also measured by indications of any obstacles to college going and ways to overcome them. Although the overwhelming majority of GSMMS's families lived below the poverty level, neither students nor parents believed that their financial situation would deter them from attending college. Sixty-three percent of parents and 87% of students did not see the expense of college as a barrier to college access. Interestingly, the biggest obstacle that both parents and students perceived to college access was that their school did not prepare students to enter college. For example, while 37% of parents felt that college may be too expensive for their child to attend, 50% felt that the school was not effectively preparing their child to attend college. Parents saw this as a bigger barrier than the cost of college, their child's grades, or their child's interest in attending college. These results are also reflected in the findings regarding rigorous curriculum and instruction detailed below.

**Rigorous Curriculum and Instruction**

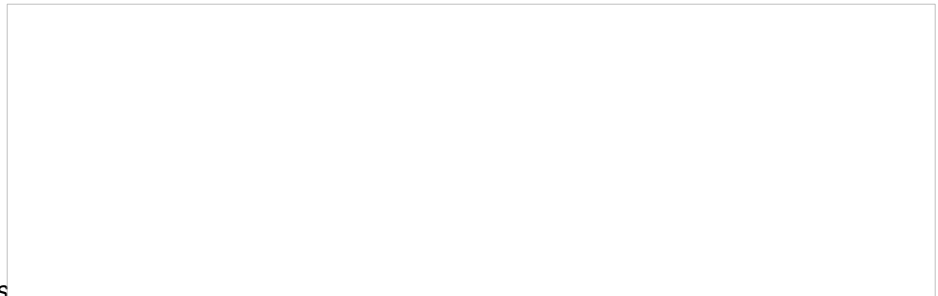


Rigorous curriculum was measured by the following: a) The degree to which students perceived that they were engaged in challenging academic work in their classes; b) the degree to which parents perceived that their child was involved in challenging academic work ; c) the degree to which teachers believed that they engaged students in such work; d) the amount of homework that students indicated they received, that parents' perceived their children receiving, and that teachers' indicated they gave to students; and, e) the rate of access to computer technology that students and teachers perceived was available to them during instructional time.

Although students expected that they would go to college, many (56%) did not believe that they were engaging in challenging academic work. Fifty-four percent did not perceive their classes at Golden State as difficult. Similarly, though to a lesser degree, 15% percent of parents disagreed with the statements "the classes my child takes at this school are difficult" and "the teachers at this school make students study hard and do difficult work." Yet, parents were still apt to give teachers the benefit of the doubt in terms of how much they (the teachers) cared about students. For example, while 34% of the parents disagreed that the classes students took at the school were difficult, only 15% felt that this was because the teachers didn't care. As will be discussed later, parents' perceptions of the lack of rigor of academic curriculum and instruction were more closely related to their perceptions of the school's lack of resources.

In terms of teachers' perceptions of the rigor of academic curriculum and instruction, although their expectations for students attending college were low, the majority of teachers (68%) believed that they were able to engage students in a rigorous curriculum at least 70% of the time. Eighty percent reported that they believed they academically engaged over 50% of their students, and 88% of the teachers felt that they built strong relationships with the majority of their students. Moreover, most teachers (78%) believed that the majority of students at their school were "good students." Similar to previous findings, a lower percent (55%) of teachers perceived students as somewhat committed to school.

Sixty-one percent of parents felt that students were able to engage in a rigorous academic curriculum. Yet, corroborating student findings were teachers' responses in which 66% indicated that students were not engaged in difficult classes. Interestingly, as shown in Table 2, more teachers than students felt that students were not taking many rigorous classes. Ironically, the significant difference in teachers' perceptions of their ability to engage students in a rigorous curriculum and their perceptions of the level of difficulty of the classes at Golden State seem to indicate their beliefs that, overall, students were not getting an academically rigorous education. These results, coupled with participants' perceptions of the school's ecology in the following section, paint a grim picture of education and schooling at the middle school.



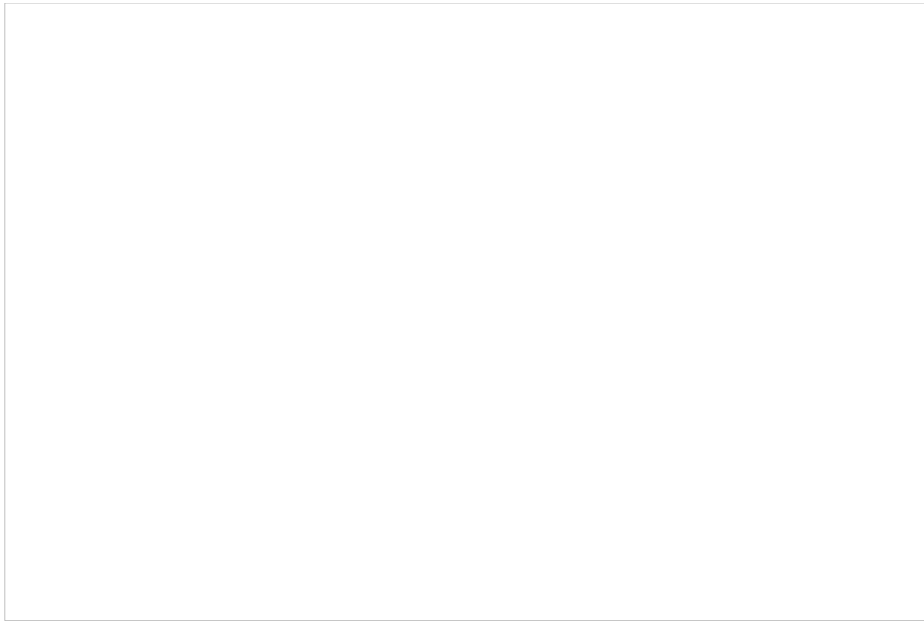
*Table 2 - Perceptions of rigorous classes*

## **School Ecology**

The school's ecology was measured by the factors related to school conditions, the learning environment measured by academic resources and other school materials, and teachers' and parents' perceptions of the administration. Students were asked about their access to computers at their school. Substantiating recent studies on the digital divide, students at this inner city middle school reported a significant lack of engagement with technology. Only 7% reported using a computer at least once a week for internet research. Even fewer (5%) reported using a computer at least once a week for writing.

In agreement with students' reports, 92% of teachers rated the availability of technology as poor or only fair. Overall, teachers rated their school conditions as being quite poor. Only 2% rated their working conditions as excellent, while 85% rated the adequacy of the physical facilities as poor or only fair. With the exception of books and other reading materials, the majority of teachers reported not having either enough or any materials for math, science or other lessons. Figure 3 shows the extent to which teachers felt they had adequate classroom resources.

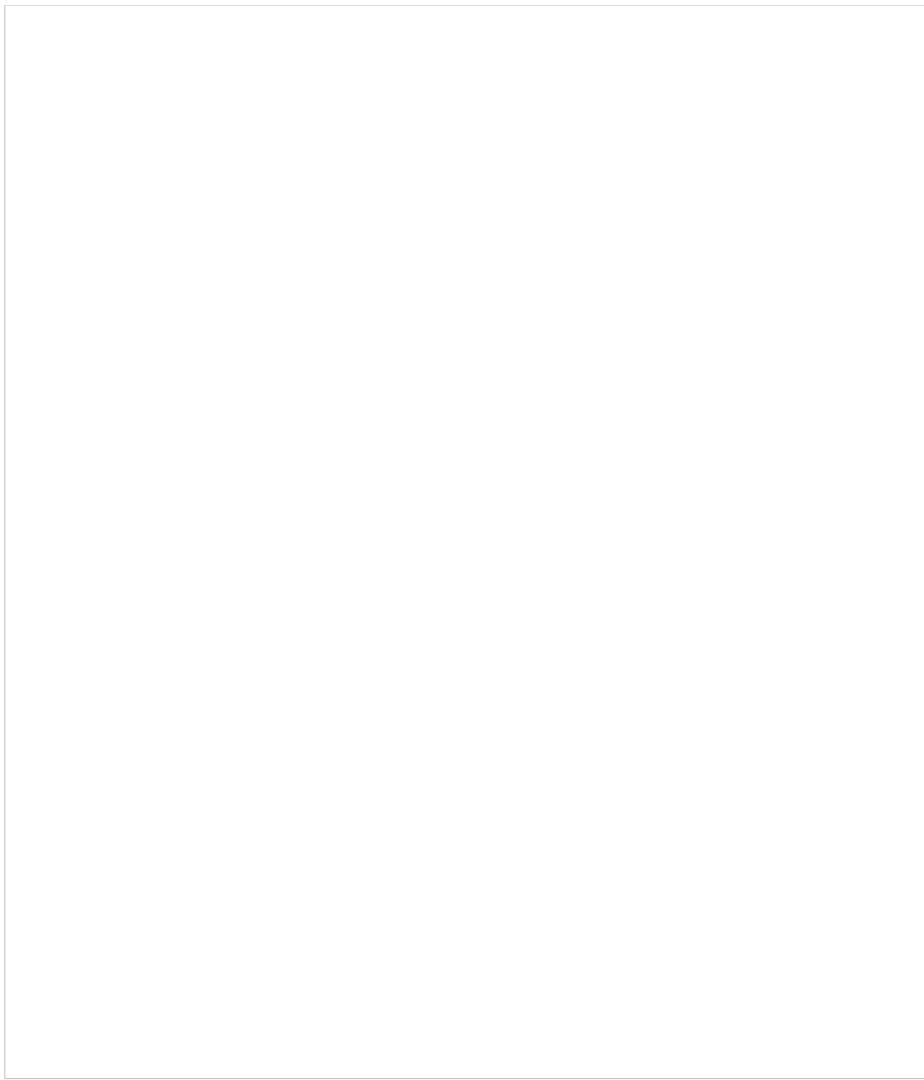
*Figure 3 - Teacher perceptions of academic resources available at GSMMS*



In terms of the administration, 57% of teachers rated the administration as average or above average. School administrators were rated high (74%) in terms of their commitment to the job and to the students (72%). However, the majority of teachers (55%) rated the administration as below average with respect to their ability to motivate teachers and make an impact at the district level (57%). Teachers also believed that their school did a poor job of involving parents at the school, with 70% rating the school as doing either only a fair or poor job. Parents, the most optimistic group of participants, rated the administration higher than the teachers did.

Interestingly, even though teachers' reported dismal conditions at Golden State, they were hopeful about the future. When asked about the conditions at the school five years from now, the majority of teachers were optimistic. Table 3 shows the percent of teachers who felt optimistic about the various conditions at their school. Teachers were mostly optimistic about their own job satisfaction. The majority believed that parental involvement, professional development, school resources such as textbooks, and the school's facilities will improve. They were least optimistic about the quality and appropriateness of required tests and the availability of technology.

*Table 3 - Teachers' perceptions of the school*



## Discussion

Golden State Magnet Middle School is an archetypal representation of an inner city public school serving a high poverty urban area in California. The families are primarily Latino immigrants, the majority of whom speak Spanish as their primary language. Only half of the parents surveyed finished high school and the majority of them earn an annual family income at or below the national poverty level. The data collected also indicate that a number of these families may be highly transient, as 23% of the students reported attending an elementary school out of the district. The dismal test scores at Golden State reflect the test scores of similar middle and junior high schools in the state.

California's fourth graders ranked 40th out of 43 states and jurisdictions in reading performance on the 1998 national report card. Even more disturbing is that the state's low-income students ranked last among students nationwide in this reading assessment (US Department of Education, 1998). Recently, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit that linked these dismal test scores to the lack of educational resources afforded to children in schools serving primarily communities of low-income and people of color (*Williams v. State of California*, 2000).

In serving low-income families with parents who have little academic achievement beyond high school, Golden State, like other such schools, offers these families in dire need of a quality education quite the opposite. To elaborate, policy advocates such as the Education Trust assert that the single greatest determinant of educational quality is teacher quality, and, that over half of the persistent educational gap between White students and students of color could be closed if students of color were not exposed to unqualified teachers. Data from research studies also indicate that student academic achievement is significantly influenced by the competency of the teacher more than any other instructional variables (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Wright, Horn & Sanders, 1997). Other studies indicate that the differences in teacher quality were significantly related to student achievement in reading and mathematics (Betts, Rueben, & Dannenberg, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2002).

At Golden State, even though nearly half of the teachers hold master's degrees, the majority of them have not been trained to teach and do not hold a credential in the subject matter that they teach. Additionally, a significant rate of turnover is evidenced in 39% of these teachers teaching at the school for three years or less. Moreover, these teachers were likely to leave the school before an incoming 6th grader became an 8th grader. Studies have shown that parents' limited education may result in a level of under-preparedness with which students come to school. However, at schools like Golden State, these students are then met by teachers underprepared to teach them effectively. This issue of teacher quality at GSMMS is mirrored in the state. In California, 42,000 teachers are working without a credential (Shields et. al., 2001). The number of schools with non-certified teachers have grown over the last five years from 20% in 1997 to 24% in 2001.

Teacher underpreparedness at Golden State is reflected in myriad ways. For example, as indicated in the earlier review of the literature, college aspirations are nurtured in students. Students flourish when the adults in their lives encourage their potential. However, while the students surveyed expressed a high interest in going to college, their aspirations wavered in the glare of teachers' low expectations for them. Learning from the data that students did not perceive their teachers as having high academic expectations for them was far less disconcerting than having these perceptions confirmed by the teachers themselves. Students also contended the low quality of the academic curriculum offered to them due in part to teachers' lack of training. These conjoined circumstances have a significant influence on the nurturing of students' college aspirations.

In short, survey results indicate that the students at Golden State perceived their school environment as both resource poor and tremendously unsupportive and unnurturing of their academic achievement and aspirations. Students knew their teachers did not expect them to succeed academically and, for a number of them, this type of environment may be internalized into a self-fulfilling prophecy of school failure, despite parental support to the contrary. In other words, students may perceive teachers as knowing more than their parents about what is necessary for them to achieve academic success. And, if their teachers project their disbelief that students cannot achieve such success, students will believe that they can't.

Teachers at Golden State perceived that only seven percent of their students would be competitive for UC admission. For this dismal outcome teachers blamed the parents, the school's environmental conditions, lack of technology and other materials, the administrators' lack of ability to motivate teachers and parents, and students' commitment to school. However, the role of teachers in nurturing students' aspirations to go to college through providing rigorous curriculum and having high expectations for students has to be considered as well. The results of the survey indicate the need for more studies that examine the impact of teachers' expectations on students' academic achievement and aspirations. More importantly, professional development is also needed to raise teachers' awareness of the potentially debilitating impact that their low expectations may have on students' academic achievement. Through professional development targeting this area of concern, teachers can learn about and become more empowered in the pivotal role they play in making students academically successful and thus more prepared for college.

Even though we argue for teachers' professional development, we believe that this professional development should focus on specific areas of concern at the school in addition to the traditionally general areas of professional development (i.e., curriculum development and so forth). For example, teachers, all of whom are college graduates, were the adults least likely to have high expectations for their students and least likely to talk to them about going to college. Additionally, teachers did not perceive parents as allies in their children's educational process. In sharp contrast, parents had very limited college experience yet maintained high aspirations for their children to attend college, and high expectations for their teachers to provide the pathways. This disconnect between those who can significantly influence students' access to college (i.e., teachers,) and those who lack college knowledge but who nonetheless nurture high college aspirations in students (i.e., parents) need to be addressed. Professional workshops should focus on developing teachers' awareness of how their low expectations of students affect their relationships with students and parents, students' behavior in their classrooms, and ultimately, their (teachers') motivation to nurture students' academic engagement and success. Teachers can also be trained to tap into the assets that parents bring with them to school.

Additionally, it has been consistently asserted that academic achievement is directly related to challenging and rigorous course work (Adelmen, 1999). Camara and Schmidt (1999) assert that "all groups of students benefit from taking more rigorous courses, even after controlling for differences in SES, aptitude, and/or prior achievement" (p. 6). Yet, the above results indicate clearly that students, parents *and* teachers agree that students were not rigorously challenged at Golden State. Each group pointed to different reasons this was the case (e.g., students and parents agree that teachers don't require challenging assignments, and teachers agree that they don't do so because of a lack of enough textbooks and other resources). Thus, the structural conditions affecting the lives of parents and students coupled with the schooling conditions of limited resources, may cultivate low expectations in teachers, many of whom are underprepared and yet are asked to increase students' academic achievement under such circumstances.

As noted earlier, the revised Elementary and Secondary Education Act calls for increased student testing. However, increasing the frequency of tests within the context of the conditions of Golden State as detailed in this paper-conditions that mitigate students' successful academic achievement-is unlikely to change the current dismal failing rate at the school (i.e., 72% of the

students below the 50th percentile in math and 75% below the 50th percentile in reading). Under the No Child Left Behind Act, schools will have to test students in science starting in 2005-2006. Yet, none of the science teachers at Golden State had a science credential and, as the teachers reported, they were also underresourced in math and science materials. Clearly, without addressing these two areas, no testing is necessary to know that academic failure in science at Golden State will prevail. In summary, related to the demands of NCLB, more testing with predictable negative outcomes, in light of the kind of educational environment at Golden State, is futile without attention paid to teachers' lack of classroom materials, technological resources and effective teacher training.

Rather than a renewed focus on changing social and cultural structures to improve students' academic achievement, the new federal bill has made states and school districts more preoccupied with testing materials than with addressing conditions that cannot be fixed overnight, and often not even as soon as five years. For example, in order to address the structural conditions that currently exist at Golden State, policies relating to the recruitment and retention of credential teachers, class size, and school finance must be brought into the conversation well before discussions of what tests are needed and the frequency with which tests have to be administered. Unfortunately, much of the current educational discourse on improving urban schools in light of the changes brought on by the No Child Left Behind Act, begin and end with testing. Testing should be the ultimate measure of academic achievement after adverse schooling conditions are remedied.

Moreover, because of the changes in the No Child Left Behind Act, a significant portion of schools' direct instruction budget must now go toward purchasing and preparing for tests. This money is directed away from improving these schools and the practices of their teaching staff to better educate students based on their (the students') needs-both academic and social-that have to be assessed in multiple ways. For our society, it seems that a focus on testing is easier than the undertaking to improve educational quality. Oakes and Lipton (2000) comment that "struggles for equity for low income children and children of color expose and challenge contradictions deeply rooted in American culture" (p. 8). They continue:

Understanding and promoting equity-focused change demands explicit attention to the cultural and political dynamics of social, economic, and racial stratification in the U.S. It requires educators to recognize schools as culturally congruent with the stratifying pressures in American society. (p. 8)

In short, the question isn't whether or not we are able to provide a quality education for all of America's children. We are able to do so. However, the question of "Will we?" remains, and the push for more testing does not provide an answer to this very important question.

Hypothetically, student failure is supposed to act as a "shame on you" to the adults commissioned to serve these students and prevent their academic failure. Yet, because of the racist society in which we live, despite systems' and adults' failures to fulfill their obligation to students, the "shame on you" often ends up being reflected back to students and their parents. In order for testing to correctly reflect those responsible for the failure, perhaps teachers, school administrators and state board of education officials should be tested on the prerequisites to a quality education and whether or not they are provided such to students.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have presented the results of survey data that examined students', parents', and teachers' perceptions of how the factors necessary for students to attain academic success (measured by their preparedness for college), were being met at their middle school. Rather than test scores, we used college preparation and attendance as the ultimate goals of effective schooling. We conclude by offering several implications based on both the literature reviewed and the results of this study. From the literature reviewed it is clear that, as a society, we already know the results of the standardized tests: Schools in high poverty, urban districts will score lower than schools in higher socioeconomic and suburban districts; White and Asian students will score higher than African American and Latino students; schools that provide a quality education for its students as measured by rigorous academic instruction, credential teachers, and sufficient resources, will have more of their students scoring higher on standardized tests. There is no need for more tests to verify the outcomes that have consistently been maintained almost from the inception of public schooling in America. Moreover, the increase in test taking will mean that more of the already limited school budgets allocated to underresourced schools serving high poverty areas of cities will have to be used to purchase and disseminate tests and other requisite materials related to frequent testing.

Related to the study's findings, all members of this school community who were surveyed were aware that the social and ecological contexts of teaching and learning at their school were in dire need of improvements. Indicators of this awareness were seen in their responses that confirmed low expectations for students to achieve academically, limited or no access to computers for students, lack of advanced classes, rigorous curriculum and instruction, and limited educational materials for teachers and students.

As a result of our findings outlined above, we assert that more studies need to be done regarding teachers' and administrators' expectations about the students they serve. Additionally, and more importantly, we assert a great need for studies which analyze the factors that keep this population of students and families hopeful in light of the circumstances under which education takes place at this middle school. Questions such as, what makes parents bring their children to school every day knowing that the best teaching and learning are not occurring at the school? What keeps the hopes for a college education alive in the hearts of parents and students of these communities? How do students maintain the will to learn and teachers maintain the will to teach in such under-resourced and often frustrating environments? None of these answers can be measured through standardized testing. However, we posit that *knowing* answers to these questions and developing intervention strategies based on these answers can be the start of sustainable student success in schools where access to a quality education has been consistently in question.

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