A Critical Investigation of Florida's NCLB Waiver and School Leader Sensemaking

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A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF FLORIDA’S NCLB WAIVER AND SCHOOL LEADER SENSEMAKING

By

Stacey Mercedes Kesten

A DISSERTATION

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A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF FLORIDA’S NCLB WAIVER AND SCHOOL LEADER SENSEMAKING

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This study used a combination of descriptive statistics and qualitative methods to investigate Florida’s NCLB waiver with respect to its school accountability grading system as it was applied to elementary, middle, and K-8 schools in a large, urban school district. Using publicly accessible school accountability data for the 2013-2014 academic year, the quantitative component of this study examined the extent to which Florida’s school grading system hides or highlights reading performance disparities across student subgroups. Quantitative results indicate that the exclusion of disaggregated data in accountability rating determinations functions to systematically mask critical disparities in reading proficiency between student subgroups, even at the highest rated schools. As a result, performance inequities are largely rendered invisible making it possible for highly graded schools to receive accountability rewards and accolades despite substantial performance disparities for Black/African American students and students with disabilities.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 school leaders from five moderate to highly graded schools in order to better understand school leader sensemaking with respect to the NCLB waiver and school grades. Several themes emerged related to the ways in
which school leaders interpret, communicate, and respond to school accountability grades, student performance, and state policy more generally. Overall, findings from this study paint a picture of school leaders as ambivalent policy actors. Depending on context, willingness, and individual perceptions, leaders were at times limited and in other circumstances more liberated in their capacity for recognizing and counteracting less than equitable policies and systems. Results from this study have implications for policy design, leadership practice, and school leadership preparation.
DEDICATION

Dear Noah,

I’ll never stop fighting to make sure you are afforded every opportunity to reach your fullest potential in school and beyond. I love you more than I ever imagined I was capable of loving. Always remember, “You’re braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.” –Winnie-the-Pooh

This work is also dedicated to the countless school professionals that truly see infinite potential in all of their students, regardless of their differences. Keep fighting the good fight!
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Schools are complex, dynamic spaces with a multitude of social, political, economic, and historical forces interacting to produce a constellation of experiences that propel the educational and life trajectories of young people in America. Policy and school leadership play highly important roles in this educational process. With the advent of accountability reform, what happens in and across schools has become increasingly influenced by the interplay of state and federal policy. With an emphasis on competition, standardization, high-stakes testing, school reconstitutions, and the expansion of school choice ideology and policy, the era of educational accountability has redefined both the administration and experience of public schooling in the United States.

This era of reform has had particularly strong implications for school leaders, ultimately altering their roles and responsibilities (Gawlik, 2015). Positioned at the center of accountability reform, school leaders (and teachers) are now explicitly tasked with ensuring that policy goals are met. Despite the importance of their role in the policy process, there is a dearth of research on the ways in which school leaders interpret, communicate, and respond to changes in state and federal accountability policy. Therefore, investigating the ways in which school accountability policy impacts students and how school leaders make sense of these systems is paramount in our quest for educational equity and well-being.

The 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) marks a significant event in the history of education policy in America. Known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), this new law represents a substantial departure from No Child Left Behind (NCLB), swinging the pendulum back towards
state control over school accountability. Thanks to the ESEA Flexibility initiative introduced in 2011 under which states were granted waivers from a number of NCLB requirements in exchange for state-developed accountability plans, researchers, advocates, and critics have been afforded a unique opportunity not only to glimpse into the future by observing how states behaved as they transitioned away from NCLB during the waiver years, but also to investigate the consequences of specific policy decisions included in their waiver proposals.

As researchers, it behooves us to capitalize on this opportunity to investigate pre-ESSA state-level decision-making and the ways in which school leaders make sense of associated policy changes and their outcomes. Guided by a critical policy study framework (Edmondson, 2004), the present study used a combination of school accountability data and in-depth interviews with school leaders to investigate Florida’s NCLB waiver with respect to its school accountability grading system as applied to elementary, middle, and K-8 schools in Miami-Dade County.

**Background**

**NCLB and its waivers.** In 2011, after more than a decade of stringent federal oversight under the No Child Left Behind Act, states were given the opportunity to take back substantial control over their school accountability systems through the ESEA Flexibility initiative, also known as the NCLB waiver program. In exchange for “rigorous and comprehensive State-developed plans designed to improve educational outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve the quality of instruction” (U.S. Department of Education [ED], 2015), states would be granted flexibility for ten of the most significant, and controversial, requirements of
NCLB, including the requirement that all students reach 100% proficiency in reading and math by 2014. During the initiative, 43 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico were approved for ESEA flexibility (ED, 2015). As a leader in school accountability reform, Florida was one of 11 states that comprised the first round of NCLB waiver application submissions (Florida Department of Education [FLDOE], 2015). In February 2012, the U.S. Department of Education approved Florida’s request. Since the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year, Florida’s public schools have been governed by the policies, provisions, and programs mandated by its NCLB waiver.

In many respects, Florida’s NCLB waiver, like those of several other states, represents a substantial shift away from the fundamental aspects of NCLB as law (Kober & Riddle, 2012), and arguably in spirit as well (Ushomirsky, Williams, & Hall, 2014). Despite all of the criticism that it has faced, NCLB was, and continues to be, a highly significant piece of federal legislation. In its design, the Act fundamentally transformed not only the role of the federal government in education but also the framing of equity issues as real problems deserving real solutions (NCLB, 2001). Although formal equity initiatives in education can be traced back to the 1960’s (Jennings, 2012), NCLB was the first piece of federal legislation to explicitly address not only the significant gaps in educational performance between student groups, but also the “soft bigotry of low expectations” (NCLB, 2001).

The No Child Left Behind Act was also significant because it pushed the focus of education policy beyond the traditional socio-economic framing, recognizing the seriousness of persistent disparities in academic performance for other traditionally overlooked groups (i.e., disparities between racial/ethnic minorities and non-minority
students, students with disabilities and their typical peers, and language minority vs. majority students) (NCLB, 2001). Under NCLB, four categories of student groups were created carrying equal weight for accountability purposes: racial minorities, students with disabilities, English-language learners, and children from low-income families. This broadening of focus was translated into policy through the mandated tracking and reporting of disaggregated student performance data. As its teeth, NCLB required the inclusion of disaggregated performance data in all accountability mechanisms (NCLB, 2001). As such, to be considered successful, schools, districts, and states were required to reach certain academic performance goals for each student subgroup, in addition to students in aggregate. Failure to meet these goals for any individual subgroup would trigger a set of accountability consequences. With these policies, NCLB put equity squarely on the table by insisting that regardless of race, class, disability, or language, no child be left behind. This new and explicit focus has arguably been the one thing that civil rights advocates and even the strongest critics of NCLB agree the law did right (Ushomirsky, Williams, & Hall, 2014).

Despite its focus on equity, criticisms of the law were plentiful, particularly with respect to its theory of change. Ravitch (2010) argues that as a policy package, NCLB solidified the values and mechanisms of a market-based accountability framework for education reform. This federal shift brought with it a number of controversial policies and practices including an unprecedented focus on curriculum standards, high-stakes testing, competition, quantification, parental choice, and a system of rewards and sanctions for schools, districts, and states (Edmondson, 2004).
Accompanying this framework was a collection of devices used to amplify transparency throughout the system (Koyama & Kania, 2014). For example, school accountability data were required to be made publicly available so that educational stakeholders (i.e., parents, community members, business leaders, and investors) were able to make informed decisions about their investments in certain schools based on measurable indicators of success (i.e., school accountability ratings). Politicians and education officials believed that this transparency was an essential component for school improvement (Koyama & Kania, 2014). Taken together, these policies and mechanisms have been understood as “cornerstones of neoliberal accountability” (Koyama & Kania, p. 143), and are believed by proponents of NCLB to have been necessary and required catalysts for change.

Although states were given autonomy to design their own standardized assessments, set their own standards and cut-off scores for proficiency on those assessments, and develop their own annual measurable target trajectories, the end goal for each school, district, and state across the nation was the same: reach 100% proficiency in math and reading by 2014 (Porter, Linn, & Trimble, 2005). As the measurement centerpiece of NCLB accountability, adequate yearly progress (AYP) was the tool through which schools were judged as either successful or failing. The attainment of AYP was meant to ensure that schools and districts were sufficiently en route to achieving the ultimate goal of NCLB (Porter, Linn, & Trimble, 2005). If a school failed to meet AYP for their students in the aggregate, or for any individual subgroup, the school would be categorised as failing. In this respect, NCLB made it clear that schools needed to perform well for all of their students, not just for some.
It is important to acknowledge that ESEA represents only one of several overlapping federal laws that impact the administration of education in the United States. Of particular relevance to this research is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal law ensuring that all students with disabilities are provided a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (IDEA, 2004). Aligned with IDEA’s 1997 amendments requiring that all states include students with disabilities in their assessments and report their participation and performance, NCLB fully incorporated students with disabilities into all aspects of NCLB accountability as they were designated a distinct subgroup. For the first time, a school’s success would be determined at least in part by how well they served their students with disabilities.

**School accountability in Florida.** Since the enactment of NCLB in 2002, Florida had been functioning under two distinct accountability systems: a state-designed system and the federal system (Linn, 2005). For many states, this predicament resulted in mixed messages about school performance and success (Linn, 2005). A number of factors including conflicting demands and differences in accountability requirements and determinations between NCLB and state systems contributed to confusion related to mixed messages. Florida is a case in point. In 1999, then governor Jeb Bush signed into law *Florida’s A+ Plan for Education*, a test-based school accountability system with a strong parental choice component (FLDOE, 2015). The main objective of Florida’s system was to hold schools and students accountable for academic achievement. The A+ Plan was centered around the administration of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), a state-wide standardized test of achievement in reading and mathematics. As a school accountability mechanism, performance on the FCAT was used to determine
a school’s grade (A through F) wherein clear positive and negative consequences would be triggered depending on the grade achieved by the school (West & Peterson, 2006). The A+ Plan also held students accountable, requiring the passage of an examination prior to graduation and expecting students in third grade to reach a certain level of proficiency before being promoted to fourth grade (West & Peterson, 2006).

Although in many ways Florida’s system provided the blueprint for NCLB, signs of significant incompatibilities surfaced with respect to their respective methods and criteria for determining school success. For example, shortly after NCLB data became publicly available in Florida, news reports revealed that while 94% of Florida’s schools met state standards, a dismal 13% met the federal ones (Neal & Poole, 2004). In an empirical investigation of Florida’s A+ Plan, Linn (2005) demonstrated that if one only looks at the historical picture painted by Florida’s school accountability system, one might conclude that schools are performing extraordinarily well. For example, between 1999 and 2005, the percentage of schools earning high accountability ratings (i.e., A and B) sharply increased while the number of schools receiving D’s and F’s significantly declined. However, within that same period of time, with 82% of their schools unable to achieve AYP, Florida led the nation as the state with the largest percentage of schools failing to meet NCLB standards for progress. Similar patterns of curious discrepancies between state accountability data and NCLB results surfaced across the nation. For example, Ford and Thacker (2005) found that while only 74% of schools in Kentucky made AYP in 2004, 95.6% of schools met state performance goals. Other instances illustrating serious inconsistencies have been investigated and described in the education policy literature (Ford & Thacker, 2005; Linn, 2005; Porter, Linn, & Trimble, 2005).
Understanding what contributes to these discrepancies and the implications they have for the supposed beneficiaries of equity-oriented policies is critical. Of particular relevance to this study is the finding by Linn (2005) that among other factors, the requirement of meeting targets for separate student subgroups within a school as opposed to meeting the performance target for students in aggregate is a significant contributor to why vastly different pictures of the same school, district, or state can be painted using two different accountability systems.

**Florida’s ESEA flexibility waiver.** According to Florida’s Department of Education (FLDOE), the state’s waiver policy package represents an extension of its established accountability system (FLDOE, 2012). Since its passage in 1999, the A+ Plan has relied exclusively on aggregate student performance data for making accountability determinations. As evidenced by the “success” discrepancies noted above, critical questions arise about the extent to which Florida’s waiver functioned to highlight or hide subgroup performance inequities in public schools across the state.

Although states under waivers continue to be required by federal law to set performance targets and report subgroup data, they are not required to include them in accountability decisions (Riddle, 2012a). As indicated in their flexibility request, Florida has taken the Flexibility initiative as an opportunity to exclude individual subgroup performance data in major school accountability determinations, most importantly, the determination of school accountability grades. In a related policy move, Florida also decided to set differentiated performance targets in reading and math for each individual subgroup, even though schools and districts will not be required to achieve them. These performance targets set the lowest expectations for Black students and students with
disabilities, two groups that are historically underperforming and underserved. This move has been so disturbing to some, that a formal civil rights complaint was filed by a local group to the federal Department of Justice (SPLC, 2013). Since the approval of Florida’s waiver, a number of education advocacy and civil rights organizations across the nation have gone on record denouncing these policy decisions (i.e., The Education Trust, Southern Poverty Law Center, NAACP).

**Accountability and School Leadership**

The overarching goal of accountability reform has been to close the *achievement gap* and achieve educational equity. As such, school leaders play a particularly important role in the education of historically underperforming and underserved groups: students from low-income families, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and students with disabilities. After nearly 20 years of increasing accountability reform, the roles, responsibilities, and function of school leaders has most certainly evolved.

**School leaders as policy actors.** By virtue of the policy process, the story of Florida’s NCLB waiver plays out in the day-to-day life of schools across the state. It unfolds in classrooms, at faculty meetings, and in principals’ offices. As schools strive to demonstrate their effectiveness by reaching or maintaining high accountability grades, school leaders become active policy actors. With the bureaucratization of districts resulting from accountability reform, school leaders have been required to take on the role of *middle-managers* (Rousmaniere, 2013), responsible for “enforcing district, state, and federal policies while simultaneously supporting the instructional practices of teachers” (Cosner et al., 2014, p. 4). As a result, now more than ever leaders have the responsibility of acquiring policy information, making sense of it, communicating their
interpretations to the school community, and guiding their school’s response to it. This
process is known as the cognitive aspects of school leadership (Coburn, 2005; Evans,
2007; Spillane et al., 2002).

Understanding and exploring the cognitive aspects of school leadership is an
important research endeavour. For one, decades of research on school leadership
demonstrate consistent findings that principals play a critical role in the success or failure
of school reform (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002;
Fullan, 1991; Muncey & McQuillan, 1996). Further, as policy narrators, school leaders
interpret and translate policies for their school (Sullivan & Morrison, 2014), playing a
key role in shaping the ways in which teachers and other staff make sense of and enact
policies (Coburn, 2005). As educational policy research has expanded beyond an
examination of implementation, the characterization of the relationship between school
leaders and policy has been complicated. Traditionally, policy has been conceptualized
as the causal influencer in the relationship, whereby policy influences leader and teacher
practices. However, a more critical body of literature suggests a different type of
relationship wherein leaders act as transformers of policy (Weatherley & Lipskey, 1977;
Cohen & Ball, 1990; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Based on pre-existing understandings and
social contexts both within and outside their schools, leaders interpret and adapt policy in
various ways (Spillane et al., 2002). The relationships and processes related to the
cognitive aspects of educational leadership presented above have been empirically
investigated using sensemaking as a theoretical framework (Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007;
Spillane et al., 2002). The basic premise of sensemaking is that “people act on the basis
of meaning that they attribute to situations, where action emerges from social interaction and is developed and modified through an interpretive process” (Sammon, 2008, p. 916).

**School leadership and educational equity.** In addition to making sense of the accountability policy landscape, school leaders must respond to it while taking into account the various complexities that characterize their environments. School leaders hold a unique vantage point. They witness and experience the vast complexity of the educational environment, including a plethora of external forces such as changing demographics, increased diversity, and poverty, that impact teaching and learning. Despite these challenges, leaders are tasked with supporting and ensuring student learning. Towards that end, a recent report by the Wallace Foundation (2011) identified five key functions of principal leadership: i) shaping a vision for academic success for all students, ii) creating a climate hospitable to education, iii) cultivating leadership in others, iv) improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost, and v) managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement (p. 4). The extent to which school leaders embody these principles has an impact on their ability to promote equitable opportunities for students in their schools.

In their exploration of what equity looks like in leadership practice, Rigby and Tredway (2015) make the case for *equity allies*, principals that intentionally and explicitly ground “their leadership actions in an equity framework to make good on a core value: moving toward a just and democratic society in which all students, regardless of race or family income, are given equitable opportunities for educational success.”

School leaders acting as equity allies have the potential to be effective agents of change. However, few studies investigate the willingness and/or capacity of leaders to
act as equity allies in the face of potentially inequitable policies. Given the current policy context in which states have reclaimed substantial autonomy in accountability decision making, understanding the ways in which school leaders have the capacity to act as mediators of policy decisions is important to further understanding the implications of policy decisions on subgroups of students who, although being the named beneficiaries of policy, often remain the most ill-served.

The Current Study

Guided by a critical policy study framework (Edmondson, 2004), this study uses a combination of school accountability data and in-depth interviews with school leaders to investigate specific aspects of Florida’s NCLB waiver related to school accountability grades as they are applied to elementary, middle, and K-8 schools in Miami-Dade County.

Critical policy study as guiding framework. Edmondson (2004) explains that the overarching objective of a critical policy study is to answer the question, “who benefits and towards what end?” (p. 18). A critical orientation to educational policy study puts values and power relations at the forefront, obliging the researcher to incorporate these aspects into analysis and interpretation, and account for them in a critical discussion of findings (Edmondson, 2004). In the spirit of critical policy study, the present study contributes to a growing body of policy literature oriented towards investigating the consequences of policy with respect to whom the policy benefits and who is left out.

Problem statement. Despite the significance of the ESEA Flexibility initiative, few studies have empirically investigated the consequences of state-level policy decisions
as reflected in their NCLB waivers. With its waiver, Florida took full advantage of the opportunity to once again function under a single accountability system, freeing itself of the most stringent NCLB requirements. To date, little is known about what impact Florida’s transition away from specific NCLB requirements has had on historically underperforming and underserved students. Specifically, it remains unclear what impact the exclusion of disaggregated data in school accountability determinations has had on schools. Despite the critical role of school leadership in the policy process, there is a dearth of literature examining how school leaders make sense of the NCLB waiver and their school’s grade.

**Purpose.** The purpose of this study was twofold: i) to examine the extent to which Florida’s school accountability system highlights or hides subgroup disparities in reading performance in the state’s largest county, Miami-Dade, and ii) to explore how school leaders at moderate to highly graded elementary, middle, and K-8 schools make sense of the NCLB waiver, its grading policies, and student subgroup performance at their school.

This study focused on the application of Florida’s school accountability grading system to elementary, middle, and K-8 schools only. In Florida, school grades for elementary, middle, and K-8 schools are largely determined by FCAT data. In contrast, high school grade determinations are based on multiple indicators including standardized test performance, graduation rates, participation in accelerated coursework, and performance on accelerated coursework (Florida’s ESEA Waiver, 2012). Although disparities in academic performance exist across multiple content areas, this study focuses on reading disparities only. Results from the 2015 National Assessment of
Educational Progress (NAEP) show that across the nation, only 36% of fourth grade and 34% of eight grade students are reading at or above proficiency (NAEP, 2015).

This study also pays particular attention to the impact of Florida’s school accountability system on moderate to high performing schools (A-C grades). Although educational equity research has traditionally focused on underperforming schools, typically in high poverty communities, a recent study by Ushomirsky, Williams, and Hall (2014) demonstrates that although students from historically underperforming groups are overrepresented in the lowest performing schools, in most states, most of these students actually attend higher rated schools. For example, in Florida nearly 70% of all Black/African American students attend A-C graded schools, while only 11% attend F schools. As Ushomirsky and colleagues argue in their paper, “we cannot close the achievement gaps on the backs of low-performing schools alone” (Ushomirsky, Williams, & Hall, 2014, p. 4).

**Research questions.** This study addressed two complementary sets of research questions based on the following meta-questions:

1) Has Florida’s NCLB waiver highlighting or hiding subgroup inequity in Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS)?

   RQ1: Among M-DCPS elementary, middle, and K-8 schools earning each accountability letter grade, how did the reading performance of key subgroups of students compare to the reading performance of all students combined?
RQ2. What percentage of “A” schools are meeting annual reading performance targets for all students? What percentage are meeting annual reading performance targets for key subgroups?

RQ3. What is the magnitude of reading performance disparities between key subgroups at “A” schools?

2) How are school leaders at moderate to highly graded schools making sense of Florida’s transition away from NCLB requirements?

RQ4: How do school leaders interpret the NCLB waiver, its policies for determining school grades, and their own school’s grade? How do they communicate these interpretations to members of their school community?

RQ5: How have school leaders responded to the NCLB waiver, its accompanying policies, and their own school’s grade?

RQ6: How do school leaders make sense of subgroup performance at their school?

**Significance.** The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act represents yet another significant shift in power between states and the federal government. As we are learning more about this new federal law, it is becoming clear that ESSA does in fact represent a swing in the pendulum back towards state autonomy in the administration of education and a substantial rolling back of the federal role in public education. As the inner workings of the new law are being grappled with and as states, districts, and schools begin yet another process of transition, this research can be used to inform the policymaking process and to better understand the capacity of school leaders for disrupting and challenging the status quo.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

*Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust.*  

- John Rawls (1971)

In her 2006 presidential address at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings attempted to push our collective understanding of educational inequity and research into a new, critical era. For some, she persuasively argued that our “all-out” focus on the achievement gap has been misplaced at best, disastrous at worst. The traditional framing of the persistent academic disparities between minoritized students and their non-minority peers has perpetuated an entirely false and unfair notion that minoritized students are in some or many ways, defective and lacking. This framing places pathology within the individual or group, thereby ignoring the structural and systemic factors that may contribute. Ironically, in a sociopolitical era consumed with audits and accountability, this acritical discourse has in effect, absolved institutions and social structures of any responsibility. As an alternative, Ladson-Billings offered what she has termed, the “education debt” – a critical examination of the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components that, taken together, can provide a plausible, historically accurate, and comprehensive understanding of sustained inequities. Such an understanding would facilitate a shift in thinking and discourse allowing for the development and implementation of long-term remedies addressing underlying problems and root causes as opposed to near-sighted solutions. Indeed, a revolutionary thesis.
Nearly a decade has passed since this landmark address and although this nation has seen some remarkable feats, like the election and re-election of its first Black president, significant disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes remain, and they continue to fall largely along racial and economic lines. In fact, one must look no further than social media or a local news station to be reminded that issues of racial equity extend well beyond the educational context. In recent months, a seemingly never-ending string of tragic, unprosecuted, and often unindicted deaths of black and brown men, women, and children have spurred a national #BlackLivesMatter movement, to sadly remind society that black lives, indeed matter. The strength and power of this movement is evidenced by its successful crossover into multiple social and political arenas, including education.

As a testament to the seriousness of this movement, the Schott Foundation for Public Education used the Black Lives Matter slogan as the title and centerpiece of their 2015 report on the state of public education for black boys (Schott Foundation, 2015). The authors explained, “since Black lives continue to matter to us, this edition…is intended to again alert the nation to the quieter danger that does not instantly end young lives, but creates an all but insurmountable chasm of denied opportunities that consigns them to limited chances to succeed in life” (p. 6). The report goes on to argue that the “failure to close the opportunity gap, whether at the national, state or local level, not only deprives all of us, our communities and our nation of the talents and potential contributions that these young people have proven they can make and would likely replicate, but also constitutes a grave injustice” (p. 6).
Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an exhaustive accounting of the many disparities between minoritized students and their non-minority peers, I believe it is necessary to highlight those that appear to be most chronic and most deleterious over time. When all is said and done, these longitudinal trends are our best measure of whether or not federal, state, and local policy, programs, and practices are working to increase equity in education. According to the most recent reports, of all racial/ethnic and gender groups, the opportunity gap continues to be greatest for black males (Schott Foundation, 2015). Although there have been slight increases in the rate at which this group has been able to secure regular high school diplomas within four years, more nuanced analyses reveal that the gap between graduation outcomes continues to widen between black and white males (Schott Foundation, 2015). Nationally, disparity in graduation rates continue to be most pronounced between black males and their white counterparts, at 59% and 80% respectively, however, the gap between Latino and black males is growing. While the Latino/white graduation gap decreased from 20 percentage points in 2009-2010 to 15 percentage points in 2012-2013, the black/white gap increased two percentage points in that same timespan. Currently, black males lag 6% behind Latino males (Schott Foundation, 2015). Further, even when black males are successful in reaching the 12th grade, data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that more than half (51.3%) lack basic reading skills compared to just 24.3% of White males (NCES, 2010).

A growing body of literature addressing what is commonly referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline presents convincing evidence that black students are more likely than other groups to be systematically “pushed out and locked out of opportunities
for academic achievement” (Schott Foundation, 2015, p. 7). One of the most dramatic examples illustrating this process is the chronic over-identification/mis-identification of culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly Black males (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999), within the high-incidence disability categories (Cordington & Fairchild, 2012; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Once identified, black students tend to be placed in more restricted learning environments than their non-Black peers (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006), have less access to a pedagogy that challenges their critical thinking and analytical skills (Cordington & Fairchild, 2012; Harry & Klingner, 2006), and are often met with lowered academic expectations (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Unsurprisingly, data indicate that black students are underrepresented in programs for the Gifted and Talented and are less likely to have access to, enroll, and succeed in advanced placement courses (Schott Foundation, 2015).

Equally concerning trends revealed in studies examining exclusionary discipline policies and practices (i.e., suspension and expulsion rates) have highlighted concern for what is commonly referred to as the “discipline gap” (Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015). According to their 2015 report, the Center for Civil Rights Remedies (CCRR) estimated that in a single school year, nearly 18 million days of instruction was lost to students as a result of exclusionary discipline. Again, black students and students with disabilities are significantly more likely to be negatively impacted by these policies and practices. For example, in 2011, black students were suspended at a rate of 16% compared to that of only 5% for white students. The disciplinary gap between black and Latino students was only slightly smaller than the black-white disparity, with a suspension rate of only 7% for Latinos. These trends are even more pronounced when
examining exclusionary practices at the high school level. Although black girls tend to
outperform their male counterparts on various academic indicators, they suffer
significantly more in the realm of school discipline. Whereas black males were found to
be three times more likely than their white peers to be suspended, black girls are
suspended at six times the rate as their white counterparts (African American Policy
Forum (AAPF), 2015).

Taken together, the continuation of these disparities coupled with the rapidly
changing demographics in the United States suggests a bleak future at best, not only for
those directly impacted, but non-minority communities that have yet to realize the cost of
such a vast amount of lost potential. More than sixty years has passed since the Supreme
Court’s landmark decision in Brown v. Board of Education, a decision catapulting the
notion that equal access to education in the United States should be a civil right. Sadly,
the data presented above support the fact that in 2015, racial inequity in education
remains to be a significant civil rights issue (Cordington & Fairchild, 2012).

The following review of literature is organized around three interrelated sections.
The first section is narrative in nature, and provides a brief but necessary description of
key policy events and significant transitions in American education reform. Weaving this
section together is a focus on how policy, through various reform movements, has been
used (at least in theory) as a mechanism to address equity issues in education. Section
two focuses exclusively on the advent of the school accountability reform movement.
This section also provides an overview of the NCLB waiver initiative and discusses the
limited empirical research on waiver design and impact. The third and final section of
this review examines literature addressing the intersection of accountability policy and
school leadership. Specifically, this section discusses sensemaking as viable theoretical framework for investigating this intersection and the qualitative scholarship exploring the ways in which school leaders make sense of their school and policy environments.

**Addressing Equity via Education Reform**

Although it remains elusive, the pursuit of educational equity has arguably dominated both rhetoric and policy reform initiatives in the United States for decades (Domaleski & Perie, 2012). Equity is based on the principles of justice and fairness and can be thought of as the *process* that leads to an outcome of equality. Educational inequities occur when “biased or unfair policies, programs, practices, or situations contribute to lack of equality in educational performance, results, or outcomes” (Abbott, 2014). Attempts to address issues of educational inequity have historically been made through state and federal education reforms and their accompanying policy packages. Several waves of federal law, by way of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) have, at least in spirit, placed equity at the center of discussion. This focus is arguably most prominent in the 2001 reauthorization of ESEA known as No Child Left Behind. As the name suggests, NCLB was explicit in its spirit and writing that significant disparities exist between different groups of students and these gaps would no longer be tolerated. As discussed in chapter 1, equity-oriented educators, advocates, and researchers fear a backsliding of focus on equity in the post-NCLB era. The remainder of this section will focus on three major movements that have characterized education reform over the last half-century: equity-based reform, school choice, and standards-based accountability.
**Equity-based reform.** The 1960’s and 1970’s represented a period of momentous change in America. Social and political transformations were catalyzed by Civil Rights legislation, extending in very significant ways to the realm of public education. As part of the Johnson administration’s war on poverty, a new role for the federal government in public education was introduced via the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) (Edmondson, 2004; Jennings, 2012). In addition to ushering in a more involved federal role, this legislation remains highly significant as it also represented the first explicit attempt by the federal government to equalize all children’s opportunities through education (Edmondson, 2004). To address issues of equity, ESEA instituted the use of categorical aid programs to “provide extra educational services for specific groups of students at risk for educational problems” (Jennings, 2012, p. 3). As its flagship program, Title I was and continues to be a primary mechanism used to improve education for children of low-income families and other ill-served groups. The main goal of Title I has been to “help close the educational achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers by providing funding for supplementary educational services in reading and mathematics to low-achieving students in low-income elementary and secondary schools” (van der Klaauw, 2007, p. 733). In order to be eligible for Title I funding, a school must have a poverty rate above the average poverty rate for the district within which it is located (van der Klaauw, 2007).

The 1960’s and 1970’s represented an equally transformative time for individuals with disabilities. Building from the momentum of the Civil Rights movement, advocates and activists were able to successfully push for legislative action to address
discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Together, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) catalyzed significant changes in many sectors, including public education (Jennings, 2012). Reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), this federal law mandates the provision of a free and appropriate public education for all children with disabilities. This law is particularly notable because it blended civil rights protections with categorical federal aid and incorporated procedural rights that enable parents to formally sue schools and districts if they did not provide services mandated by law (Jennings, 2012).

As significant as equity-based reform continues to be, the policy strategies birthed from this movement have fallen short of its original promise. One need look no further than Jonathan Kozol’s (1991) *Savage Inequalities* for a detailed accounting of continued inequalities with respect to the educational experiences, resources, and funding afforded to low-income children and children of colour. In addition to qualitative depictions of sustained inequities, quantitative investigations of its effectiveness have also consistently shown that Title I, in all of its iterations, has largely failed to meet its original goal of closing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers (Borman & D’Agostino, 1996; Mullin & Summers, 1983; van der Klaauw, 2007). In his evaluation of Title I effectiveness between 1992-2001 in New York City Public Schools, van der Klaauw (2007) found that the program was largely ineffectual in raising student performance. In addition to reading and math scores and gains, van der Klaauw considered a number of other outcome measures including grade retention, suspensions, school attendance, and student mobility rates thereby examining a broader operationalization of student performance. The author linked the absence of
improvements to the finding that “Title I receipt actually does not translate into a statistically significant increase in per-pupil expenditures” (p. 732). These results were consistent with findings of studies investigating educators’ perceptions of Title I funded remedial programs as educationally ineffective (van der Klaauw, 2007).

To help make further sense of why equity-based reforms have fallen short, Jennings (2012) identified two major limitations associated with the movement. He argues that their impact was largely constrained “because they become separate, add-on services funded with limited federal aid and placed on top of inequitably distributed state and local funding” (p. 3). With respect to Title I, van der Klaauw (2007) also explains that although it is the largest federal program for elementary and secondary education, it actually constitutes a small share of total federal spending and total school expenditures. In the end, as Jennings noted, “by their very nature, categorical funding and individual guarantees of civil rights were not designed to generally improve the broader educational system” (p. 3).

**School choice.** The second significant wave of education reform is characterized by school choice, a movement that has gained substantial momentum and garnered an equal share of criticism and controversy over the past two decades (Jennings, 2012; Ravitch, 2010). As policy, school choice successfully introduced competition in education and turned public education into a marketplace where parents (consumers) are theoretically able to choose the best school for their child to attend (Ehlers, Hafalir, Yenmez, & Yildirim, 2014). With competition between schools, proponents of school choice believe that ineffective schools would eventually be weeded out by market forces. In theory, this process would address equity by leaving only the schools consumers
deemed to be effective (Jennings, 2012). In addition, advocates of school choice emphasize the importance of parental rights, and argue that school choice policies address equity in education by providing all parents, regardless of background, with freedom and independence to make the appropriate decisions for their children.

Currently, several mechanisms facilitate the delivery of school choice. These include publicly funded vouchers for private schools, controlled choice programs, public school choice, and charters (Ehlers et al., 2014; Jennings, 2012; Ravitch, 2010). School choice, in its various forms, has played a significant role in both state and federal school accountability systems. Florida, for example, offered tuition vouchers to students at failing schools as one of its primary accountability mechanisms in its A+ Plan for Education (Greene, 2001). Following suit, No Child Left Behind incorporated a similar school choice provision to incentivize low-performing schools to improve their academic performance by allowing students in identified failing schools to transfer to higher-performing schools outside of their neighborhood. Although some local evaluations of school choice programs have demonstrated slight increases in standardized test scores in low-performing schools (Greene, 2001), studies investigating the long-term impact of markets in education do not support the hypothesis that school choice results in increased equity, improvements in student achievement, or the closure of performance gaps (Jennings, 2012). In fact, critically-oriented scholars, like O.R. James (2014) argue that “opt-out education”, as a movement, has produced a newly erected system of racial subordination where marginalized students and their families are blamed for poor “choice” when improvements in educational performance are not realized. Opponents of school choice have also argued that these programs contribute to the re-segregation of
schools along both racial and socioeconomic lines (Betts, Rice, Zau, Tang, & Koedel, 2006; Ravitch, 2010).

**Standards-based reform and school accountability.** Emanating from the concerns raised in *A Nation at Risk* (1983), an open letter to the American people outlining the imperative for educational reform, the standards-based reform movement moved education policy into the realm of identifying and measuring what all students should know and be able to do (Jennings, 2012). This era gave rise to the use of standardization in curriculum and testing and eventually evolved into the development of accountability systems based on high-stakes testing.

Enacted in 2002, *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* ushered in a new era of educational reform, placing standards-based school accountability at the center of education policy. School accountability has been defined as “the process of evaluating school performance on the basis of student performance measures” (Figlio & Loeb, 2011, p. 383). Prominent features of NCLB-style accountability include a focus on minimum competency standardized testing, the assignment of rewards and sanctions based on student performance, transparency of school data, and the choice to leave schools that have been identified as failing (Edmondson, 2004). As policy, NCLB attempted to address issues of inequity in education by demanding that schools, districts, and states shine a light on underperforming student groups and be held accountable for closing those gaps. The section that follows will provide a more detailed discussion of school-based accountability and the impact of NCLB on schools and historically ill-served groups.
**Equity and School-Based Accountability**

The accepted theory of action underlying school-based accountability reform postulates that the use of incentives will effectively motivate teachers and administrators to align their behaviours with identified standards and goals (Figlio & Ladd, 2007). Polikoff, McEachin, Wrabel and Duque (2014) suggest two streams of economic theory supporting the use of accountability in education. The first, principal-agent theory (Holmstrom & Costa, 1986; Milgrom, 1988), proposes that the “incentives created through accountability systems help direct educators’ efforts toward those behaviors most important for improving student outcomes” (Polikoff et al., 2014, p. 46. The second, experiential goods (Shapiro, 1983), introduces the notions of choice and competition, arguing that quality information helps consumers make the best choice in an educational marketplace (Figlio & Loeb, 2011).

The translation of these frameworks into school accountability policies relies on a set of assumptions and criteria that affect the likeliness of these policies to produce intended outcomes (Polikoff et al, 2013). For example, one of the major assumptions associated with the school accountability theory of action is that sources of accountability are exclusively experienced as outside the individual (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013). As will be discussed in further detail in the third section of this chapter, the reliance on external forms of accountability in current accountability systems poses several problems and may even render said systems ineffectual (Firestone & Shipp, 2005; Fullan, Rincon-Gallardo, & Hargreaves, 2015; Gonzalez & Firstone, 2013). With respect to policy design and the use of data to inform accountability determinations, criteria such as construct validity, reliability, fairness, and transparency have been suggested as critical
components of any school accountability system (Domaleski & Perie, 2013; Polikoff et al., 2013; Riddle, 2012). Investigations of the implementation and impact of school accountability systems suggest that if any of these criteria or assumptions are violated, a variety of unintended consequences may result and negatively impact students’ success (Davidson, Reback, Rockoff, & Schwartz, 2013; Domaleski & Perie, 2013; Figlio & Ladd, 2007; Figlio & Loeb, 2011).

The remainder of this section will address aspects of NCLB’s school accountability policies that have garnered the most controversy and criticism. Inherent in this literature are discussions of the various ways in which the assumptions and criteria described above have been violated or compromised. The second part of this section will outline the limited scholarship examining the NCLB waiver program and its potential for addressing the recognized flaws associated with NCLB.

**Controversial aspects of NCLB accountability.** Although there is general consensus about the overarching goal of NCLB, that of closing the achievement gap(s), the mechanisms through which this goal would be accomplished have been hotly contested and debated. Ironically, the aspect of NCLB that has arguably generated the most controversy, reaching 100% proficiency in reading and math for all students, is also recognized as its most significant contribution to federal education policy, with respect to addressing issues of equity in education. Critics and proponents alike seem to agree on the importance of the goal, but strong disagreements have emerged with respect to the accountability mechanisms through which that goal would be measured, monitored and achieved.
**AYP and subgroup-specific accountability policies.** NCLB’s school accountability system is based on the interaction of three basic elements: (i) student performance on (ii) state-developed standardized tests, and (iii) the assignment of sanctions or rewards based on test performance. In addition to problematizing the assumptions inherent in the logic of this system, studies addressing these elements highlight its impact on equity (Chakrabarti & Schwartz, 2013; Dittmer, 2004; Figlio & Lucas, 2004; Jennings & Sohn, 2014; Kim & Sunderman, 2005).

As the central accountability mechanism for measuring and improving school performance, adequate yearly progress (AYP) and its sister indicator, annual measurable objectives (AMOs), have garnered significant attention and empirical study. At the outset, researchers have challenged the validity of AYP as a measure of school effectiveness arguing that “mean differences in test score outcomes are often inaccurate indicators of school effectiveness because they fail to account for selection biases (Kim & Sunderman, 2005, p. 4). A more accurate assessment would characterize mean test score levels as reflections of difference in cognitive skills and background characteristics prior to school entry (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1988; Linn, 2000). Therefore, according to this line of research, NCLB’s assumption that student performance is an indicator of school quality would be faulty without controlling for differences in student background. However, just as AYP fails to account for student background, the aforementioned research is limited in that it fails to account for the multitude of other factors, including in-school, structural, and systemic factors that potentially impact student performance.

In addition to questioning the validity of AYP as an indicator of school quality, a number of studies have extended research in this area to investigate the consequences of
proficiency-based accountability systems on schools and students. This body of literature has produced mixed findings in terms of its effect on equity and inequality in academic achievement (Jennings & Sohn, 2014). For example, through an examination of student achievement data from six states across the nation, Kim and Sunderman (2005) found that as opposed to increasing equity across schools, the AYP requirement had a disproportionate negative impact on high-poverty and racially diverse schools. Because low-income, minority students by and large generate lower mean proficiency scores in the aggregate, schools with high concentrations of these groups are unlikely to make AYP. As a result, these schools are disproportionately labelled as “failing” and are subject to stigma and sanctions. The authors argue that the primary factor causing this disadvantage is NCLB’s reliance on mean proficiency scores as its sole measure of student achievement. However, in their study investigating the effects of subgroup-specific accountability on student achievement, Lauen and Gaddis (2011) found that the pressure and sanctions associated with failing AYP resulted in positive effects on the academic achievement of low-income and minority students.

Criticism and concerns with respect to NCLB’s use of AYP were not limited to its impact on high-poverty, minority schools. Because NCLB required that, to be considered successful, a school must meet AYP for each individual subgroup, in addition to students overall, all schools enrolling a state-determined minimum number of students from traditionally low-performing subgroups were theoretically at risk of failing to meet AYP, including schools with overall high average achievement (Linn, 2005). This issue has been highlighted, although somewhat indirectly, in studies addressing variations in state policy design and implementation, and compatibility (or lack thereof) between NCLB
and state systems. For example, Florida’s state-accountability system used aggregate student performance for determining school ratings. As a result, discrepancies between state and NCLB determinations for which schools qualified as successful or failing were large (Linn, 2005). As an illustration of the magnitude of difference, in 2004, 56% of the 1262 schools in Florida receiving a school accountability grade of A failed to make AYP (Linn, 2005). Significant discrepancies have also been reported for other states including but not limited to Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia (Olson, 2004). This research not only highlights the substantial difference in accountability determinations depending on whether or not a system is designed to include or exclude disaggregated performance data, it also highlights the confusion that can result as a result of having two different accountability systems functioning at the same time.

Educational triage. Studies investigating the impact of proficiency-based accountability systems, like NCLB, have described the phenomenon of educational triage, a practice resulting in the unequal distribution of instructional resources across students and content areas (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Weitz-White & Rosenbaum, 2007). Because school effectiveness in NCLB was solely based on the percentage of students scoring proficient in specific content areas, the extent to which a student or group of students demonstrated progress or growth in performance had no impact on the accountability determination of a school. Qualitative and survey findings show that schools and teachers reported being focused on “bubble” kids, those that were close to meeting the cut-score for proficiency in a given content area (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Hamilton & Stecher, 2007). Despite these reports, quantitative studies reveal mixed
results with respect to inequality in academic achievement. For example, Jennings and Sohn (2014) found that although proficiency-based accountability pressure increased inequality between low- and high-performing students on high-stakes math tests, it actually decreased inequality on reading tests, and had no effect on inequality in low-stakes math and reading performance. Because proficiency standards for math and reading were set at substantially different levels in the state where this study was conducted, the authors concluded that schools were highly incentivized to focus on different parts of student performance distributions for each test.

**NCLB and students with disabilities.** As a group, students with disabilities have long suffered the deleterious consequences of systematic exclusion in the realm of public education and beyond. Of all the historically underserved groups, students with disabilities were the last to secure the legal right to a free public education with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (re-authorized as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Jennings, 2012). Based on a number of legislated guarantees including access to a free appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE), an individualized education program (IEP), and procedural due process, IDEA has dramatically changed the landscape of public education in the United States. Despite substantial progress, students with disabilities remain one of the least well-served groups in education. In addition to the persistent gaps in performance on standardized tests (Eckes & Swando, 2009; Cole, 2006), as a group students with disabilities face dramatically worse learning and post-school outcomes than their non-disabled peers. For example, students in special education programs are more likely than their general education peers to drop out of high school (Christenson &
Thurlow, 2004), are significantly underrepresented in post-secondary pursuits and have lower rates of success/persistence in these programs (Test, Mazotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering, & Kohler, 2009).

The intersection of NCLB and IDEA has been described and critiqued in the literature from various, and often opposing standpoints. Because NCLB required the participation of all students, including the majority of students with disabilities, the law ignited (or re-ignited) a debate over fundamental beliefs about the capabilities of students with disabilities and the purpose of special education (Gloeckler & Daggett, 2004). For some, NCLB and its requirements represented a clear, positive opportunity for the special education community to be fully recognized, acknowledged, and incorporated into the larger school environment (Cole, 2006). As with each of the other subgroups, NCLB made explicit that states, districts, and schools were to be held accountable for the performance of students with disabilities. In theory, NCLB incentivized schools to promote inclusive practices by necessitating that students with disabilities have equal access to general education curriculum and instruction (Cole, 2006). In addition, because of its focus on disaggregated performance data, NCLB facilitated the accumulation of vast amounts of data on students with disabilities – data which was once scarce (Thurlow, 2004).

With more than a decade worth of disaggregated school accountability and performance data for students with disabilities, studies investigating the impact of accountability on this subgroup have become available and provide much needed insight in this area (Eckes & Swando, 2009; Harr-Robins, Song, Garet, & Danielson, 2015). Capitalizing on the fact that under NCLB, schools with less than the state-determined
minimum number of membership in a given subgroup would not be held accountable for the performance of that subgroup, Harr-Robins et al. (2015) were able to investigate differences in school practices related to students with disabilities between accountable and non-accountable schools. Findings from their study support the hypothesis that when held explicitly accountable, schools respond qualitatively different than schools that are not held externally accountable for the performance of students with disabilities. In addition, differences with respect to school characteristics and student demographics were also found between accountable and non-accountable schools.

For example, accountable schools were more likely to be located in urban areas at the middle-school level, but less likely to be in an urban setting at the elementary level. They were also found to have lower percentages of non-White or Hispanic students and higher percentages of students eligible for free- or reduced-priced. In addition, compared to non-accountable schools, accountable schools had more special education teachers per 100 students with disabilities but less staff of various types, including regular education teachers, related service providers, classroom paraprofessionals, and one-on-one assigned paraprofessionals (Harr-Robins et al., 2015).

With respect to school programs, accountable schools were found to be more likely to adopt reading across the curriculum, new reading and math programs or curricula, systems for tiered instructional interventions and positive behavioral support, and extended instructional time. Accountable schools were also more likely than non-accountable schools to implement team teaching structures. Students with disabilities at accountable schools were more likely to spend 80% of their time in general education classrooms. In addition, accountable were more found to be more likely than non-
accountable schools to use student achievement data to inform instruction and provide at least monthly coaching related to instructing students with disabilities to both general and special education teachers (Harr-Robins et al., 2015).

Despite the positive aspects and benefits, the mandated inclusion of students with disabilities in NCLB also prompted critique and concern, both from those within and outside the special education community. Townsend (2007) argued that the testing of students with disabilities under NCLB was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, if students with disabilities were excluded from testing, a variation of educational triage where school resources are redirected to the groups of students for which they are held accountable could be created thereby dismissing the learning needs of students with disabilities. On the other hand, if this group is included, schools run the risk of failing to provide these students with an appropriate, individualized educational experience. These concerns were raised in the results of an online survey gauging the attitudes and perceptions of superintendents, principals, and directors of special education with respect to the implications of NCLB. An overwhelming 82% of respondents felt that NCLB and IDEA were fundamentally conflicting mandates (Cole, 2006). While IDEA assures students with disabilities the right to an individualized education program, tailored to address the unique educational needs of each student, NCLB requires the standardization of curriculum and assessment for those same students.

As a result of the strict AYP requirements of NCLB, critics also raised concerns about the inclusion of students with disabilities and its implications for schools. In their investigation of special education subgroup inclusion, Eckes and Swando (2009) found that across three different states, schools failed to meet AYP requirements most often
because of their students with disabilities subgroup. This trend was also reported by Cole (2006) where she found that of the 51% of Indiana schools failing to meet adequate yearly progress, 76% reported not making AYP because of their special education subgroups.

**NCLB waivers.** Growing out of a worry that “in its implementation, No Child Left Behind had some serious flaws that are hurting our children instead of helping them” (The White House, 2011 as cited by Riddle, 2012a), the NCLB waiver initiative has seemingly brought equal parts optimism, relief, and concern from a broad spectrum of educational stakeholders. Both the constitutionality of the waiver program and the policy decisions of individual states have sparked heated debate (Barron & Rakoff, 2013; Hall, 2013). On the one hand, after years of unprecedented federal oversight, the waiver program has provided states with an opportunity to take back a substantial control over their schools and school accountability systems. With the balance of control shifting back in the favour of individual states, the initiative also afforded a rare opportunity to address the many flaws, criticisms, and controversial aspects of NCLB. This was an opportunity for states to recognize lessons learned and apply this knowledge to the development of innovative policy and design (Hall, 2013). With the freedom and power afforded by the waiver, states also had the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to equity and excellence through equity-oriented decision-making with respect to policy choice and design.

On the other hand, however, with relief from the key accountability provisions of NCLB coupled with vague guidelines from the Department of Education, advocates
cautioned of the potential for significant backsliding with respect to NCLB’s applauded focus on equity for ill-served groups. (Ushomirsky, Williams, & Hall, 2014).

In order to receive a waiver, states were required to submit a plan that adequately addressed four components: college- and career ready standards and assessments, differentiated accountability, teacher and principal evaluation, and reducing administrative burdens. If approved, states would be released from 10 of NCLB’s most controversial requirements including the obligation to i) set annual student achievement targets that culminate in 100% of students scoring proficient in reading and math by 2014, and ii) to implement specific interventions in all schools and districts that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP), toward these targets for two or more consecutive years (Riddle, 2012b). Of particular relevance to this study is the consequence that, with the waiver, states were left to decide for themselves if and how subgroup-specific accountability policies would be designed and implemented.

Although the NCLB waiver initiative represents a significant event in US education policy with implications for students, schools, and states, few empirical studies have focused on the design, implementation, or impact of state waivers. This dearth in published research is most likely the result of the limited time frame between waiver development, implementation and speculation about the next reauthorization of ESEA. Despite the limited empirical work, however, advocacy groups like The Education Trust and think tanks like the Center for Education Policy (CEP) have been actively monitoring the waiver process and providing analysis where possible (i.e., Hall, 2013; Riddle, 2012a; 2012b; 2012c; 2012d; Ushomirsky, Williams, & Hall, 2014). The remainder of this section will summarize the main equity concerns associated with the waiver, but will only
present material relevant to school accountability as opposed to curriculum standards like
the adoption of the Common Core or teacher and principal evaluations.

In his comprehensive review of all approved waiver plans, Riddle (2012a) found that waiver accountability policies and provisions, across the nation, substantially depart from those of NCLB, are generally more complex in nature, and as a result, have created significant differences across the states with respect to school accountability. Despite the lack of uniformity across the nation, states like Florida that had been functioning under two separate accountability systems (NCLB and a state system) did take this opportunity fully integrate federal requirements and create one streamlined system (Riddle, 2012a). In addition, despite the fact that NCLB did not require states to apply accountability provisions and consequences to non-Title I schools, the majority of states have taken this opportunity to fully integrate their accountability systems to include all schools, regardless of Title I status.

Of particular relevance to this proposal is the issue of state decisions regarding academic achievement targets. Riddle (2012a) found that as a group, states proposed “major and often complex changes to their Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs)- the targets states set to measures schools’ and districts progress in raising student achievement” (p.2). Although the guidelines offered by the Department of Education were vague in many areas, they did require that states set achievement targets. As a result, all approved waivers included achievement targets. However, the ways in which states determined those targets and the extent to which they would be used in accountability determinations, such as determining school ratings and identifying schools for intervention, was left up to each individual state. Riddle’s (2012a) analysis revealed
that state decision-making with regards to these two issues varied widely. The majority of the states proposed abandoning annual yearly progress (AYP) as the measure of school and district progress. While AYP was highly criticized because of its simplistic focus on a given performance benchmark, waiver states have capitalized on the opportunity to replace the measure with more complex and multifaceted formulas that take into account additional factors including student growth (Riddle, 2012b).

Despite the advances made by many states in their treatment of performance and progress measurement, Riddle’s (2012c) review confirms that concerns of equity-oriented advocates, states have taken this opportunity partially or entirely abandon the use of individual subgroup performance in making accountability determinations. Riddle states, “no state will continue the current policy of requiring all relevant student groups to meet the AMOs in reading or math in order for a school to make AYP or otherwise avoid being identified for improvement” (p. 9).

Although the waiver absolved states of the responsibility to include subgroups in accountability decisions, through their guidelines, the Department of Education continued to require states to set targets for student subgroups, track performance, and make data publicly available (Riddle, 2012c). Garnering a significant amount of media and public attention has been the concern that because states would no longer be required to hold a uniform 100% proficiency goal for all students, states would assign different goals for different groups of students. Riddle’s (2012c) review confirmed that “it is either explicit or implied that some or all AMOs will vary by student group, school, and in some cases by district” (p. 10).
To date, only one published report (Ushomirsky, Williams, & Hall, 2014) has empirically investigated the unfolding impact of states’ waiver policy decisions. This study focused specifically on the relationship between waiver policy decisions dealing with school accountability ratings and their impact on historically underserved student subgroups. They found that, without the inclusion of individual subgroup performance in rating determination decisions, school ratings do not send powerful or accurate signals about the performance of individual subgroups. In the three states investigated in this report (Florida, Kentucky, and Minnesota), “schools are getting top ratings despite low performance for some groups…the differences are so large that top-rated schools often perform similarly for their students of color and low-income students as middle-to-low-rated schools do for their white and higher income peers (p. 1). The findings of this study are highly important because they legitimize the concerns that many equity-oriented educators, advocates, and researchers expressed about the potential for backsliding with the NCLB waivers.

Understanding and unpacking the accountability policies included in state waivers is an important step because the ways in which accountability systems are designed have direct impacts on educators’ responses, that then impact student outcomes (Polikoff, McEauchin, Wrabel, & Duque, 2013). However, once decisions have been made about system design and the policies are in place, a new step in the policy process begins. The following section of this review will examine literature addressing the critical connection between policy formulation and enactment.
School Leadership, Equity, and Accountability

School leaders hold a unique and highly critical position in education today. Research suggests that the success of large-scale, sustainable education reform is largely dependent on the effectiveness of school leaders (Fullan, 2002). That being said, what it means and what it takes to be an effective leader has become more difficult to define. With the high-stakes environment that currently characterizes the educational system, school leaders are tasked with negotiating multiple pressures and conflicting demands (Firestone & Shipps, 2005). School leaders are crucial actors in the process that bridges policy as text to policy as practice (Spillane et al., 2002). Therefore, understanding this process is of great importance.

There exists a wealth of school leadership literature, and a primary assertion consistent across this base is that leaders can (and do) contribute to increased equity and improvements in student learning (Boscardin, 2005; Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin, 2003; Firestone & Shipps, 2005). Because of continual and complex changes in the context of both education policy and school environments, this assertion requires continued attention, exploration, and testing. For example, because accountability reform relies heavily on centralized direction flowing downstream from federal and state levels, local discretion and school leader autonomy has substantially decreased (Firestone & Shipps, 2005). What does this shift in control mean for school leaders and their capacity to effect change? Furthermore, if the assertion is true, why is there a persistence of disparities as outlined in the introduction to this chapter? The assertion that school leaders can, and do, contribute to increased equity and student improvement becomes even more important to investigate when the equitable nature of state and federal policies is called into question.
It has been argued that the most fundamental measure of success for school leaders is the extent to which their traditionally marginalized students achieve academic success (Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, & Hodgins., 2007; Frattura & Capper, 2007; Marshall & Oliva, 2006). In the policy context of the last decade, school leaders’ performance on this measure has become increasingly connected with their negotiation and interactions with accountability policy. Spillane et al. (2002) describe school principals as mid-level managers and argue that, particularly in the context of implementing accountability-based policies, their work is key because “accountability levers operate in and through particular schools where they are understood through existing beliefs, experiences, and ways of doing business (p.732).” Further, school leaders, as with all other school actors, enact their environments (Coburn, 2005; Spillane et al.; Evans, 2007), meaning they “construct, rearrange, single out, and demolish many objective features of their surroundings” (Weicke, 1979, p. 164).

**School leaders and multiple accountabilities.** Understanding how leaders make sense of their school and policy environments has become paramount in light of the fact that accountability-era leaders face multiple, conflicting accountabilities that produce a metaphorical and, at times, literal “educational tug-of-war” (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013). A necessary step in understanding how leaders interpret and respond to the complexities of this system is to first examine each of these accountabilities individually. Firestone and Shipps (2005) identified five accountability pathways facing school leaders: political, bureaucratic, market, professional, and moral. The first three represent external accountability demands and the latter represent internal pressures.
External accountabilities. External forms of accountability have dominated the governance and administration of public education in the United States for at least the last two decades. External accountability requires school and system leaders to “reassure the public through transparency, monitoring and selective intervention that their system is performing in line with societal expectations and requirements” (Fullan, Ricon-Gallardo, & Hargreaves, 2015, p. 4). The primary sources of political accountability include the legal demands of political representatives and the concerns of local constituents. Given the heavily political nature of modern education and education policy, “administrators remain acutely responsive to a complex web of constituent groups, politicians, and civic leaders, many of whose demands are not motivated by improved student performance or increased equity” (Firestone & Shipps, 2005). Studies investigating school leaders’ responses to conflicting local and state demands rarely promoted improvements in teaching and learning (Bizar & Barr, 2001).

Bureaucratic accountability is characterized by the relationship and power structures within an organization (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2011). In the case of educational accountability, as mid-level managers (Spillane et al., 2002), school leaders play the role of both subordinate and superior. Along the chain of command, school leaders are accountable to those above them, and are expected to accept directives and follow the rules of the system. Because modern-day school-based accountability is based on student performance, schools and leaders are assigned rewards or sanctions based on that performance. As a result, school leaders are pressured to be “advocates of performance targets and the improvement steps they require…they are to explain and defend the reward and punishment structures…and unintended increases in inequity that
have already been decried” (Firestone & Shipps, 2005, p. 86). Survey findings suggest that the political and bureaucratic pressures associated with the current accountability system have become so onerous that principals report being driven out of the profession as a result of these demands (Public Agenda, 2001).

The primary source of market accountability is competition and choice. This type of accountability has transformed education into a public marketplace where educators compete for jobs, external service providers compete for contracts, and most important, schools compete for students (Firestone & Shipps, 2005). In her investigation of market accountability, Shipps (2003) found that school leaders felt pressured into adopting corporate management strategies including treating parents and students as customers.

**Internal accountabilities.** At the opposite end of the spectrum, internal accountability is characterized by the willingness of individuals and groups to take on personal, professional and collective responsibility for continuous improvement and success for all students (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Research addressing school and system effectiveness have identified internal accountability as playing a fundamental role in school improvement (Elmore, Abelman, Even, Kenyon, & Marshall, 2004; Fullan, Ricon-Gallardo, & Hargreaves, 2015). In fact, several studies have found that, for sustained improvements in student achievement to occur, internal accountability must precede external demands and pressures (Fullan, Rincon-Gallardo, & Hargreaves, 2015; Leana & Pil, 2006; Marzano, 2003).

Internal accountability is highly related to and dependent on school culture. Research suggests that school communities that are successful in building and maintaining a collaborative culture are more likely to succeed in improving student
achievement. For example, in their multiple case study report, Elmore et al. (2004) found that successful schools shared a common culture that combined individual responsibility, collective expectations, and corrective action. Taken together, these characteristics reflect key aspects of internal accountability.

Internal accountability incorporates aspects of professional and moral accountabilities (Firestone & Shipps, 2005; Gonzalez & Firestone, 2011). Traditionally, the notion of professional accountability has been tied to setting and meeting standards, certification, and accreditations required by institutions, the state, and/or professional associations (Gonzalez & Shipps, 2011). In this sense, professional accountabilities are at least, in part, external. However, more recent discussions of professional accountability have highlighted the importance of its internal aspects. For example, Adams and Kirst (1999) emphasize peer solidarity and informal enforcement of professional norms and rules of behaviour as other mechanisms through which professional accountability is experienced. Fullan, Ricon-Gallardo, and Hargreaves (2015) have extended the discussion of professional accountability even further by offering a wholly new model that focuses professional capital. According to these authors, professional capital consists of “human capital (the quality of the individual), social capital (the quality of the group), and decisional capital (the development of expertise and professional judgement of individuals and groups to make more and more effective decisions over time)” (p.6). This model of professional accountability emphasises the importance of social learning as opposed to the notion of individual learning traditionally promoted by external accountabilities.
At the center of most discussions of internal accountability is the notion of moral accountability, being accountable to one’s own conscience (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013). Moral accountability addresses the existence and significance of personal and communal values (Firestone & Shipps, 2005; Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013), internalized obligations (Sergiovanni, 1992), and the actions and behaviours of agents that are guided by personal integrity and empathy for others (Firestone & Shipps, 2005). It has been argued, that at its core, moral accountability is the internalization of social justice as a value in education (Firestone & Shipps, 2005).

Perhaps of greatest importance is the idea that moral accountability has the capacity to act as an “antidote to other forms when they fail to embrace fairness and justice” (Firestone & Shipps, 2005, p. 89). Moral accountability is also connected with notions of empowerment and resistance. It has been described as, “an act of resistance to thoughtless banality, technical rationality, and carelessness” (Greene, 1995 as cited by Firestone & Shipps, 2005, p. 89).

Although compelling arguments have been made for shifting the accountability framework in favour of one that emphasises internal accountabilities (Fullan, Ricon-Gallardo, & Hargreaves, 2015; Firestone & Shipps, 2005), many questions remain unanswered. For example, if internal accountability can effectively act as a buffer between policies that are recognized as inequitable by school leaders and the students for whom they negatively effect, does this mean that school leaders would first need to interpret policies as inequitable? It also might be the case that because of the heavy-handed nature of the sanctions and stigma associated with current externally-focused accountability systems, a reliance on internal accountability is only a luxury afforded to
some. Gonzalez and Firestone (2013) found that the meaning and relative importance of different forms of accountability differed for school principals depending on whether or not their schools were high or low performing. Despite increasing external accountabilities, principals at high achieving schools consistently reported their most important accountability source was internal. They reported that first and foremost they felt accountable to themselves. This internal accountability was described by participants as a “sense of personal responsibility, responsibility to children, and using a moral code to balance among the conflicting accountabilities they still felt” (p. 390). Further, these principals also described becoming “immune” to increasing accountabilities and thus relied on a personal code to choose a course of action. However, principals at low achieving schools were more likely to emphasize the importance of external accountabilities. These principals reported feeling most accountable to NCLB and then to the public. Critical questions remain: which comes first, a commitment to internal accountability or high achievement? Does a high sense of internal accountability contribute to high achievement or does previously existing high achievement create the conditions conducive for a focus on internal accountability?

**A sensemaking framework.** Whether explicit or implicit, school leaders have the responsibility of acquiring policy information, making sense of it, responding to it, and communicating their interpretations to the larger school community. This process, otherwise referred to in the literature as the cognitive aspects of school leadership (Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007; Spillane et al., 2002) has been explored using sensemaking as a theoretical framework. More specifically, this research has been concerned with understanding how leaders “frame, derive meaning, and make sense of the multiple
messages they receive from their school environments and the ways they manage
meaning for others through their words, actions, and decision making” (Evans, 2007, p. 160). As Evans (2007) argues, “the importance of school leaders’ sensemaking lies in the assumption that the meanings they make of educational issues and situations determine how they define and respond to them via their actions and decisions on school programs, policies, and practices” (p. 160).

Sensemaking as a theory is rooted in a collection of sociological perspectives including symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Prasad, 1993), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Burrell & Morgan, 1979), and sociology of knowledge (Burger & Luckmann, 1967; Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, & Kijrweil, 1984). Together, these perspectives have emerged from constructivism, a theory of knowledge or philosophical orientation proposing that individuals generate knowledge and meaning through a succession of interactions between their experiences and ideas. The basic premise of sensemaking is that “people act on the basis of the meaning that they attribute to situations, where action emerges from social interaction and is developed and modified through an interpretive process” (Sammon, 2008, p. 916). Thus, sensemaking is a socially constructed process, context specific and value laden, and situated within a broader institutional context “that provides a framework for socially acceptable actions and behaviors” (Evans, 2007, p. 162).

Although sensemaking, as a theoretical framework, emerged from organizational and management literature as a response to the growing dissatisfaction with and limitations of decision-making theory (Weick, 1995), with rapidly changing demographics and increasing accountabilities, a small but growing body of educational
scholarship has begun to investigate the cognitive aspects of school leadership. These qualitative studies have used sensemaking to better understand how school actors make sense of various aspects of accountability, policy enactment, and school environments (Coburn, 2001; Evans, 2007; Gilmore & Murphy, 1991; Ogawa, 1991; Spillane et al., 2002; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014; Park, Daly, & Guerra, 2012).

Sensemaking has been defined as “the cognitive act of taking in information, framing it, and using it to determine actions and behaviors in a way that manages meaning for individuals” (Evans, 2007, p. 161). It has also been described as simply, “the ways in which people make sense of their environments” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 733). Weick (1994) emphasised the relationship between sensemaking and interpretation and argued that “people generate what they interpret” (p. 13). Gaining insight into the ways in which individuals make sense of and interpret their environments helps researchers better understand and predict behavioural responses.

In their influential paper, Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking (2005), Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld provide readers with an eight-part description of the nature and process of sensemaking. They propose that sensemaking, 1) starts with chaos and organizes flux, 2) involves noticing and bracketing experience and information, 3) is about labelling and categorizing experience, 4) is retrospective in nature, 5) connects the abstract with the concrete, 6) is highly influenced by social and systemic and systemic factors, 7) inevitably leads to action, and 8) results in organizing through communication.

School leader sensemaking is complex yet remains underdeveloped in the literature. The few studies in this area have found that sense-making is related to and influenced by personal and organizational identities (Dukerich, 1991; Evans, 2007;
Spillane et al. (2002), perceptions of the role the sensemaker plays (Evans, 2007), and the multiple contexts in which their sense-making is situated (Spillane et al., 2002). For example, in her investigation of race and demographic change in schools, Evans (2007) found that the ways in which her participants made sense of changes was related to both their racial and role identities, the local context, and the organizational ideology of the school. Although similar findings were reported by Spillane et al. (2002), their case study findings placed more emphasis on the context within which school leaders worked. They found that “answering to or enacting accountability policy meant something different depending on the school” (p. 755).

Another critical aspect of school leader sensemaking is its influence on teachers. Spillane et al. (2002) argue that while teachers may encounter accountability mechanisms through outside sources (i.e. media reports) participation in their school community mediates their evolving perceptions and understandings of policies. This critical role in shaping teacher sensemaking was further illustrated and defined in Coburn’s (2005) work examining the enactment of reading policy. Coburn found that “principals influence teacher enactment by shaping access to policy ideas, participating in the social process of interpretation and adaptation, and creating substantively different conditions for teacher learning in schools” (p. 476).

Although the bodies of literature addressing school-based accountability policies and school leadership are vast, studies in these areas rarely bring together a focus on the impact of policy design and leaders’ interpretations of and responses to those choices. The NCLB waiver has provided an opportune moment to engage in this type of critical work. This proposed study will use a sensemaking framework (Weick, 1995; Weick,
Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) to provide a rationale for and help guide the qualitative examination of how school leaders negotiate and interact with school accountability policies.
Chapter 3: Method

Research Design

A combination of descriptive statistics and qualitative methods was employed in this study in order to gain a richer, more nuanced understanding of the interplay between state-level policy decisions and school-level outcomes. This research takes a pragmatist approach as it allowed the researcher to let “assumptions of ontology and epistemology take a back seat to values and methodological issues” (Nelson & Evans, 2014, p. 161). Because pragmatist approaches espouse abduction in lieu of deduction or induction exclusively, the researcher can freely move back and forth between the two, allowing observations to influence theory and interpretation and vice versa (Morgan, 2007). In addition, and of particular relevance to this research, pragmatism emphasizes the notion of “intersubjectivity.” As Morgan (2007) explains, with a pragmatic approach, “there is no real problem with asserting both that there is a single ‘real world’ and that all individuals have their own unique interpretations of that world” (p. 72). With Morgan’s assertion in mind, this approach proves highly fitting with the nature of this research study and the phenomena it explores. In this study, accountability data represent one reality, while the
perceptions and experiences of school leaders, however discrepant or commensurate with
the data, represent their unique lived experience and interpretations of the data and their
school environment.

This study used a quantitative → qualitative design, whereby data were collected
sequentially, beginning with the collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by
the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Although the qualitative component of this
research was more time-intensive and the data were analyzed in greater detail,
quantitative analyses figured prominently in both the identification of sites for qualitative
data collection and the qualitative analysis.

Setting

This study was conducted in Miami-Dade, a large urban county in the
southeastern part of the United States. Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) is
the fourth largest school district in the nation, serving a highly diverse population (M-
DCPS, 2015a). District students come from 160 countries and speak 56 different
languages (M-DCPS, 2015a). According to the 2013-2014 Statistical Highlights report
(M-DCPS, 2014), the district served 355,268 students across 466 schools (201
elementary, 82 middle, 78 K-8 centers, 77 senior high, 7 combination, and 21
alternative/special education centers). Across the district, 74% of all students were
eligible for free or reduced price lunch and 22% were identified as students with a
primary exceptionality.
Table 1

*Distribution of Student Membership by Race/Ethnicity for M-DCPS (2013-2014)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>27,524</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>81,711</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>239,681</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Race/Ethnicity*</td>
<td>6,352</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>355,268</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Other includes American Indian, Asian, and Multiracial categories*

Following the policies and provisions outlined in Florida’s NCLB waiver, in the 2013-2014 school year, all schools in Miami-Dade County were assigned a school grade using an A through F scale. Florida’s school accountability grades are based on student achievement data from the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test 2.0 (FCAT 2.0), Florida End-of-Course (EOC) Assessments and the Florida Alternate Assessment (FAA). According to the Florida School Grades report for elementary, middle, and K-8 schools (FLDOE, 2015), in 2013-2014 M-DCPS produced the following distribution of grades: A (n=160), B (n=57), C (n=92), D (n=41), and F (n=23). Figure 1 presents the distribution of school accountability grades by percentage for elementary, middle, and K-8 schools in Miami-Dade. According to federal law (NCLB, 2002), schools earning a state’s highest performing designations (A and B for Florida) are labeled “reward” schools, making them eligible for financial and other accountability incentives. As indicated by Figure 1, nearly 60% of elementary, middle, and K-8 schools in Miami-Dade County are designated “reward” status.
Figure 1. School Accountability Grade Distribution for Elementary, Middle, and K-8 Schools across M-DCPS
Chapter 4: Analysis and Results – Quantitative Data

A series of descriptive statistical analyses were performed to answer three research questions examining Florida’s NCLB waiver policies with respect to school accountability grades:

RQ1: Among M-DCPS elementary, middle, and K-8 schools earning each accountability letter grade, how did the reading performance of key subgroups of students compare to the reading performance of all students combined?

RQ2. What percentage of “A” schools are meeting annual reading performance targets for all students? What percentage are meeting annual reading performance targets for key subgroups?

RQ3. What is the magnitude of reading performance disparities between key subgroups at “A” schools?

Taken together, these questions enabled a close examination of school performance across M-DCPS and helped to address whether or not Florida’s school grading system functions to highlight or hide performance disparities between student subgroups.

A portion of the analytic approach represents an adaptation of questions and procedures outlined in a recently published report by the Education Trust (Ushomirsky, Williams, & Hall, 2014). This study, however, includes a focus on one particular school district (M-DCPS) as opposed to the state-level analyses described in the report and the inclusion of additional key subgroups including economically disadvantaged (ED) students, English language learners (ELL), and students with disabilities (SWD).
Data Source

Quantitative data used in this study were gathered from the Florida Department of Education website at http://fldoe.org/. As mandated by federal law (NCLB, 2002), all school accountability data must be publicly reported and made accessible to the general public. The data source for this component of the study is the Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs) for Schools, Districts, and the State: AMO outcomes, 2013-2014 database.

Data specific to M-DCPS were culled from this larger dataset, making the sampling design purposive in nature. This study focuses on elementary, middle, and K-8 schools exclusively. Each of the analyses described below used the combined data from each of these school types. Further, performance data was only included in the analysis when a school tested at least 10 students in a given subgroup. This cut-off is consistent with Florida’s policy describing its confidentiality criteria for accountability (Florida ESEA waiver, 2012). This minimum of 10 students per subgroup inclusion criterion resulted in different sample size numbers for the various analyses involving different subgroups because not all schools had enough students enrolled in each subgroup to be reported.

In addition to high schools, the study also excluded schools designated as “alternative” centers for education, including special education centers and schools receiving a grade of “I” (incomplete) or “P” (pending). These grade designations were not included because they indicate missing and/or incomplete data necessary for accountability grade determinations. It is also necessary to note that multiple membership (i.e., students identified as members in two or more subgroups) could not be
accounted for because the AMO dataset does not include student-level data. As a result, the analyses performed for this study were not able to address more nuanced variations such as comparisons between the average proficiency rates of Black students with disabilities and those of other racial groups with disabilities. This limitation will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

The following section will describe data analysis procedures and results organized around each research question respectively.

**Data Analysis and Results – Reading Proficiency Rates**

*RQ1: Among M-DCPS elementary, middle, and K-8 schools earning each accountability letter grade, how did the reading performance of key subgroups of students compare to the reading performance of all students combined?*

In order to examine how student subgroups are performing in schools receiving each accountability grade (A, B, C, D, and F), the average percent of students meeting Florida’s satisfactory standards in reading was computed by subgroup across all schools earning each accountability grade for the 2013-2014 school year. This descriptive procedure was performed separately for race/ethnicity subgroups and “other” categorical subgroups (ED, ELL, and SWD). The race/ethnicity analysis included White, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino student subgroups. The exclusion of other race/ethnicity categories (i.e., Asian-America, Native American) was determined to be appropriate given the exceedingly small percentage of students that comprise these categories in Miami-Dade public schools. An “All” students group was included to determine how well individual subgroup are performing compared to student
performance in aggregate. The inclusion of this aggregate group is critical given the focus of this study and Florida’s school accountability grade determination formula.

**Universal hierarchy patterns for performance.** As illustrated by Figures 2 and 3, substantial performance disparities in reading proficiency exist across each accountability grade. In addition, there is a consistent hierarchical pattern that can be observed with respect to subgroup performance. White and Hispanic/Latino students consistently perform above the average reading proficiency rate, while Black students lag considerably behind their peers, always below the average. This performance hierarchy is consistent across school grades.

Another hierarchical pattern emerged with respect to the second set of subgroups. However, a notable difference is that none of these groups performed at or above average proficiency. As illustrated by Figure 3, the ED subgroup consistently outperformed the ELL and SWD subgroups at each accountability grade, also performing closest to the average. These results are particularly stark for students with disabilities. Even at schools earning the highest grade designations, students with disabilities are performing substantially below average. In fact, “A” schools show the greatest disparity between students with disabilities compared to the aggregate rate.

**Grade-to-grade performance comparisons.** Although proficiency rates for Black students increase in correspondence to increases in accountability grade (i.e., Black students perform better at higher graded schools than they do at lower graded schools), a cross-school grade comparison reveals that *reward* schools (A and B) are producing performance rates for Black students that are only on par with White students at “C” schools. Further, Black students in “A” schools only perform marginally better than their
White counterparts in “D” schools. Although the disparities are not as dramatic, Hispanic/Latino students in M-DCPS schools consistently fare better than their Black peers, leaving Black student performance close to an accountability letter grade behind. For example, while 50% of Hispanic/Latino students are meeting proficiency minimums at “C” schools, Black students remain under this mark at schools earning “B” status. These results show similar patterns to those found in state-level analyses of Florida’s school accountability grading system (Ushormirsky, Williams, & Hall, 2014).

Figure 2. M-DCPS Reading Proficiency Rates by Race/Ethnicity (2013-2014)
Data Analysis and Results – Reading Proficiency Targets

*RQ2: What percentage of “A” schools are meeting annual reading performance targets for all students? What percentage of schools are meeting annual reading performance targets for key subgroups?*

Basic frequencies were derived to determine what percentage of “A” schools were meeting annual performance targets for reading proficiency rates for students in aggregate as well as each subgroup. Figure 4 shows that a substantial percent of schools earning “A” status fell short of reaching their reading performance targets for the 2013-2014 school year. Even with performance targets differentiated on the basis of subgroup membership, between 28.1% and 65.4% of “A” schools were unable to meet basic proficiency standards in reading for key subgroups of students.
Similar to the results presented above, this analysis continues to demonstrate that Black students and students with disabilities are the least well-served of all subgroups. These results are particularly important given Florida’s NCLB waiver and its shift away from the inclusion of individual subgroup performance in school grade determinations. For example, under NCLB, schools that were unable to meet proficiency targets (also known as annual measurable objectives, AMO’s) for all students, including each individual subgroup, would not have met adequate yearly progress (AYP) and therefore would not have been considered “successful”. If the same policies were applied to these results, a substantial number of “A” schools would be designated as failing. However, under Florida’s NCLB waiver policy for determining school success, these same schools are designated as “reward” schools and celebrated for their high performance.

Figure 4. Percentage of “A” Schools Meeting Annual Performance Targets for Students in Aggregate and Key Race/Ethnicity Subgroups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup: Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis and Results – Magnitude of Disparities

**RQ3: What is the magnitude of reading performance disparities between key subgroups at “A” schools?**

The final set of analyses investigated the magnitude of subgroup reading performance disparities across schools earning an accountability grade of “A”. The magnitude of disparity was operationalized as the percent proficient point difference between two given subgroups. This computation created a new set of variables whereby the range of disparities across “A” schools was identified. As such, I was able to create a distribution and rank schools from highest subgroup disparities to those with the lowest. In addition, these ranking procedures identified those schools that produced “inverse disparities” where traditionally underperforming subgroups were outperforming their counterparts. The following formula was used to compute the magnitude of disparity:
Magnitude of Disparity for Reading = % of students in subgroup 1 performing at or above a satisfactory level in reading - % of students in subgroup 2 performing at or above a satisfactory level in reading.

Table 2

Reading Performance Disparity Subgroup Pairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup 1</th>
<th>Subgroup 2</th>
<th>Variable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>W-B Disparity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>W-H Disparity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>H-B Disparity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students</td>
<td>Students with disabilities</td>
<td>A-SWD Disparity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students</td>
<td>English language learners</td>
<td>A-ELL Disparity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students</td>
<td>Economically disadvantaged</td>
<td>A-ED Disparity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated in the figures 6-11, of all subgroup pairs the largest disparities were found for Black students (mean = 19.46) and students with disabilities (mean = 34.29). Also noteworthy is the slim disparity for the economically disadvantaged subgroup at only 4.43. These results also reveal the “acceptable” range of disparities for schools earning “A” status. For example, Black students performed 65 percentage points below their White peers in one school. At another, students with disabilities performed, on average, 63 percentage points below students in aggregate.
Figure 6. Magnitude of Reading Performance Disparities between White and Black Students at “A” Schools

Figure 7. Magnitude of Reading Performance Disparities between White and Hispanic Students at “A” Schools
Figure 8. Magnitude of Reading Performance Disparities between Hispanic and Black Students at “A” Schools

Figure 9. Magnitude of Reading Performance Disparities between All students and Economically Disadvantaged Students at “A” Schools
Figure 10. Magnitude of Reading Performance Disparities between All Students and English Language Learners at “A” Schools

![Histogram](image1.png)

All-ELL Disparity

- N = 139
- Maximum = 43.00
- Mean 16.80
- Minimum = -4.60

Figure 11. Magnitude of Reading Performance Disparities between All Students and Students with Disabilities at “A” Schools

![Histogram](image2.png)

All-SWD Disparity

- N = 115
- Maximum = 63.00
- Mean 34.29
- Minimum = 0.00
Taken together, these results suggest that elementary, middle, and K-8 schools across Miami-Dade are performing differently for different student subgroups, regardless of school accountability grade. Further, results indicate that schools across the district are producing patterns of lower performance for Black students and students with disabilities, even at the highest graded schools. It can also be inferred from these data that students are having different educational experiences and/or responding to their educational experiences differently, as measured by standardized test scores, depending on their background. When compared to reading proficiency rates measured in aggregate, the subgroup results also support the conclusion that data reported in aggregate by school grade paint a much less accurate picture of school performance than would be demonstrated when taking into account performance by subgroups. As a result, these data support the conclusion that Florida’s school accountability grading determination formula systematically masks subgroup performance inequities.
Chapter 5: Analysis and Results – Qualitative Data

Identifying Target Schools

The ranking procedures described in chapter 3 were used to inform qualitative data collection and analysis. Specifically, subgroup disparity rankings for A and B schools were used to identify target school sites to recruit school leaders as participants for the qualitative component of this study. Schools showing disparities of 15 percentage points or more between at least two subgroup pairs were defined as “high disparity” schools. Schools showing disparities of 5 percentage points or less between at least two subgroup pairs were defined as “low disparity” schools. Both high and low disparity schools were targeted for participation in this study.

Selecting school sites. Fifteen “A” schools with varying degrees of subgroup disparities were identified for participation in this study. After obtaining approval from both the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the M-DCPS Research Review
Committee (RRC), I extended a formal invitation for participation in this study via email to the principals at each target school (see Appendix A). This initial phase of recruitment only yielded a response from two principals. In an attempt to create more interest, I sent follow-up emails and made phone calls to the remaining 13 principals. Unable to secure those sites, I consulted with members of my dissertation committee and decided to broaden my participation criteria to include schools earning grades of B and C. After this modification was approved by the IRB, I re-visited my school ranking list and consulted with members of my committee to identify additional target school sites. This second recruitment attempt yielded three affirmative responses. Thus, a total of five schools participated in this study.

Table 3

*Participating Schools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name*</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Title 1</th>
<th>Magnet Status</th>
<th>Enrollment Size 2013-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greenview Academy</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full Magnet</td>
<td>793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKenzie Elementary</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>883</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baxter Landing Elementary</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saunders Middle</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Partial Magnet</td>
<td>1106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pines Elementary</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pseudonyms were used for all school and participant names.

Table 4

**Student Subgroup Membership at Participating Schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>Greenview Academy</th>
<th>McKenzie Elementary</th>
<th>Baxter Landing Elementary</th>
<th>Saunders Middle</th>
<th>Pines Elementary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17.3%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>754</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>862</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>63.7%</td>
<td>85.4%</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
<td>77.9%</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>793</strong></td>
<td><strong>883</strong></td>
<td><strong>282</strong></td>
<td><strong>1106</strong></td>
<td><strong>280</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ED</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>882</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60.7%</td>
<td>47.4%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>79.7%</td>
<td>88.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWD</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The sum of student subgroups may not equal total student population because not all subgroups were included in the research (Asian, American Indian, and two or more race/ethnicities).

Figures 12 through 16 provide the percent of students scoring satisfactory or above in reading (FCAT 2.0) by subgroup for the 2013-2014 school year.
Figure 12. Percent of Students Scoring Satisfactory or Above in Reading by Subgroup at Greenview Academy

Figure 13. Percent of Students Scoring Satisfactory or Above in Reading by Subgroup at McKenzie Elementary
Figure 14. Percent of Students Scoring Satisfactory or Above in Reading by Subgroup at Baxter Landing Elementary

Figure 15. Percent of Student Scoring Satisfactory or Above in Reading by Subgroup at Saunders Middle
Participants

For the purposes of this study, a school leader was defined as an administrator (i.e., principal or assistant principal) or a teacher that had been nominated by an administrator for participation in this study because of their active leadership and involvement in school-wide activities. In total, 10 school leaders from the five school sites participated in this research. Of this group, four were principals, four were assistant principals, and two were lead teachers with administrative responsibilities related to accountability and school data. Table 5 provides an overview of research participants and their leadership background. Although participants were currently in administrative positions at moderate to highly graded schools, each had professional experience at lower
graded schools (D and F). As a result, participants were able to provide insight about similarities and differences between their experiences at schools occupying both ends of the school performance spectrum.

Table 5

*Research Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant*</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Years in Current Position</th>
<th>Total Years of Administrative Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mario</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juana</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizette</td>
<td>Lead Teacher</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alonzo</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Lead Teacher</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marisol</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedure

*Data collection.* Individual, semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 1979) were conducted to generate rich, descriptive data exploring school leaders’ sensemaking. Prior
to the interview participants were provided with an outline of the interview protocol and the topics that would be addressed (see Appendix B). This advanced consideration was offered in the hopes of enabling a thoughtful, rich, and comfortable interview process.

Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to data collection. Interviews ranged from 18 minutes to more than 90 minutes in length. I was able to meet with each participant at their school site. Interviews were typically conducted in the office of the administrator, but on two occasions, the interviews were conducted in resource rooms. All participants agreed to have their interview recorded with a digital audio recording device. Immediately following each interview, audio files were transferred to a password-secured laptop and deleted from the recording device. Each recording was subsequently transcribed by a professional transcription service. In addition to interviews, relevant policy and school-related documents were identified and reviewed.

**Data analysis.** Interview transcripts were imported into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program that enables organization and thematic analysis of qualitative data. Each data source was read and re-read multiple times to ensure maximum data immersion. In addition, I revisited the audio recordings several times throughout the immersion process to further my familiarity with the content and tone of the interviews. This technique enabled me to pick up on various verbal cues (i.e., sighs, laughs, sarcasm etc.) that may have gone unnoticed while reading the transcripts.

Following the pragmatist approach, a combination of inductive and deductive methods was used to make sense of the data. Data were analyzed through a sensemaking framework, paying particular to attention to the ways in which participants (i) interpreted,
(ii) communicated, and (iii) responded to Florida’s NCLB waiver, school grades, and student performance.

In order to remain open to the development of emergent themes, a variety of grounded theory coding strategies were also employed (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The coding process included 1) the identification of open codes, 2) a bundling of those codes to form more focused codes, 3) the construction of conceptual categories, and finally, 4) the development of themes. Constant comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were used throughout the coding process to “establish analytic distinctions- and thus make comparisons at each level of analytic work” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 54).

Although ATLAS.ti was useful in the initial stages of analysis (open and focused coding), it became more of a hindrance further along the analytical process. In order to develop conceptual links between codes and discover overarching themes within the data, I transferred my focused code bundles to an excel spreadsheet organized around a structured framework and continued working my way up the analytic ladder from there. To help provide analytic trustworthiness, I consulted three trusted colleagues with substantial experience in qualitative research and analysis. Each was provided with de-identified transcript excerpts and a basic outline of my analytic framework. After working through the excerpts on their own, I met with them individually and received feedback. We worked together until consensus on conceptual categories was established.

**Findings**

Eight themes emerged from the data that cut across four higher order organizational groupings: i) school accountability grades, ii) student performance, iii)
supporting low performers, and iv) intersections of leadership and policy (see Figure 7). These groupings took shape as the data collection process unfolded, however they are largely deductive in nature, representing the delineated sections of my interview protocol (see Appendix C). It should be noted that several themes, categories, and sub-categories cut across one another, but for the sake of clarity, they will be presented as distinct groupings.

Figure 17. Overview of Qualitative Findings

- T1: Conceptualizing the grading system as a game
- T2: The ups and downs of high and low graded schools
- T3: Making sense of student performance
- T4: Disparity blindness
- T5: A data-driven process
- T6: Interventions as “extras”
School Accountability Grades

Theme 1: Conceptualizing the grading system as a game. Whether they agreed with it or not, their connection to the school grading system was palpable. This observation was somewhat unsurprising as the grading system in Florida had been in place nearly 17 years at the time of the interviews. Across interviews, school leaders described varying perspectives of and experiences with Florida’s A-F accountability grading system. However, their collective sensemaking was weaved together by a common thread: they conceptualized the system as an inevitable game that had to be played. Despite this recognition, there was a general sense of ambivalence towards the importance of winning. In fact, in one way or another, each participant questioned the validity and fairness of the game itself.

Figure 18. Coding Map of Theme 1
Meaning and significance of school grades. According to the Florida Department of Education, school grades are meant to communicate to the public how well a school is performing relative to state standards (FLDOE, 2015). When asked questions about the meaning of school grades and their significance, participant responses were rich, at times contradictory, and often delivered with emotion. In his description of Greenview Academy, Mario, Greenview’s principal for the past 11 years, attributed his school’s 14 consecutive years earning an A grade to having a “very fortunate run in terms of the state’s accountability system.” When I asked what it meant to him and his school, Mario explained:

More than it should probably, but it is extremely significant. For a school like ours who is a full magnet program, who has to compete to bring the students in, we know the impact of being able to say we’re an A school. Trying to recruit students if our grade were to drop to a B or C would be a much bigger challenge. I don’t think there’s any denying that. (Mario, Principal)

Other participants expressed a sense of pride in earning A-status. Evelyn, a veteran administrator and the principal at Baxter Landing Elementary expressed her interpretation of the state’s meaning of school grades by directly connecting it to a measure of her school’s effectiveness. In this case, school grades were used not only to communicate with the public about the success or failure of a school, but also as a measurement tool for the school itself:

Of course we’re happy to be an A. I think it’s a reflection of how well we have taught the standards. So to me, it’s a gauge that lets me know that we’re doing what we’re supposed to be doing as far as preparing our children for middle school. (Evelyn, Principal)

Similarly, Lizette, a lead teacher at Greenview Academy explained, “It lets me know we worked hard. Because to maintain an A, a lot of people think, “Oh, they’re an A, it’s easy for them.” This same notion was brought up and challenged by several other participants,
even going so far as saying that, from their perspective, it is more difficult to maintain A-status than raise the grade of a lower performing school. The challenges associated with maintaining the “A” will be discussed further near the end of this section.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, other participants expressed contempt for and serious skepticism of the grading system as a whole. Without taking a moment for reflection, Maria, the principal at Saunders Middle, responded to my question about the meaning of school grades with an abrupt, “Oh, I hate it! I hate grades!” In the same vein, describing the system as “so contrived” Juana, an assistant principal at Greenview Academy commented:

*I don’t think the public truly understands the nuances of the formula and how schools are really able to play with the formula to get the data that’s needed...half the time at my school I felt like I was the only one that understood. But I was the nerd... it’s very, very convoluted.* (Juana, Assistant Principal)

In contrast to other school leaders’ perspectives on the significance of school grades, with more than 16 years of administrative experience across the district, Juana firmly believed that the school grading system has been rendered meaningless due to the manipulability of data that she described above and her observation that a school’s reputation will always trump their grade. Despite her principal’s belief in the importance of maintaining A-status for recruitment, Juana argued, “So, here I think we could be a D, a B, a C, and they would still clamor to get in here because…in this community…we’re the best game in town.”

Juana, and other participants, contended that, depending on the community, the grading system is interpreted and responded to in significantly different ways. For example, reflecting on past experiences in different communities and schools, Juana
argued that demographics have more to do with school choice decisions than a school’s grade. She explained:

...we had phenomenal teachers and phenomenal data, but there are a lot of parents out there that it didn’t matter what data I was going to show them; they just didn’t want their child in that environment, an environment where there was a little bit of everything. (Juana, Assistant Principal).

What Juana was referring to when she said “a little bit of everything” was the fact that some schools have a diverse mix of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status. Throughout her interview, Juana used a variety of linguistic maneuvers, like the one described above, to side-step an explicit discussion of race. For example, she (and other participants) would refer to certain schools as having a “rough population” or serving a “lower echelon” of students. There were also references to students as “top-end” kids or “high-end” kids in comparison to “regular” kids, “weaklings”, and “babies”. This type of maneuvering was observed multiple times across interviews, especially when the topics of student performance, disparities, and parent involvement would come up. These observations will be further elaborated in the sections below.

In their reflections on the school grading system, some participants also made an important distinction between the meaning and significance of school grades from an organizational and personal perspective. For example, Alonzo, an assistant principal at McKenzie Elementary explained:

It’s kind of like a difficult question to answer because there’s so much value put on the grade of the school. So everybody who is in education understands that that grade that you receive is going to mean dollars for your school whether it be in money that’s given to teachers for accountability or the A+ money that comes to the school as a reward...Now personally I don’t need a letter grade to tell me how well my school is running or not. My background is I worked at a school for ten years that was considered a low performing ETO[educational transition office] school. I never felt that school was an F school...I honestly felt that the work that was being done and the quality of teaching was at an A level. It was
just other factors that weren’t allowing the students to succeed or were a hindrance to having success. (Alonzo, Assistant Principal)

Jasmine, the principal at Alonzo’s school shared a similar sentiment. In an emotional response, she maintained that no matter the school grade, it would never define her as a person or as a professional. For Jasmine, all that mattered was the positive relationships that she strived to foster at her school. In her mind, nobody would ever remember her as a principal that achieved $A$-status for her school; rather, her legacy would be based on the care and attention she gave to creating a positive, safe, and inclusive school environment for her students and their families.

**Game language.** As participants spoke about school accountability and the grading system, I began to take notice of their language and tone. As a group, they frequently described their experiences using what I have termed, *game language* – words, phrases, and euphemisms that, taken together, depict a game-like scenario. One participant even referred to it as such, saying that “…the reality is sometimes it is playing the game.” Participants made various references to “knowing the rules,” being strategic,” and the importance of “competition” and maintaining a competitive edge. Maria, the principal at Saunders Middle, also spoke about the necessity to “take risks” while playing the game. According to Maria and other participants, risk taking is a necessary component to finding success in an unpredictable environment. Related to this last point, Maria insisted that she did not mind playing the game; it was the unpredictability of the game that she had a problem with.

*I actually have never had a problem with any of the systems...I just have a problem with the way it’s applied, and I have a problem with not knowing the rules before the game starts. Somebody always used the analogy it’s like you’re playing baseball and you have two strikes, and all of a sudden you’re out because they changed the rules. It’s not three anymore, now it’s two. And then I’m held*
accountable for it. You’re holding me accountable, you didn’t tell me the rules, but then you want me to fix the problem. (Maria, Principal).

**Playing to win.** Irrespective of their personal feelings and attitudes towards the grading system, a general sense of ambivalence emerged throughout the interviews. Love it or hate it, participants acknowledged the deep rooted nature of the game in the educational environment. While maintaining that she “doesn’t really care” about school grades, in the same breath, Jasmine also made clear that, as an administrator, you certainly don’t want to find yourself at a low graded school. With this sentiment in mind, it was important for me to explore how school leaders made sense of their schools’ success compared to their experiences at lower performing schools.

Two strands of sensemaking emerged related to how a school can achieve and maintain A-status: following the “rules,” and creating a culture of success within the school. The former deals with strategic decision making at the school level – things that were within the control of school leaders. The latter has to do with factors that were perceived as external to the school environment, more related to the willingness of parents and communities to “receive” and act upon messages for creating a culture of success.

Although there was an acknowledged danger of falling into the “trap” of teaching to the test, participants spoke about the importance of following the rules set out by the state, which included i) understanding the standardized test, ii) relaying this understanding to students through instruction, and iii) creating a “school-wide program” that aligns curriculum, instruction, and assessment to state standards. As Evelyn, the principal at Baxter Landing Elementary explained, developing a school-wide program to ensure success is one thing, but getting all stakeholders on the same page is a completely
different story. In reflecting on her experience with changing her school’s culture,

Evelyn described the many challenges she faced trying to create “teacher buy-in” at her school:

My first two years were really tough. I was in my early 30’s when I got here...and they felt that I was coming from a background where I didn’t understand high performing schools. And I mean, I spent my first year answering complaints and letters to the region and the superintendent about things that I wanted to put into place as far as testing and grading...It took a lot of convincing because they didn’t know the formula...Our grades reflect assignments. And when I say grades, the grades that the students get on a weekly basis – our grades reflect assignments that are on grade level and that are done by the students independently...I don’t allow for home learning assignments to be used as grades. I don’t allow for assignments that students did with assistance to be used for grades. These tests are aligned to the Florida State Standards and this is what we’re going to use as a grade. Because you want to make sure that the grades reflect how the students are going to perform on the FSA [Florida Standards Assessment]...I tell my teachers, it’s better to have a student who’s earning B’s and C’s and do fabulously on the FSA than to have a straight-A student, and then how do you explain to a parent why they didn’t do well? And especially in 3rd grade, god forbid they have to be retained. You have to make sure the grades are aligned to the standards. You don’t want any fluff work in there. And that took a lot of meetings and convincing back and forth, give and take, between me and the teachers. Because when I got here, no student got less than a C, because the teachers’ philosophy was we don’t want to affect their self-esteem, even if they aren’t doing well. (Evelyn, Principal)

In addition to alignment and changing teacher practices, several participants also spoke about the importance of school culture. For example, Mario ascribed his schools’ longstanding success to a firm adherence to school values, regardless of state or federal policies that are in place.

I believe that being able to understand that the teachers and the faculty and staff and stakeholders have the solutions to almost every problem that the school can face, and letting them be part of the problem solving and letting them be part of the programs that drive the school, letting that bubble up from the field, so to speak, rather than top down...you have to work with your staff and remind them of what they’ve been doing that works well and try to keep them focused on that...to maintain core values. And if your core value is attention to critical thinking and parent involvement and the magnet curriculum and teaching foreign
languages and having a big focus on fine arts too, then you continue to do those things. (Mario, Principal)

With respect to school culture, Marisol, the assistant principal at Baxter Landing Elementary reflected on her experience at lower performing schools. She described a circumstance where low graded schools are stuck in a cycle similar to a self-fulfilling prophecy. She believed that when the majority of students are low performing, teachers have the mentality that there is nothing they can do to help them, so they might as well not push it. As a school leader, she saw it as almost an impossible task to change that mentality and create a school culture equipped for success.

Developing and implementing a school-wide program aligned with the state’s rules and standards provided the framework for these high performing schools to achieve and maintain success. However, once that framework was established, participants described different ways of being strategic within that framework. From an administrative perspective, participants described strategic maneuvers to help facilitate increases in student performance. For example, at McKenzie Elementary, Laura described the following process:

At the end of the year, we all articulate our students. So we get a card with their information on it and their grades. So we, as teachers, we have a coding on the top. So we’ll say, “Are they low, average, or high readers? Are they a behavior issue? Are they special ed? Are they ESOL? We write all this on the cards and we do boys and girls. (Laura, Lead Teacher)

With this information in hand, Laura explained that the administrative team then makes strategic matches between students and teachers and creates classes based on similar student needs. In addition to strategic matching and student placement, based on her understanding of how school grades are determined, Lizette, a lead teacher at Greenview...
Academy described how she and other teachers target specific students for strategic instruction in the hopes of scoring more “points” for their classroom and school.

_The school grades are determined based on the score that your students get on the standardized test. If you make a learning gain, more points are gained than if a student maintains a level, they stay at a level two, yes, you get points for that. But you get more points if that student goes from a level two to a level three. So that’s where you gain a lot of your points. And that’s why a lot of schools, this one included, we target bubble students, which are students that are a high two. We see them; they’re ready to burst the bubble – hence the name “bubble student” which I’m sure you are aware of. We target those students, for our interventions - inside of the classrooms those students are targeted. That’s where you can earn a lot of points. Now if you skip a level, if you go from like a three to a five, that’s beaucoups bucks. That’s like double points right there...But at the same time when you’re targeting your bubble students what’s happening to that kid that’s a low two? He’s not getting the same attention. She’s not getting that extra enhancement._ (Lizette, Lead Teacher)

As this quote illustrates, in the school grading game, students become points up for grabs.

This finding must be considered within the current policy context involving teacher evaluation systems based on student test scores; another policy initiative included in Florida’s NCLB waiver. Many participants spoke about the mounting pressure teachers are now experiencing as a result of the new teacher evaluation policies based on value-added measurement. Jasmine explained that some of her best teachers are contemplating leaving the profession because they believe that their concerns about which students will be placed in their classrooms and their ability to produce the appropriate test scores have eclipsed their passion for teaching.

_-Parent involvement and community responsiveness._ Across all of the interviews, participants were firm in their belief that parent involvement makes or breaks school success, and the maintenance of _A_-status. This mentality extended to the belief that parents are equally responsible for their children’s school performance, and without their willingness or ability to pull their weight, students and schools will fail. Some
participants attributed high levels of parent involvement to their community outreach strategies, while others maintained that having high expectations of parents motivated them to become involved because they didn’t want to feel like outcasts in the school community.

Reflecting on their experiences at lower performing schools, participants partially attributed school failure to a lack of parent involvement. Alonzo even reported that although he loved his teaching position at a lower performing school, he was advised that he would not be eligible for an administrative position if he did not gain experience “dealing with parents.” Apparently, in the 10 years that he was at that school, he had so few interactions with parents that he could not justify having experience dealing with parents. Similarly, reflecting on her experiences as the assistant principal at Pines Elementary, a C grade school, Judy expressed high levels of frustration about the school grading system because of the differences with respect to parent involvement she has observed across communities. She explained:

*Once these kids leave these doors, they don’t get help at home. Homework is not a priority. Any kind of review doesn’t get done. Compare us to another school where you have both parents that are educated, both parents that are involved with the child’s education, they’re going to get homework done. They’re going to do that extra review. They’re going to do everything that child needs to move along. While you compare it to our kids that don’t have that but yet we’re being compared, we have the same tests…we’re comparing apples to oranges. (Judy, Assistant Principal)*

Closely related to the issue of parent involvement is the perception of participants that some communities are more willing to receive and act upon messages for school success. As Jasmine explained, “It’s the community, you see? I can’t change the community. I can’t change the school and there’s just communities that, you know, weigh down the progress”. Alonzo, the assistant principal at the same school reiterated
this sentiment explaining, “Here the culture is easier to create because you have more people who are receptive. The parents status, not just socioeconomic but their status in terms of education is at a higher level”.

*School advantages.* Whether participants acknowledged it or not, most of the schools participating in this study benefited from resources and/or circumstances that put them at a distinct advantage for achieving and maintaining *A*-status. For example, McKenzie Elementary was described by one of its administrators as a “private-public school,” given the strength of their PTA (parent-teacher association) and the substantial amounts of money that is fundraised every year to support everything from technology upgrades to additional tutoring, the hiring of paraprofessionals, and intervention services. Another participating school has a longstanding university partnership from which they receive extra intervention services for their lower performing students.

As another example of school advantage, Juana explained that the full magnet status at Greenview Academy provided the school with the option of “exiting” students who were not meeting certain performance standards. Although she maintained that it is used only as a “last resort,” it is a reality at their school and can be used as a tool to motivate students. In addition, out of all of the interviews, only two participants mentioned the fact that they are a distinct advantage because the majority of their students entering 3rd grade are already performing at or above grade level.

*Questioning the validity of school grades.* Even though the school leaders participating in this study described being active players in the game, each recognized and acknowledged multiple facets of the system that they considered to be highly problematic. Participants identified problems with grade determination formulas, not
knowing the rules, testing as the basis of the system, and the application/use of school grade designations altogether. These issues caused participants to call into question the validity, fairness and ultimately, the usefulness of the system as a whole.

As a self-proclaimed “data nerd,” Juana spoke at length about her frustrations with the school grading system and the formulas used to determine school grades. Not only did she find the grading formula complicated and convoluted, making it nearly impossible for anyone to fully understand, she also believed that manipulation of data could produce a desired outcome. Reflecting on her previous administrative experiences, she was skeptical that a school’s grade truly reflected the quality of the school and found it impossible to believe that an $A$ at one school meant the same as an $A$ at another. For example, she explained that one year her school was docked points for some “technicality” bringing them down to a $B$. That same year however, several schools were awarded $A$-status that in her mind did not come close to comparing with her home school as their reputations were poor.

Juana was also getting at a related concern shared by other participants that the $A$-$F$ system does not account for or accurately reflect different gradients of an $A$-grade. Believing in the outstanding success and quality of their schools, many participants found it hard to accept that no distinction was made between “high” and “low” $A$-graded schools. As Jasmine explained, “I know a lot of $A$ schools and they’re not McKenzie! We would be like A++++++.”

Another issue related to the determination formula raised by participants was the fact that, from their perspective, the rules would shift and change and it was difficult to
keep up with these changes. Maria spoke about this circumstance and the frustration it has caused her over the years:

*I don’t have a problem with accountability...My problem is we get the rules so late that we don’t know how to fix the problem, and we’re always guessing. I don’t know if that makes sense...I have a problem with not knowing the rules before the game starts...Give me the rules ahead of time and let me do what I need to do, and don’t change the rules at the last minute.* (Maria, Principal)

This concern was heightened by the fact that during the course of this study, Florida had transitioned from using the FCAT 2.0 as its standardized test to the FSA (Florida Standards Assessment). This transition was causing two main concerns for school leaders. First, because of a change in the format of the test, instruction needed to be tweaked in order to adequately prepare students. As Judy explained, “The FSA is a more challenging format of testing...For so long we’ve taught there’s one possible answer and now we’re looking at multiple possible answers.” Second, because there would be no baseline for the test, nobody knew what components would be included in the determination formula or what the cut scores would be for each level of performance. Without a baseline, school leaders were fearful that the determination formula would not include points for learning gains. In fact, the day of my interview with Maria was the day the Florida Department of Education was to vote on how to proceed with determining school grades for that year.

This feeling of uncertainty and guess work cut across all interviews and surfaced at several junctures of topics that were being brought up. With varying levels of familiarity with state and federal policy, in addition to the complexity of the grading formulas themselves, participants often presented as semi-aware of how the system really works beyond their school walls. As will be discussed further in the last section of this
chapter, this “semi-awareness” impacted school leaders in different ways. Some avoided thinking about or interacting with it in general, while others dismissed it as “political”, and did not see their role as a school administrator necessitating them to become involved in the politics of it all.

“Data is like dead fish”. Beyond the issues raised concerning the shifting nature of rules governing the system, participants were also frustrated by the perceived uselessness of the data that was produced by standardized testing. Comparing old data to rotting fish, Maria complained that even with the transition to computer-based testing which should be able to “spit out the score faster”, the data becomes useless because of the time lag. In describing the following scenario, her frustration was palpable:

Seriously, we take the test in April and we’re getting [results] in December. Eight months later, that fish is dead! Not only does it stink, it’s decomposed already...and the data, we still don’t know what it means because we still don’t know what the cut scores are! (Maria, Principal)

Not only were school leaders frustrated by the lack of usefulness with respect to decision-making and instruction, they were also concerned about the fact that the grade was based on a single assessment. Marisol questioned the reliability of test scores given the various extenuating circumstances that could impact student performance on test day. Whether it was a death in the family, or a student that simply does not perform well on standardized tests, she believed that no accountability system should be based on a “single-shot assessment.”

Comparing apples to oranges. Of all the complaints and criticisms raised by participants, fairness was their biggest concern. Based on their cumulative experience in schools across the district, each participant offered poignant and moving stories and arguments for why the school grading system is not fair to students, teachers, or schools.
Time and again, participants described playing the game on an uneven playing field. The playing field that they were referring to was the broader socioeconomic context that, in their view, has an incalculable impact on schools and student performance. As Alonzo explained:

\[
\text{The problem with any accountability system that you put in place no matter what it is, the problem is that if you can’t take into account the student’s background and where they come from then you’re missing a piece of the puzzle… it is unfair and unjust because it’s a lot easier to create a culture of success at a school like McKenzie than it is at a school like Freedom Square [an inner city school with a high poverty rate]. (Alonzo, Assistant Principal)}
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Sharing a similar perspective, both Maria and Judy firmly believed that it is fundamentally unfair to compare and judge schools given the “direct correlation with socioeconomic level to students’ academic abilities.” Judy used the analogy of comparing apples to oranges in describing the problems with the grading system. She did not believe it was fair to have all students take the same test and to judge a school on how these students performed when no other similarity was present between her school and a school in a more affluent area.

It became clear throughout the interviews that participants made sense of socioeconomic status in relation to other factors they believed impacted the ability for a school to be successful. For example, levels of parent involvement were directly related to the socioeconomic status of that family, and a child’s “background” was directly related to their community’s willingness or ability to contribute to a “culture of success” at the school.

Recognizing the very real and challenging circumstances produced by poverty, Alonzo was one of few participants offering a nuanced understanding of this cycle. In
comparing his experiences at McKenzie to his prior teaching tenure at Freedom Square, he explained the following:

At Freedom Square there was a lot of good parents but they had to work. They didn’t necessarily have the opportunity to come and spend time in the school because some of the moms that I dealt with were working two, three jobs. So they were more focused on putting food on the table than going and listening to the teacher telling them what their homework policy is. So it’s not that they are worse parents. They just don’t have the same opportunities as some of the parents who their kids attend our school. (Alonzo, Assistant Principal)

**Learning gains.** Despite the issues raised, the majority of participants, at least to some extent, believed in the value or vision of accountability. As Laura explained,

I don’t mind school grades. I like the fact that I’m evaluated in some way, shape, or form because I like to hold myself to a high standard. I hold my students to high standards. So I think it’s a good thing that we should have some kind of form of evaluating what I’m doing in my classroom compared to what you’re doing in yours. (Laura, Lead Teacher)

What Laura spoke emphatically about was her belief that all schools and teachers should be held accountable for producing and promoting student growth. With a professional background in special education, she was particularly passionate about the potential for learning in students with disabilities, and the responsibility of all schools and teachers for promoting learning even for students with significant disabilities. That being said, with respect to school accountability grades, Laura went on to explain that she was “not even sure how it all works to be honest because – they give it to us.”

Participants also spoke about the importance of focusing on learning gains and how they are pleased that it has been included in the determination formula thus far. As Maria explained, “One thing I have liked about the school grades in the past is that it included the learning gains. I think that’s huge, and I think honestly, learning gains are
more important than the achievement because there has to be some kind of learning.”
Evelyn even went as far as saying that because of the inclusion of learning gains, the
formula was actually “as equitable as it could be,” reasoning that “even for schools that
may not have students coming in who are going to meet high standards, if they
demonstrate learning gains, the schools get points for that. And a lot of times they’re
gonna get more learning gains points than a school like mine”.

**Theme 2: The ups and downs of high- and low-graded schools.** Florida’s
school grading system is based on the logic that schools will improve student
performance as a response to differentiated accountability triggers. Much like a game in
which players receive rewards and penalties based on performance, so do schools. As
such, I was interested in understanding how school leaders made sense of the various
perks, or rewards, associated with achieving and maintaining top performance grades.
What emerged was a complex relationship between school grades and the perceived
distribution of district and state support.
Benefits of holding A-status. Beyond recognizing the meaning and significance of school grades on a personal and/or professional level, participants also spoke about their impact on the school from an organizational perspective. When identifying benefits, participants spoke about financial incentives from the State, student recruitment and retention, and a general boost to school morale. However, it should be noted that not all participants were aware of incentive dollars, and some had a hard time identifying any benefits other than the fact that they believed it was better to be an A school than a failing school.

Incentive dollars. Mario, the principal at Greenview Academy was one of two participants that related A-status to a tangible benefit. As he explained, “There are incentive dollars that are given to schools who are maintaining the A grade or who improve a letter grade each year. And it’s part of the accountability plan. It’s called the A-Plus Recognition Money Program.” Mario believed that his staff were well-aware of
this program and that the financial benefit acted as a motivator for them to work as hard as they could to earn the A. However, when asked about the benefits associated with their school grade, neither the assistant principal, Juana, or Lizette, a lead teacher identified the financial incentive. In fact, Juana’s response was a flat “no,” she did not believe that any benefits existed for schools earning A-status. This lack of recognition or awareness was common throughout the rest of the interviews.

Reputation and student recruitment. Of the participants that acknowledged any benefit at all, most identified it as having a positive impact on community perceptions of their school and the subsequent impact on student recruitment and retention. These participants thought that the school grade signaled to parents that the school and its staff are doing a great job. As result, participants felt that the A grade increased parent support and respect for teachers and administrators. On the flipside, reflecting on past experiences at lower graded schools, participants also felt that, for parents that were “aware” of or “cared” about the school grade, the perception was that teachers were not working hard enough.

Boosts school morale. Closely related to the reputational benefit, participants also spoke about the relationship between their high grade and its psychological impact on the school. They believed that it creates a sense of pride in students and teachers and this pride cycles into striving to be the best which then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Lizette explained, it’s more about “living up to high expectations.”

The downsides of high grades. Throughout the interview process it became clear that a definitive downside existed for schools with high grades. In response to my question about perceived benefits, some participants responded by saying that they would
rather tell me how it didn’t benefit them or their school. Participants spoke about the costs of maintaining high grade status in terms of resource costs, emotional tolls, and student learning costs.

*Lack of district support.* At the forefront of participants’ minds was the lack of district support for moderate to highly graded schools. In essence, participants described highly graded schools as needing to be self-sufficient, even when they didn’t necessarily have the resources or finances to maintain their grade status. This predicament was particularly concerning for non-Title 1 schools and for schools receiving a grade of C.

As Laura explained:

*So we get no support. We get absolutely zero. So we’re the last ones to get technology. We’re the last ones to get curriculum support. We’re the last ones to get anything because, “Oh, they’re doing fine.” So I guess the idea behind that is, okay, if you’re an A school, your students come from backgrounds where they have parental support. So you don’t need as much support and intervention.*

(Laura, Lead Teacher)

Several participants shared similar stories, experiences, and sentiments about the lack of support and resources that go along with high grades.

School leaders responded in several ways to this need for self-sufficiency.

Evelyn, for example, shared that she had to become strategic with her networks so that she did not miss out on any of the resources or information provided to lower performing schools that would help them prepare students. She explained, “And what we do, principals of A schools, is you got to have colleagues who are in those types of schools that will call you and say, ‘Hey, listen, this just came out. You may not be aware of it.’”

At McKenzie Elementary, a school with over 800 students, school leaders responded by placing a strong emphasis on community fundraising, mostly through the PTA. Alonzo even went as far as describing it as a “private-public school:”
We don’t have a lot of dollars that come to us either from the district – and we have no federal dollars cause we’re not Title 1. So a lot of the money that we use to run our school or to do anything extra, it comes from our PTA. We do a lot of fundraisers. We do technology walks to increase technology. (Alonzo, Assistant Principal)

Even with the incentive dollars that Alonzo acknowledged his school receives, he argued that it still was not enough. As a result, the majority of the financial cost to maintain their A status is incurred by the community to pay for after-school tutoring and different academic clubs such as their Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) club.

As Alonzo described above, many of the schools participating in this study were able to cope with the lack of resources and support in one way. However, the lack of district support was felt in the lower graded schools as well; schools that are less able to rely on community support to offset costs. For example, Judy, the assistant principal at Pines Elementary, a C school, was particularly frustrated by the district-level decision-making for resource allocation.

We have been a C for a couple of years now so it has plateaued. We look at it as better than going down. It ’ s better to stay where you ’ re at than go down. Ideally, we would like to move up but it ’ s difficult. It ’ s not as easy as it sounds…Last year we did have a reading coach and a math coach but because we stayed a C they took them away. Instead of being one of those schools that is considered to be struggling because we stayed the same, we ’ re considered a “ release ” school. So, they take away the coaches. It ’ s difficult. The coaches made a difference last year. Whatever they did, it ’ s on me plus everything else. I don ’ t have that time to be able to plan with the teachers like they did all the time, supply resources to the teachers. The district provides monthly meetings for math, reading, and science. When the coaches would go to them, they would come back, meet with teachers, go over stuff, and share with them…It ’ s hard because at the end of the day the kids are the ones losing out because we don ’ t have that extra to be able to give to them. (Judy, Assistant Principal)

Emotional toll. In addition to the lack district support, participants also spoke about the emotional costs and increased workload related to achieving and maintaining a high grade. As Marisol explained, “ Once you ’ re up there, there ’ s only one other way to
go, and that’s down. So it’s really maintaining, and it’s hard to do that.” Participants, especially the two lead teachers felt that they were under a lot of pressure to always reach perfection. Coupled with the stress of high expectation is the increased workload necessary to maintain the high grade. As Alonzo described:

...where the cost comes in is emotionally. We’re expected to maintain a certain level of performance. And to maintain that level of performance and to maintain it at such a high level requires a lot of hard work and people don’t understand that...To maintain that high level means that we have to work extra hard to make sure that everybody is getting what they need to be successful. (Alonzo, Assistant Principal)

Like Alonzo, other school leaders described the cost in terms of school staff going above and beyond what is contractually required of them to ensure that each and every student will succeed. However, an examination of within-school reading performance disparities presented at the beginning of this chapter shows that for some of these schools, including McKenzie Elementary, going “above and beyond” didn’t necessarily ensure high performance for all student groups.

Potential for complacency and stagnation. Another component of the double-edged sword that participants were describing was the loss of urgency among school staff. At times, this scenario resulted in what they expressed as “good enough” teaching and educational practices. Reflecting on her experience at highly graded schools, Marisol explained, “you become accustomed and you become comfortable in it”. Other participants explained that some egos would get all “puffed up” and as a result, there was a tendency to relax and not worry so much about how well their students could be doing, as long as they’re doing well enough.

Student Performance
Because Florida’s school accountability grades for elementary, middle, and K-8 schools are largely based on standardized test scores, it was important to understand how school leaders participating in this study made sense of student performance and performance disparities (or lack thereof). The following section presents the various ways in which school leaders went about differentiating between high and low performers, explaining performance, and reconciling (or not) patterns of disparities among student subgroups.

**Theme 3: Making sense of student performance.** Engaging participants in a discussion about who they identified as low and high performers proved more challenging than I originally thought it would be. At times, participants were uncomfortable answering questions that directly related to student performance. For the most part, participants were careful about the ways in which they spoke about low performing students, trying not to overgeneralize low performance as a group characteristic (i.e., all students from a particular racial or ethnic background). However, the exception to this observation was the recognition that students with disabilities, as a group, represented the lowest performing students across schools.
Identifying high and low performers. As participants delicately maneuvered around questions regarding student performance, their reliance on the availability of assessment data emerged as a common strategy for differentiating between high and low performing students. For example, Juana explained that because of the transition from the FCAT to the FSA and the State having yet to announce the new cut scores, schools were in a particularly difficult situation this year trying to identify their lowest 25% of performers. She said, “Honestly, for this year, with this new scale, I don’t – we don’t know who they are…I don’t even know how the state’s calculating it this time.” She went on to explain that although there are other forms of data, like teacher assessments, until the new formula is determined, she’d just be guessing. Juana’s frustration mirrored that of Maria’s as she was comparing data to rotten fish. Because of the time lag between testing and the release of data, in conjunction with shifting rules, formulas, and cut scores, administrators are faced with the challenge of developing and implementing a plan to “fix” the problem, when they are not sure who or what to target.
Exceptional students. Regardless of their access to timely data, participants were able to definitively identify gifted students and students with disabilities as representative of their highest and lowest performing students. This recognition was consistent with school data demonstrating students with disabilities as the lowest performing group across schools. For example, at Saunders Middle, only 19% of students with disabilities scored at or above a basic level of reading proficiency - this subgroup included 145 students. Even at Greenview Academy, a school whose data showed overall high performance and minimal disparities between racial and ethnic subgroups, students with disabilities performed substantially below all other groups. As Greenview’s principal for more than a decade, Mario recognized this pattern and offered the following reflection about the challenges his school has faced in addressing this issue:

Our students with disabilities I think is one of the most significant groups for us. We deliver special education instruction in an inclusion model almost 100 percent. And so that means that student is placed in the general ed class and receives assistance from a special education teacher who comes into the gen ed class and helps the gen ed teacher access the curriculum to those students who have an IEP. And that is one area that we’ve had some fluctuation in our scores. And we worry sometimes that the inclusion model might not be the best for everyone, but with the way that the resources and staffing are given to us for the SPED [special education] program, for us to carry out two or three different delivery models would be very much of a challenge. (Mario, Principal)

Although Mario recognized students with disabilities as an identifiably low performing group, he did not mention his English language learners, a group that was also performing substantially lower than the school’s average, with only 63% meeting basic proficiency.

In addition to the challenges associated with the inclusion model, participants also spoke about additional frustrations they encountered that help explain how they made sense of lower performance among this group. Evelyn explained that even though “it’s just a handful of kids” that could be considered low performing, the “toughest group to work with” at Baxter Landing Elementary were students with disabilities. The challenge
that she faced had more to do with the disability identification process and the parents of these students than the students themselves. She explained:

\[ \text{We have more 504s here than IEPs...it's a lot harder to get a student on an IEP than it used to be, because you have to go through the whole Response to Intervention, the RTI process. But our parents here, they're smart, they have resources. And when they see that they are not going to be able to qualify through RTI, then they get physician statements. “We have ADHD diagnosis”. And in some of those cases, these are kids that really have severe disabilities that the parents don’t want on the student’s record. We have autistic kids on 504s where it says ADHD...So even though we put all these things in place, they need more.} \]  

(Evelyn, Principal)

Evelyn’s explanation also provides insight into why the state-reported school accountability data for Baxter Landing did not include information about their students with disabilities. With so few students identified through the traditional identification process, they were able to not have this information disclosed and reported.

With respect to high performing students, if a participant explicitly identified any group as high performing, it was their gifted students. Alonzo, for example, explained that even though McKenzie had their share of low performing students, their overall averages were skewed up because of the large gifted program at his school. He went on to explain that their gifted program was highly successful because there is a strong effort to focus as much on those higher performing students as on those that are struggling by challenging them at the instructional level they are capable of handling. In fact, Alonzo boasted that they were able to facilitate the promotion of exceptionally high performers by allowing them to skip grades.

**Explanations for high and low performance.** Participants’ explanations of student performance were highly related to their sensemaking about how and why their schools were able to achieve and maintain high accountability grades.
Parent involvement. Across interviews, parent investment in both the school and their child’s academic achievement was cited as the most significant factor contributing to student performance. Based on his experience, Mario reflected on Greenview’s racial and ethnic subgroup performance, alluding to the fact that high levels of parent commitment successfully transcend historically low performance for certain groups. Mario also connects the notion of parent investment with school choice policies and their ability to facilitate high performance as they shift responsibility and choice to parents.

Our African-American students and Hispanic students have done very well...I think the fact that it is a choice program, that the families that choose to come to Greenview Academy are making a huge commitment. In some cases they’re sending their kids across town on buses in order to get here and access our magnet program. That in and of itself shows the kind of commitment to a school program. And most of the time, also indicated the support that you need to get for that student for the whole thing to work. And knowing that our families are making the commitment to the program by applying, by then keeping their child in good academic standing at the school, I think it augers well for the success that we’ve had with all of our subgroups. (Mario, Principal)

However, in some circumstances at high performing schools, parent involvement was characterized as parent pushback and/or interference that was perceived by participants as being detrimental to student growth and teacher motivation. For example, both Jasmine and Laura felt disempowered by what they referred to as “a different generation of parents”. In these schools, leaders described a type of parent disengagement that was different than the perceived lack of involvement at lower performing, higher minority schools. For example, in venting about her frustrations, Jasmine lamented the fact that “the parents nowadays – they’re just different”. She went on to explain:

You got the extreme of living vicariously through their kid and this is how they come. They hail them from the car and they’re on the phone and the kid gets in. They don’t even look at them and then it’s, like, they’re saying “What are you doing for my child? Why does he have so much homework?” And you’re like, “Seriously? Are you kidding me?” And you can only take so much of that til you
realize, “I’m not making a dent here” and you start getting disappointed in the world. (Jasmine, Principal)

Echoing that frustration, Laura’s experience dealing with parents of students with disabilities has left her feeling highly unmotivated and demoralized as a teacher.

Reflecting on her experience implementing Florida’s new state standards, she explained:

* I do see pushback. I feel like a lot of parents, even in this high performing school don’t want their students pushed, and it’s like, why? That part I don’t understand. Why do you not have as high expectations for your child as I have for your child because I feel like your child can be way up here? [holding her hand high] You’re saying, “No, no. I’m fine with here.” [holding her hand low] No, if your fine with here, they’re never gonna get higher than there…It’s really hard. I’ve hit ten years…I guess I’m just discouraged. I think parents need to support teachers as a whole front, and I’m just kind of seeing them want to take the kind of easy road. (Laura, Lead Teacher)

**Socioeconomic status.** Related to the perceived importance of parent investment was the issue of family socioeconomic status. Throughout the interviews it became clear that participants’ notions of parents’ abilities were dependent on parents’ financial stability and professional status. In her reflections on the minimal racial and ethnic disparities at Greenview Academy, Juana concluded that the data from her school confirms her hypothesis and deeply held belief that the “achievement gap” is all about differences in socioeconomic levels:

* I think our school is a great example that the diversity or the dichotomies in education are really not ethnic but socioeconomic. Because I do think the parents here – it doesn’t matter if you’re Black, Hispanic, or White, most parents are socioeconomically sufficient. We have a lot of professional parents regardless of their race or ethnicity. They’re professionals. That’s not the case, I think, in most other schools. (Juana, Assistant Principal)

I asked Juana to elaborate on this point and asked her to reflect on her previous experiences. She went on to explain:

* …well, it was totally socioeconomic. I mean, our – most of our ESE [exceptional student education] or our more struggling students, or the rougher crowd, so to speak, had socioeconomic issues at home. And then, on the other side, our higher-performing students, they were more financially self-sufficient. (Juana, Assistant Principal)
Shifting demographics. In addition to their interpretations of student performance, participants also reflected on factors contributing to fluctuations in overall school performance and the challenges they’ve experienced as school leaders in addressing those fluctuations. Each of the A-graded schools participating in this study identified having to deal with demographic changes at their school and in surrounding communities. Not only did these shifts create challenges for the school, leaders used them to help explain decreases in overall performance, and subgroup disparities. For example, having worked at McKenzie Elementary for many years, both Jasmine and Alonzo were able to reflect on how the school had changed over the years and the challenges these changes posed. As Jasmine explained, some of those challenges were felt internally, having to deal with changing teachers’ mindsets about students that did not fit the traditional mold of a McKenzie student.

When I got here there was a saying that the teachers would use, the older-generation teachers, like the ones that had been here since they opened the hole for the school, since they dug up the ground. “Oh, that’s not a McKenzie kid.” What exactly does that look like, because I’m not quite sure what a ‘McKenzie’ kid is? You know, there was a lotta pushback with the Hispanics, right? And because this was at the beginning a predominantly Jewish community but then it became just Anglo but then now it’s mostly Hispanic, right? And the teachers, I had to switch the mindset of the teachers because every time they would say, “Oh but obviously look at these grades. That’s not a McKenzie child.” I’m like, “Exactly please tell me what that is...you can make them a McKenzie child because they’re all gonna come in and we’re gonna teach them and if you’re a good teacher you can make them into a McKenzie child when they leave in fifth grade.” But to judge a child because they don’t speak the language or because they come from a – or they didn’t have that solid background from the beginning or that the parent works three jobs and can’t be here to do your tea party? No. (Jasmine, Principal)

In telling a continuation of the history of McKenzie, Alonzo highlighted the continuing demographic changes, particularly with respect to socioeconomic changes:
One of the interesting things that’s happening at this particular school is the demographics are changing. This used to be a predominantly middle to upper class neighborhood. There’s two things that are going on: Number one, the houses in this neighborhood are being subletted. They’re actually leasing out rooms so you have families living in rooms. So you may have two, three families living in one house. Even though that’s illegal, ok, that’s what a lot of people are doing. So you see the socioeconomic status of some parents coming in changing. Secondly, we have a lot of people coming to our school that are not necessarily from within our school boundaries. They’re requesting out of area transfers to leave their current schools because of charter schools and because of parents being empowered to try to acquire the best school possible there’s a lot of mobility. So we have about 120 students here that are not necessarily from the area per se but are here on out of area transfers approved by the region or are here ‘cause they’re using their relatives’ addresses to be able to come to this school. (Alonzo, Assistant Principal)

Alonzo also attributed fluctuations in overall performance to the byproduct of shifting demographics: the loss of white middle-class students at McKenzie. He argued that without a critical mass of white students, scores would go down.

Throughout the interviews at McKenzie, participants spoke about the many strategies they use as a school leaders to facilitate school success and to make sure that all students are receiving the best possible educational experience. Jasmine was particularly focused on the importance of working directly with teachers and staff to break down barriers that she believed would get in the way of successful teaching and learning and the importance of creating a positive school culture for parents, students, and staff was evident throughout these interviews. Despite this explicit and intentional focus, the school accountability data revealed a 30 point disparity in reading performance between Black students and their White and Hispanic peers, and an even greater disparity for students with disabilities compared to student performance in aggregate.

**Repairing the damage caused by charter schools and NCLB transfers.** Student mobility as a result of school choice policies also posed challenges for schools. Although
Alonzo and other participants defended such school choice policies and applauded the competition they produced, they linked these policies to fluctuations in overall school performance and the challenges they have been facing as a result of student mobility related to school choice. Alonzo explained:

*We have a lot of students who are coming back to us from the charter schools. Their needs are not being met in the charter school system. And charter schools, depending on what charter school you go depends on what experience you’ll have. There was one charter school that was close by and they had to close down. So we started getting an influx of those students. Now those students for the most part these are parents who are highly involved. Ok? These are parents who care but their students were not receiving instruction at the level that was necessary to be successful. So when those kids came here a lot of those kids came deficient.* (Alonzo, Assistant Principal)

Similar stories were told by other participants with reference to student mobility related to the No Child Left Behind transfer option. Describing her experience with this challenge at her previous school, Juana explained:

*So, when we became an A school, I really didn’t see much change in the upper echelon, but I did see a change in the lower. They were able to transfer out with the No Child Left Behind transfer. And we had quite a few students that did that. I remember one year, they wouldn’t even tell us how many kids were coming. And I’ll never forget one day walking in, it was like well into the summer, and I open up my master schedule and all of a sudden I had like 250 kids in my building that I hadn’t scheduled.*

**Theme 4: Disparity Blindness.** Despite the availability of subgroup data and the recognition that schools did in fact have low performing students, participants rarely made mention of performance disparities among subgroups other than students with disabilities. Although participating schools had varying degrees of within-school disparities, each school had at least one group of students, in addition to students with disabilities, that either lagged substantially behind or outperformed other groups. For the most part, school leaders were reluctant to make generalizations about academic
performance based on student membership in a given demographic group, and even less likely to recognize and discuss issues of intersectionality for students with multiply minoritizing identities. This reluctance manifested in two distinct but related modes of sensemaking: i) disparity silence, and ii) the use of a colorblind perspective.

Figure 21. Coding Map of Theme 4

**Disparity silence.** Overall, it was difficult to engage participants in a conversation about performance disparities and the intersection of demographic membership and patterns of academic performance. While the majority of participants acknowledged that the “achievement gap” was a problem, they spoke about it as something that was taking place beyond their own schools’ walls (i.e., a problem for other schools). This observation was particularly evident as they spoke about their previous experiences working in lower performing schools. In fact, in many respects, participants acknowledged the need for accountability policies like NCLB to keep, as Mario put it, “those gigantic gaps that you see in some schools” in check.

During my interview with Marisol, I asked her to think about patterns of performance at her school. With respect to demographic membership she said, “I wouldn’t be able to even tell you. We’ve had some grade levels that have performed
better than others in terms of the grade level as a whole but not an actual subgroup.”

Evelyn provided a similar response to my questions about low performers and disparities among subgroups. She explained, “It’s just a handful of kids. And if you mean by ethnicity? It’s not an ethnicity thing. It’s just some of them [low performing students] are students with 504’s because they have attentional issues.”

I asked Alonzo whether or not McKenzie would be impacted if school grades were determined by subgroup performance instead of aggregate student performance. He said, “I think we would continue to be very successful. I think the school would continue to perform. You would still see our subgroups performing at an equal or if not higher level than the rest of the population.” Despite this belief, performance data for both of these schools indicated substantial disparities among various subgroups.

A colorblind perspective. Maria, the principal at Saunders Middle, was an exception to the observation described above. Throughout the interview, she spoke candidly about race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. As depicted in the excerpt below, Maria used a colorblind approach to make sense of these issues. Because she had not heard of the NCLB waiver, I explained to her that although school grades would continue to be determined with aggregated student data, there would be no requirement by NCLB law to also produce adequate yearly progress for individual student groups. As I was aware of the substantial subgroup disparities reported for her school, I asked whether or not the exclusion of disaggregated data would benefit her school and what type of impact it would have on student performance. Our conversation went as follows:

Interviewer: So at this particular school being a B school, do you see that having any type of impact?
Maria: Absolutely. We would get penalized when it came to the school improvement plan. Overall, it does benefit us if they average it – especially because I have the magnet program too. What ends up happening is that – I’ll give you a perfect example. The other day, I was walking the building, and it happened to be I walked into this class, and I’d always walked into this class, but for some reason that day it hit me more than anything. There were 18 kids in the room. Sixteen of them are Black and two of them are Hispanic, and it was a SPED class. And I looked at them like, “Do you realize how many SPED kids are sitting in ESE that are African-American?” And my SPED teacher who knows, she starts laughing, and she’s like, “yeah”. It’s sad, but it’s true...We have what we call iR-Plus, which is the lowest of the low readers in the building. These are the kids who are not even fluent readers, and if you walk into those classes, it’s all Hispanic or all African-American. There’s not a single white child in that building in that classroom.

Interviewer: So what do you do at a B school when you have those types of differences?

Maria: I don’t see them. I notice it, but I don’t necessarily acknowledge it because I think every kid can learn. So what I really focus on is not necessarily the fact that why aren’t there more Black kids in the IB program or why are only – I don’t do that, and maybe I’m wrong for that. I just focus on what we need to do to get you out of reading. I don’t look at what do I need to do to get the Black kids out of reading. That’s not it. Unfortunately, some of these kids only come to school because they know they’re going to get a meal here.

Supporting “Low Performers”

Although participants were reluctant at times to discuss low performing students or acknowledge disparities in performance, it was evident that each school had a plan in place for supporting those students that were struggling. Two interconnected themes emerged from the interviews characterizing the process through which these high performing schools supported their low performing students. First, the use of ‘data,’ specifically data produced by i-Ready, the state-wide diagnostic and instructional program, emerged as the focal point around which the ‘intervention’ process was carried out. Second, when it came to the administration of interventions at these schools, a substantial emphasis was placed on the notion that struggling students need “extra” and
that extra support typically needs to be provided outside of the classroom and regular school hours.

**Theme 5: A data-driven process.** From the identification of struggling students to the delivery of interventions and the monitoring of student progress, data was the sole mechanism through which participants described addressing and supporting the academic needs of students. As Lizette explained, “it drives the instruction of your whole school. At least it should.”

**Developing a data culture.** Across interviews, participants spoke about the importance of data and the fundamental role it now plays in the teaching and learning process. For example, of all the changes she could think of during her nine years of teaching, Lizette said that the incorporation of technology and its ability to produce diagnostic and instructional data has most significantly impacted her practice. Her love for and belief in data trickled all the way down to her students as she explained in the following story:

*Several years ago I was teaching second grade for a brief time....This little second grader comes up and hands me a bar graph. And it’s all different colors, a beautiful bar graph. And I’m like, “Wow, honey, what is this? Tell me.” He goes, “This is the data, the numbers that you’re always looking at on your*
computer.”...I’m like, “I love it.” It’s taped on my desk. My students have data folders with all of their pertinent data. They have their STAR testing data, they have their i-Read diagnostic one, diagnostic two. If they’re in tutoring, they have the monthly growth monitoring. I go over it with them in small groups. We sit and we go over the data, “Hey, here’s where you grew. Here’s where you lost. Let’s use that strength to play into your weaknesses.” So my students know data! And I think that’s really important. I mean this is a big change, like this is like a shift in teaching, in pedagogy. (Lizette, Lead Teacher)

In her interview, Lizette did acknowledge that not all teachers or administrators share her passion for data. Like other participants identifying themselves as ‘data nerds’, Lizette maintained that you either like data or don’t. “You can give the data to the teachers, you’re going to have data chats until you’re blue in the face. What they do with it on their own time is up to them.”

Despite her ongoing attempts at engaging her faculty with data, Maria found that her teachers were suffering from data fatigue. She explained:

Since I was a math teacher, I’m very data driven. Every year at the beginning of the year I plan this very nice breakfast for the staff...And so my first year, I went too wild. I did E Pluribus Unum, together as one, and I talked about data. And my second year, again, I talked about data. So this past year, we didn’t have any data, so our theme was a very simple one. Be Awesome! So this year I took a totally different approach to the presentation, and everybody this year has been like, happy. And I asked them, “why do you guys look so much happier?” They say, “You didn’t talk to us about data this year! There’s no stress on us. We can just go in and teach.”...My first year, we did phenomenal. (Maria, Principal)

**Clustering by performance.** Data was also used as a sorting tool for instructional purposes. Participants described multiple ways of identifying, sorting, and grouping students according to different performance levels. For example, Judy explained that at Pines Elementary:

...being that we’re a small school, kindergarten and first are the only grades that have three classes. Everybody else has two. So, we have two per grade level. Our reading and language arts is one teacher. Math and science is the other teacher. Our reading and language arts will have one group. Let’s say, the morning group is the low students. Within that reading and language arts group,
we have intervention going on. We have extras to help those students. We cluster them by performance. (Judy, Assistant Principal)

In a similar vein, while describing her use of i-Ready data, Lizette explained:

And you have three diagnostics throughout the year. We’re in the midst of completing diagnostic two. So when I get this information I will alter all of my intervention groups. Pull kids out who have found success, put kids in who need it. And also change some groups around – put students in the lower performing groups if they were raised enough put them in a higher performing group where they might be able to leave the program at least we can advance them.

Theme 6: Interventions as “extras”. Throughout the interviews, participants spoke about the importance of providing interventions for struggling students. However, what was most intriguing about their descriptions was where, when, and by whom these interventions were delivered. Across interviews, interventions for struggling students were referred to as “extras” provided to help students improve performance. For example, before and after school tutoring programs were offered to students who needed extra help, with few references to any type of instructional support provided during regular classroom hours. In fact, leaders often attributed the success of their school to their ability to provide exceptional before-school and after-school tutoring. At McKenzie, they were able to afford to hire private tutors to come to the school in their before and after care program to deliver interventions.

For those students that were failing specific classes, participants also described using a self-directed approach for remediation, one that was encouraged by the district. For example, in discussing a handful of her middle-years students that had failed math, Juana explained the following approach,

They all failed math last year, so they’re retaking it in the computer lab. If they don’t finish the course, they’re going to get “exited”. So, we just went through, we checked each one, we looked at their grades for the first nine weeks. I’m
bringing it to our administrative team meeting today saying, “Okay, what are we going to do?”...We’re going to talk about them. And the conversation we’re having, what we’re trying to decide is: They’re not being successful in their core because they’re basically taking a second math class, a seventh course on their own after hours...We really go that extra mile. And in fact, they’re supposed to be doing this Florida virtual course on their own, and what we’ve done is on Wednesdays, either myself or the counselor will stay with them in the computer lab so that they can work on it here. (Juana, Assistant Principal)

Leadership & Policy

Throughout the interviews, participants described a complex relationship with education policy characterized at various times by acceptance, resistance, avoidance, and ambivalence. Participants expressed varying levels of interest, familiarity, and even awareness of particular policies and policy changes. In addition, participants also expressed skepticism related to accountability policies and the policy process more generally. For many participants, policy was perceived as being inextricably connected to politics and their personal tendency to ‘lean in’ towards policy was greatly influenced by their acceptance of their role as a school leader being a politically charged one.

Theme 7: An inward and downward focus. In an attempt to have participants begin to reflect on their relationship to policy, during the interviews I asked them to explain if and how they obtained policy knowledge and what they did with that information once they had received it. Participants described a three-part process that involved i) acquiring policy information through formal and informal channels, ii) a self-directed curation of policy information, and iii) the communication of selective information to teachers and staff, generally on a need-to-know basis. Overall, what emerged was a self-directed process through which school leaders were able to focus only on policy that was most relevant to their own school’s context. Additionally, participants took great care in disseminating information to their faculty in an attempt to
protect their staff from what was described as an overly negative policy environment for
teachers and schools.

**Acquiring policy knowledge.** Regardless of their inclination towards politics or
the policy process, each participant reported being given policy information to some
extent or another and was able to identify the process through which they acquired
policy-related information. Participants described both formal and informal channels
through which they received policy knowledge, however the former effort was only taken
on by a few that identified themselves as being personally interested in policy and data.
Alonzo’s depiction of a top-down formal process was representative of how participants
generally understood the acquisition of policy information:

Well, a lot of the policy information we get comes to us from the district. We
attend AP meetings or principal meetings. So whatever is coming down as far as
policy changes or things of that nature we get it. So things like we’re
implementing the new FSA or the Florida State Standards which is attached to the
FSA, the assessment. We get that information...That’s the stuff that we’re going
to get privy to when we go to our meetings. They’re going to give us all that
information. (Alonzo, Assistant Principal)

In addition to regional leadership meetings, Evelyn at Baxter Landing Elementary
also explained that administrators are provided with “weekly briefings” distributed by the
district office addressing all updates and changes that administrators need to be aware of or share with a particular group of teachers or other staff members. Marisol, her Assistant Principal was responsible for reviewing and annotating the briefings before passing them along to Evelyn.

In addition to the formal channels described above, a few participants also described seeking out policy information on their own as a way to fulfill what they perceived as their professional responsibility. For example, Alonzo explained:

*Now it would be foolish for me to tell you that that’s the only place we get information. Most of the administrators that are in positions in Dade County Public Schools, most of them – I can’t speak for all of them, but most of them that I associate with that I know, they go out and they get information on their own. They’re reading the newspapers. They’re watching the news. They’re reading articles...So we’re getting information from multiple sources to try to stay abreast of what’s going on because the idea is or at least the philosophy here is we have to be the two [principal and assistant principal] most knowledgeable people when it comes to policy within the state when it pertains to education. That’s not to say we know everything.* (Alonzo, Assistant Principal)

**Curating policy information.** Once the information has been obtained, school leaders are left with the task of deciding what, if anything they are going to do with it. Participants explained this process as largely self-directed and unique to each particular school and administrator. For example, Juana explained:

*So, every Thursday they [policy briefings] come out...And then, it’s up to each school to pull them, read them, use them, not use them...some of them are just “FYI, this is the new grading formula”...You either read it or you don’t.* (Juana, Assistant Principal)

At Evelyn’s school, part of the curation process was delegated to her by Marisol, her assistant principal. Because the briefings were distributed every Thursday, Marisol would spend a portion of her day sifting through the briefings and selecting pertinent information. Evelyn explained that she dedicated Friday mornings to getting herself up
to speed on policy. Generally, participants described sifting through the information focusing specifically on the aspects that were relevant to or that would have a direct impact on their individual school. From there, school leaders needed to figure out how to communicate this knowledge and to whom it needed to reach.

**Communicating policy interpretations.** The third and final step in this process proved to be the most challenging for school leaders. Not only did they need to figure out which information to share and how much, they also needed to find strategic ways to help their school faculty digest the information by making it and its implications for school practice as palatable as possible. In the following quote, Mario explained his dilemma with initiating policy-related discussions with his staff:

*We try to keep the faculty as abreast of what’s going on as possible. And so to the extent that I try to keep up with information that is bubbling down from the state, those are the kinds of policy discussions we have. We try to talk to them about what’s coming down the pipe, what is the impact on us, how can we implement it? Sometimes I worry that I talk too much about that, because I’m worried that I’m going to take their eye and focus away from what it should be on. I don’t want to sugar-coat things or try to hide it from them.* (Mario, Principal)

As an assistant principal with 16 years of administrative experience, Juana highlighted the fact that once the policy process reaches individual schools, administrators have substantial autonomy when it comes to deciding what information to share and how. As demonstrated in the quote below, even when/if policy information is shared, there’s no guarantee that it will be received by faculty.

*Every school has its own political structure that is part of how information gets disseminated at a school. I’ve worked in schools – I mean, I was the curriculum person, so I was always in charge of the agenda for the department chairs, for opening a school for the whole staff. If I didn’t put it on the agenda, no one would have – nobody told me you need to put the updates on school grading on the agenda. I either did it or I didn’t. And I did. I was very good about that. And even when I disseminated – I can tell you sometimes half them were asleep at
faculty meetings. They were grading papers or they were on their phones. (Juana, Assistant Principal)

Another important aspect of this communication process was figuring out how to package information in a way that simultaneously shielded their teachers from unnecessary stress while creating buy-in so that the necessary steps for implementation would occur. This was a sensitive topic as participants were navigating what they described as a particularly negative policy environment for teachers, partly due to the recent passage of teacher evaluation policies. In the following quote, Jasmine was reflecting on her role as school principal:

I am the buffer. That is my official title as the principal of the school. I am a buffer between the parents and the teachers. I am a buffer between the students and the teachers. I am a buffer between employees. I am a buffer as much as I possibly can be with what I call the “Cloud of District Procedures” and the state...In Florida we're the state that least funds education or cares and I am the buffer but what happens with the buffer is that in the beginning it was plush because I had autonomy but more and more they're cutting away at that. (Jasmine, Principal)

Acting as the buffer, Jasmine went on to describe a multi-step process for dealing with new policy or policy changes. Her explanation was infused with frustration and skepticism towards the policy process and an immense sense of protection over her staff.

Jasmine: So my process is this - You hear something’s gonna happen, okay? Then you will have a principal’s meeting, okay? In the principal’s meeting they will say the rumor will either be confirmed or denied, okay? Whatever the policy change is. All right starting today this is what’s gonna have to happen, this is the regulation, this is the rule, la-la-la-la with no thought at all at how this is actually gonna look like in a school.

Interviewer: From the policymakers?

Jasmine: Correct. No idea. Yeah, so I get it at the principal’s meeting. People stop talking. I turn to my neighbor, “Oh my god, what’s gonna be doing? I think I’m gonna do this, dah-dah-dah, I think I’m gonna do that, and the you know? And then we’ll kinda talk about what’s the best plan of action. Some people don’t care about the best plan, but to me how am I gonna chew this up and hand it to
the teachers so that they buy into this because really one more thing that may or may not make any sense? So then I’ll get – they’ll send us a briefing on it. They’ll send us the manual on it. They’ll give us a training on it and try to make it so that this is what you have to do as a leader, this is the policy, this is how we have to do it, this is what it looks like with no idea how or with no consideration of what we have to come back to. I’m coming back to a place that I’ve already built up that knows that I’m gonna break it down as much as I possibly can because my job is to make your job easier not to impose one more thing and let you figure it out! So now I work it out: What does that look like? How could we ease into that? What would be the best place to start? Maybe I shouldn’t set it up. So I give it a lot of thought and then when I come up with a plan I always preface it with “Ladies and Gentlemen, yet another policy!”

In a similar vein, Mario also described acting as a buffer for his staff. As his school’s leader, he believed that regardless of the policy or change, his job was to protect the schools’ core values that facilitate their success. When it comes to policy, Mario explained:

You have to look at the mandates, look at the policy decisions that have been made that are affecting your school, and then you have to work with your staff and remind them of what they’ve been doing that works well and try to keep them focused on that…to maintain your core values. (Mario, Principal)

**Theme 8: Policy is everywhere and nowhere.** Despite the fact that participants were able to identify and describe a concrete process through which they acquired, curated, and communicated policy-related knowledge, an undercurrent of uncertainty and disconnection surfaced time and again throughout the interviews. Whether it was the cause or consequence of this disconnection, there was a pervasive sense of ambivalence towards policy, the policy process, and the overall usefulness of accountability policy in schools.
Uncertainty. When it came to policy, school leaders described feeling as though they were always being kept “off balance”. As Mario explained, “we have to constantly be reacting to the legislative mandates being passed at the state level.” And as Jasmine pointed out, responses to these policies often varied considerably across schools because school leaders were left to their own devices in terms of interpreting and implementing the mandates, initiatives, and changes. Jasmine’s sensemaking corroborates the findings presented above that depict the process through which leaders acquire policy knowledge as a largely self-directed process.

Challenges in responding to policy were also compounded by the fact that participants often felt uncertain about various aspects of the policies or what would be coming down the pike in the future. For example, participants expressed concern about the fact that decisions still had not been made about how school grades would be determined during the transition from the FCAT to the FSA. Other participants struggled with the complexity of the formulas themselves. For example, in response to my question about her understanding of how a school grade is determined, Marisol explained that she knew there were different components for different levels (i.e., elementary, middle, high
of schools, mostly based on test scores, but when it came to students with disabilities, she was entirely uncertain about how they would be included.

...the SPED students, which are exceptional students, there’s a curve for them...When the schools are assigned a grade or their grade is earned, whatever the case is, those exceptional students, there’s a curve. So they[schools] were graded on a curve with them. What the curve is, how it works, I can’t even explain that to you. I would love – if you ever find somebody that could actually explain that entire formula to you, I’d be interested in knowing. (Marisol, Assistant Principal)

Marisol might have been referring to the administration of alternative assessments for students with severe cognitive disabilities however to the best of my knowledge the curve that Marisol was referring to does not exist.

In an attempt to prompt a discussion of Florida’s NCLB waiver, after asking participants about their policy acquisition process, I asked whether or not they had any recollection of discussions (i.e., through district memos; regional meetings) concerning the NCLB waiver and Florida’s transition away from NCLB. Across interviews, participants’ initial response to this question was characterized by an uncomfortable silence and a look of puzzlement. Trying my best to keep the momentum of the interview and not have participants feel as though I was quizzing them, I typically offered some reassurance that most people that I’ve spoken with also had not heard of the NCLB waiver. I took this opportunity to provide participants with a very brief explanation of the waiver and this helped prompt some participants’ memory. For example, after this explanation Lizette recalled,

...there was some very brief talk about if from our union steward, like “Let’s wear a party hat, NCLB is over!”, but it really didn’t change. Especially at a school like this. We don’t have those low performing students so we really don’t get affected...Nobody really cares. I didn’t know if it was a win, but at the classroom level nobody cared. (Lizette, Lead Teacher)
In their attempts to recall any discussions about the waiver, other participants either confused my question with their experience with the initial passage of NCLB in 2002 or with other controversial policy changes. For example, one participant recalled the superintendent discussing changes related to the scoring procedure for the writing assessment. Another thought that it might have been about bonus pay for teachers based on student performance.

*Oh, I know what you’re talking about! They were getting bonuses, financial incentives...there were a couple of years where my teachers got additional monies, and some teachers got it on criteria A, some got criteria B, and them some met criteria A and B and got the whole amount. And no one knew, and to this day, we don’t know what formula was used or what kids were looked at.*

(Evelyn, Principal)

Other participants simply had no idea what I was talking about. As one explained, “I’m embarrassed to say I don’t really know what you’re talking about. I don’t think I’ve ever heard about that one.”

**Disconnection.** In addition to varying levels of uncertainty about policy and policy changes, it became clear that school leaders felt largely disconnected from the policy process. This disconnection emerged on a personal, professional, and practical level. Some interpreted these disconnections as the result of the top-down nature of the policy process while others related it to their increasing skepticism of the system itself. Participants also attributed the disconnection to a lack of time and energy and time to dedicate to understanding policy that may or may not be useful to them on a day-to-day basis. For example, in asking Maria about her knowledge of the NCLB waiver, she explained:

*Well, I just happened to read an article that NCLB is gone, but I’m not going to lie to you, I don’t know the ins and outs of all the waivers and all that stuff. When things are going to impact us directly, what happens is we get called into*
meetings and it’s explained to us. It’s funny because tomorrow I have to do a presentation on the student progression plan, and I know the basics of it. But like when I actually sat down and started reading the manual – look at this manual. This is insane. You can’t do this in three hours, and I didn’t even know half the stuff in here…So rules like the changes with NCLB, I don’t know the ins and outs of it until it impacts us honestly directly, and that’s the truth. We don’t necessarily have time to read all that stuff. (Maria, Principal)

The disconnection expressed by participants was also partly explained by their increasing level of skepticism towards the policymaking process. Both Maria and Juana offered frank and emotional critiques. As Maria explained,

*Unfortunately, what's happened is that there is a culture of non-educators making education decisions. So educators are fed up! I know it sounds crappy, but we are. So until it impacts us directly, we don’t get involved, and we’re so busy dealing with everything else that we just don’t – I’m sorry. I mean I’m not necessarily apologizing to you directly, but I know it may sound like I’m being ignorant or whatever, but I’d rather spend time with my daughter than read an article on something that may or may not impact me on somebody who may or may not know anything about education making a decision on what I do on a daily basis. You know, I learned there’s dilemmas and there’s problems. Some of the things you can fix, some of them you have no control over. Don’t waste your energy on things you have no control over. So sometimes legislation, I don’t have control over that. They say we do, but the reality is I don’t. So once the rules come out, let me know how it impacts me directly, and then we’ll deal with it.* (Maria, Principal)

Reflecting on her 16 years of administrative experience in the public system, Juana offered a different yet equally skeptical critique:

*I’ve been around the block for a long time, and when No Child Left Behind came out, oh my god. Everyone was going, “We have to meet NCLB!” and the NCLB subgroups and all that. And I was like, “Don’t worry about it – listen. There’s no way that by 2013”, I think that was the year every school had to be at 100% in every subgroup. I said, “That is impossible! So, I’m not going to worry about it.” I don’t care about it. I never did. Because I knew that by the time we got there, the politicians would have to fix it to come up with some other plan because they built a system that was not feasible. And they couldn’t admit that they didn’t reach it. So, I knew that they were going to put something in place. And that’s exactly what happened…You know I don’t really believe NCLB ever really had a significant impact on what was happening in the classroom. I don’t even know how much school grading does.* (Juana, Assistant Principal)
I was interested in learning more about Juana’s views on the relationship between policy and equity and if she thought the role of policy should be to promote educational equity.

She responded with the following,

You know...Hmmm. I don’t know that I have a good answer to that. I mean, I want to say, “Yes, they should be.” But policy oftentimes – once it’s put into practice, it doesn’t come out the way the policy intended it too. You get all these unintended outcomes. And I don’t think more policy is ever the answer to anything. But at the same time, I think it’s important for us to be aware and realistic as educators. We have so many things on our plate that unless it’s put on your plate as something required, nine times out of 10 it’s going to fall by the wayside...So, I want to say that, “Yes, policy should be part of it,” but I’m hesitant because I don’t have faith that a policy could be written that would actually achieve the intended goal.
Chapter 6: Discussion

That all citizens will be given an equal start through a sound education is one of the most basic, promised rights of our democracy. Our chronic refusal as a nation to guarantee that right for all children...is rooted in a kind of moral blindness, or at least a failure of moral imagination...It is a failure which threatens our future as a nation of citizens called to a common purpose...tied to one another by a common bond.

-Senator Paul Wellstone, 2000

For decades, education has been touted as both the path and key for realizing the American Dream. Yet, the nation’s supposed quest for educational equity has remained largely elusive. In a speech delivered at Columbia University foreshadowing the threat of high-stakes testing in the name of greater accountability, the late senator Paul Wellstone poignantly suggested that this failure might in fact be the result of a conscious refusal rather than an inability to address the issue of inequities in educational outcomes. Recognizing this critical distinction is perhaps the most important first step towards an honest dialogue about educational equity and the root causes of educational injustice. However, if there is any hope of digging the nation out of the tremendous educational debt owed to generations of underserved students and communities (Ladson-Billings, 2006), it is a necessary but insufficient step. Authentic reparation will only come with a radical reconsideration of both the root causes of injustice and the mechanisms for facilitating transformative, systemic change.

The meta-objective of this research, which was grounded in a critical policy study framework, was to understand and highlight the broader effect of Florida’s school grading system on the reproduction of inequality for minoritized groups. Specifically, it sought to investigate whether or not the policy decisions included in Florida’s NCLB waiver function to reinforce social injustice and inequalities (Diem, Young, Welton, Cumings Mansfield & Lee, 2014). Using a combination of descriptive statistics and
qualitative methods, this study aimed to critically investigate Florida’s NCLB waiver with respect to its school accountability grading system. The quantitative component examined the extent to which Florida’s use of aggregated student performance data for determining accountability grades hides or highlights subgroup performance disparities in Miami-Dade public schools. The qualitative component sought to explore the ways in which school leaders at moderate to highly graded schools make sense of Florida’s NCLB waiver, school grades, and student performance. The findings demonstrate, first, the power of policy to render inequitable outcomes for minority students invisible. Additionally, they suggest that, depending on context, willingness, and perception, school leaders find themselves at times limited and in other circumstances more liberated in their ability to recognize and counteract less than equitable accountability policies. Thus, the findings shed light on the ways in which accountability policies and leadership practices contribute to the reproduction of inequality by reinforcing the status quo.

Within a critical framework, the findings of this study are contextualized by, and contribute to, the broader body of scholarship addressing inequality among minoritized and marginalized groups and communities. This scholarship has addressed a broad range of topics ranging from the persistence of economic inequality, residential segregation and social stratification (Massey & Denton, 1993) to the racialized criminal justice system that guarantees the overrepresentation of people of color, particularly Black males, in the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2014). What this study brought to light – the masking of disparities by the waiver and inability of school leaders confront disparities head on - should be interpreted and understood as a single yet
interconnected piece of a larger constellation of networks and systems that create and maintain the plethora of inequalities that pervade American culture and society.

Thus, the following discussion will address three salient takeaways from this research as they relate to existing literature: 1) Masking inequity through state accountability policy, 2) Same school, different outcomes, and 3) School leaders as ambivalent policy actors.

**Masking Inequity through State Accountability Policy**

Despite decades of documentation, recognition, and policy interventions, disparities in academic achievement based on subgroup membership remain a fundamental problem with far-reaching consequences across the United States (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Results from the quantitative portion of this study demonstrate the persistence of these patterns in Miami-Dade County, the fourth largest school district in the nation. Specifically, results show substantial subgroup gaps in reading performance across schools, regardless of accountability grade. In fact, disparities persist even at schools earning the highest grades. Furthermore, results show that performance disparities follow specific patterns whereby Black/African American students perform consistently worse than both their Hispanic/Latino and White peers. In addition, students with disabilities are consistently outperformed by low-income students and English language learners. These results suggest that Florida’s school grading system systematically masks subgroup performance disparities.

Results from the current study are consistent with those of Ushomirsky, Williams, and Hall (2014), the only report known to the author examining Florida’s school accountability rating system as designed under its NCLB waiver. Like the current study,
they found that although rating systems are meant to communicate how well schools, districts, and states are performing, accountability ratings are not accurate signals of the performance of individual groups of students in states that rely on aggregated (instead of disaggregated) student performance data. As a result, Ushomirsky and colleagues found that state systems relying on this design were awarding top ratings despite substantial disparities between racial/ethnic groups. Although their study focused on state-level analyses, the replication of this approach for the present study found consistent results at the district level. Taken together, these results substantiate the many concerns voiced by civil rights organizations and educational advocates about the potential for equity backsliding as a result of the NCLB waiver.

Results of the two studies were also consistent with respect to disparity patterns. In both studies, White students outperformed Hispanic/Latino and Black/African American students. However, across A schools in Miami-Dade county, the gap between White and Hispanic/Latino students narrowed and the gap between Black/African American students and their Hispanic/Latino peers widened, compared to the state-level analyses reported by Ushomirsky and colleagues. A plausible explanation for this occurrence could be related to the cultural uniqueness of Miami-Dade County. As a predominantly Hispanic/Latino community, Miami-Dade is in a particularly advantageous position for providing culturally responsive educational experiences and opportunities for this historically underserved group. This cultural and linguistic match between students and schools could contribute to gap narrowing.

The present study also extends the work of Ushomirsky, Williams, and Hall (2014) by including other historically underserved groups (i.e., students with disabilities,
English language learners, and economically disadvantaged students) in addition to racial/ethnic subgroups. Although I was unable to account for multiple membership in student subgroups, results from this study shine a light on important differences between the income-achievement gap and other types of gaps. For example, M-DCPS was recently recognized as a leader in education equality because of its ability to produce the smallest achievement gaps in the nation within two of its cities, Hialeah and the City of Miami, as measured by the Education Equality Index (EEI), the first comparative national tool assessing income-achievement gaps. According to the first EEI (2016) report, “Miami-Dade students from low-income families are more likely to attend schools that provide equal educational opportunities than their peers in almost every other major U.S. city.” Despite this accomplishment, results from the current study demonstrate the persistence of substantial performance disparities for Black students and students with disabilities. Therefore, results from this study raise important questions about the relationship between race/ethnicity and low-income status, and the willingness and/or ability of schools to respond to students’ needs at particular demographic intersections. For example, why is it that M-DCPS is able to more effectively respond to the needs of low-income Hispanic/Latino students, but not low-income Black students or students with disabilities? As indicated above, access to student-level data is needed in order to conduct more nuanced analyses.

Results from the present study also extend the literature by highlighting the persistence of disparities even at schools earning the highest accountability ratings. Since moderate to highly graded schools are generally located in higher income communities with greater access to a variety of resources compared to lower graded schools, one
would assume that those schools would be in the best position to close the gaps. However this has not been the case. In fact, in a series of studies investigating the geography of racial/ethnic test score gaps, Reardon and colleagues (Reardon et al., 2016) found that districts with the most resources often produced the worst educational inequities.

**Implications and recommendations.** Findings from this study support the conclusion that Florida’s NCLB waiver as applied to elementary, middle, and K-8 schools in Miami-Dade County systematically masks subgroup performance disparities in reading, even at schools earning the highest accountability grades. They do so by relying on aggregated student performance data for making school grade determinations. Without NCLB’s insistence on meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) for individual subgroups, Florida’s decision to exclude disaggregated data has rendered performance inequities largely invisible. Although the NCLB waiver has eliminated much of the confusion and mixed messages resulting from the intersection of NCLB and state systems (Linn, 2005), findings from this study challenge the integrity of school performance grades. Despite the criticisms waged against NCLB, by drawing attention to subgroup disparities, NCLB provided states like Florida at the very least, a constant reminder that not all schools were successful for all students.

With respect to the usefulness of performance-based accountability, results from this study support the conclusion that regardless of the measure used, an accountability system is rendered useless, at best, and counterproductive, at worst, when disaggregated data are not considered. Regardless of intentions, the masking of subgroup performance disparities through state accountability policy is a serious issue with far-reaching
consequences and implications. What happens when disparities are rendered invisible through systematic procedures? In short, those that draw advantage from the system will continue to reap the benefits, and those that are left out will suffer the consequences. Without recognition followed by systematic, targeted intervention, patterns of inequities are likely to persist. As the saying goes, lines begun parallel and left alone can never touch.

As a systemic issue, the masking of inequities trickles all the way down from state to district to school and student, absolving those in power of the responsibility to appropriately address patterns of disparities. The stakes are even higher for minority students attending high performing schools. If school grades are meant to communicate the quality and success of a particular school, as is the case with Florida’s school grading system, in those schools and districts earning the highest accountability ratings, the masking of disparities produces a cycle of rewards, falsely affirming a sense of school quality and success for all students.

This circumstance has serious implications for school leaders, teachers, students and their families. Depending on their propensity to investigate policy and critically reflect on their school’s performance for individual groups of students, leaders at schools earning high accountability grades may reinforce messages of success to their school community and the maintenance of ineffective practices, inadvertently perpetuating patterns of disparities in their schools. Alternatively, for those school leaders keenly aware of performance disparities despite their earning of top grades, efforts at addressing these disparities are likely to be thwarted by a lack of resources provided by the district
because of the school’s earning of a high grade. Regardless of the scenario, historically underserved students are likely to remain underserved.

On strictly pragmatic and economic levels, fueling an ineffective, inaccurate, and perhaps counterproductive accountability system is irresponsible at best. Because of the increasing complexity of state accountability systems, accurate estimates accounting for both direct and indirect costs have been difficult to capture (Nakib & Iatarola, 2005). However, after nearly two decades of accountability reform, there is no doubt that a substantial amount of resources has been dedicated to the creation and maintenance of such systems. Future research should critically and comprehensively investigate the accumulated costs associated with Florida’s accountability system and the distribution of benefits to all stakeholders including publishers of standardized tests, diagnostic and instructional programs, and other private entities.

Given the wealth of research and experience accumulated over the last two decades on educational accountability, the first policy recommendation is to systematically and critically review and incorporate lessons learned from both NCLB and the NCLB waiver initiative into ESSA and state-developed plans. Specific attention should be paid to identifying and problem-solving the unintended consequences of past policies and issues that would interfere with the equity goals. Second, regardless of the measure or combination of measures used, relying on aggregated student performance data will produce at best an incomplete picture and at worst an inaccurate picture of school performance. If the objective of the policy is to achieve educational equity, disaggregated data must be used in all major accountability determinations.
Same School, Different Outcomes

Findings from the current study extend the literature on educational inequity by shedding light on an inconvenient and obscured reality about the nature of educational injustice: that access alone to those places with the most resources does not in and of itself produce equitable outcomes for all students. These findings raise important questions that challenge and complicate current understandings about the nature and cause of educational inequities.

Three conclusions have been well-established in the literature: i) students that attend socioeconomically disadvantaged schools perform less well on measures of academic achievement compared with students from higher income schools (Perry & McConney, 2010); ii) there is a high degree of overlap between race and socioeconomic status (LaVeist, 2005) and a chronic persistence of residential segregation in the United States (Massey & Denton, 1993); and iii) racial segregation is linked to academic achievement gaps (Reardon, 2016). Studies drawing on these conclusions investigating the relationship between race/ethnicity, poverty, and academic achievement have traditionally focused on issues of access and opportunity by examining contextually different schools, communities, and districts (i.e, Kozol, 1991).

Because minority students attending the same highly graded school or contextually similar schools are just as likely, or more likely, to perform below their non-minority peers, it can be inferred that students are either i) receiving different educational experiences, ii) provided different opportunities, or iii) responding to those experiences and opportunities (or lack thereof) in much different ways. These hypotheses are being addressed in a small but growing body of literature examining the
nuances of academic inequities by exploring within-school differences in academic achievement between student groups, primarily racial/ethnic groups. This literature provides clues for better understanding the factors that influence the maintenance and disruption of within-school achievement gaps. For example, these studies have found relationships between academic achievement and differences in opportunity (i.e., the opportunity gap) (Carter & Welner, 2013; Muller, Riegle-Crumb, Schiller, Wilkinson, & Frank, 2010), academic achievement and differential discipline (i.e., the discipline gap) (Losen et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 2011), and more recently, the relationship between academic achievement and school climate (i.e., the racial school climate gap) (Voight, Hanson, O’Malley, & Adekanye, 2015).

Exploring how school leaders made sense of and responded to student performance in the policy context of Florida’s school accountability grading system, contributes to our understanding of the maintenance and disruption of disparities at highly graded schools. For example, clustering students by performance level was a described by participants as a commonly used practice for both instructional purposes and in determining classroom/teaching assignments. Although what participants described would not necessarily be classified as tracking in and of itself, these practices have the potential to lead to differences in educational experiences/opportunities provided to students. Depending on the success of these strategies for improving performance, a de facto tracking system may result. Palardy (2015) investigated the relationship between classroom-based inequalities and achievement gaps in elementary schools and found that inequality in the contextual aspects of classrooms was the most prominent school-based factor contributing to reading disparities between White, Hispanic, and Black students.
For example, in the same school, compared to their White peers, Black students tended to be members of classrooms with less effective teachers and teachers who were less likely to be considered highly qualified.

A particularly interesting and relevant line of research investigating the relationship between academic achievement, school climate, and the structural characteristics of schools has recently emerged that provides even more nuance to an understanding of within-school achievement gaps. Using teacher and student survey data from more than 400 middle schools, Voight, Hanson, O’Malley, and Adekanye (2015) found that compared to their White counterparts, Black and Hispanic students reported less favorable experiences of safety, connectedness, relationships with adults, and opportunities for participation. Voight and colleagues also found a significant relationship between racial achievement gaps and perceptions of school climate, otherwise referred to as the racial school climate gap. Holding constant overall academic performance, schools with larger Black-White achievement gaps had larger Black-White gaps in perceived safety, connectedness, and opportunities for participation. These findings extended to Hispanic-White disparities as well, however, to a lesser magnitude. In addition, they found a significant association between structural characteristics of a school and the magnitude of racial climate gaps. Specifically, Black-White gaps in safety and connectedness were more prominent in higher income schools. A strong norm of respect for diversity was related to smaller gaps in perceptions of school climate.

Findings from the current study also suggest that school leaders vary in their ability and/or willingness to identify and address patterns in performance disparities that fall along racial/ethnic lines. Even when leaders recognized these patterns, there was a
tendency to employ a colorblind approach in addressing them. This finding was consistent with the race-neutral approach depicted by Welton, Diem, and Holme (2015) in their qualitative case study exploring district and school leaders’ responses to student demographic changes. A colorblind approach is not all that surprising given the race-neutral design of Florida’s school accountability grading system. Even though Florida’s NCLB waiver differentiates performance targets by subgroup, schools and districts are not held accountable for meeting those goals on a yearly basis. Taken together, these findings suggest a relationship between race-neutral policies and colorblind approaches for identifying and addressing academic disparities in schools that function to maintain disparity patterns despite accountability mechanisms that are aimed at reducing those gaps.

**Implications and recommendations.** Findings from this study and other related research suggests a need to move beyond traditional explanations of and approaches for identifying, addressing and disrupting performance disparities at high performing schools. If the goal of educational accountability is to promote equity for all students, its design must reflect that goal. This means designing accountability systems that encourage leaders to not only explicitly identify patterns of subgroup disparities but also to investigate and address school-and classroom-based factors that contribute to the maintenance of disparities. One way of addressing these issues would be to broaden the definition of school success by incorporating multiple indicators of school quality for all students. For example, The National Forum (2004) has developed a framework for evaluating school quality using the following performance indicators: academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures.
Using disaggregated data, performance on these indicators should be incorporated into accountability measures so that schools could monitor and respond to persistent gaps in educational experiences, opportunities, and outcomes.

**School Leaders as Ambivalent Policy Actors**

This study began by asking about school leader sensemaking with respect to Florida’s NCLB waiver. Unknowingly at the time, my own assumptions and biases shaped the articulation of this question and the basis of the research project more generally. For someone to make sense of something, they need to first be aware of what that something is. Although the NCLB waiver had been a hot topic, widely discussed in academic circles and at the grassroots level, it became apparent early in the data collection process that this interest or concern had not trickled its way down to the highly graded, predominantly middle class schools participating in this study. This circumstance was surprising to me as Florida’s waiver had been addressed numerous times in local news and talk radio. In fact, part of my motivation for pursuing this topic was the groundswell of concern and anger at the community level, specifically in the African American community. Prior to beginning this research, I participated in a town hall meeting addressing the policy changes associated with Florida’s NCLB waiver. With standing room only, students, community members, activists, and advocates discussed their concerns at length. However, as I began speaking with the school leaders participating in this study, it became clear that they were largely unaware of the recent transition of away from NCLB and any specific changes in Florida’s accountability system brought on by its NCLB waiver. As a result, my research frame evolved to take
into account my own assumptions. A more appropriate research question would have been, *(How) Do school leaders make sense of the NCLB waiver?*

The inattention or under-awareness presented by the participants in this study can be partly explained by their tendency to approach policy in an inward and downward manner. Although this approach appears to have been employed by school leaders largely in an attempt to protect their teachers from what they considered a negative or hostile policy environment, it may have also contributed to an inability to recognize and respond to shifts in policy that have an impact on minority groups in their school and the larger educational community. Perfunctory attention to educational policy at multiple levels of educational administration has been established in the literature (Firestone, 1989; Spillane et al., 2002). In theory, accountability reform and the use of high stakes testing are mechanisms to address these issues of inattention and noncompliance. Despite their under-awareness of the larger policy context, school leaders were highly responsive to the school grading system and ensuring their school maintained high grade status. This responsiveness was evident in their strategic game playing, such as making sure instruction and assessment were directly aligned with state standards, and the targeting of “bubble students”.

**Implications and recommendations.** Despite their central role in the implementation and mediation of educational policy, school leaders are rarely recognized as policy actors or formally prepared for this role (Heineke, Ryan, & Tocci, 2015). If school leaders are to become active equity allies, they need to be prepared as such and supported in their work. Rigby and Tredway (2015) define leadership within an equity frame as setting up “conditions for learning that interrupt historically discriminatory
practices, support democratic schooling, and achieve fair, inclusive, and just outcomes...acting on those beliefs and understandings intentionally, regularly, and systematically.” (p. 6). This type of leadership requires the translation of equity rhetoric into action and necessarily involves the critical analysis of and response to policy. The current research demonstrates the need for preparation programs that emphasize the role of school leaders in the policy process and helps prepare them to be critically minded policy actors. However, preparation alone will not suffice. School leaders must also be supported in their work as equity allies. As such, strategic efforts should be made to build the capacities of leaders to take on this new role and the responsibilities that come with it. Rigby and Tredway (2015) suggest two strategies for building school leaders’ capacities for moving rhetoric to action – “understanding self, community, and the intersections in-between; and connecting to a larger community of like-minded leaders” (p. 8). Beyond traditional forms of professional development, these strategies could potentially be mobilized through i) establishment of communities of practice explicitly focused on equity, both on- and offline (Seddon & Postlethwaite, James, & Mulryne 2012), ii) supportive partnerships between universities and educators (Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003), and iii) school-community partnerships (Green, 2016).

Limitations

At least two limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, because of the unavailability of student-level data to the researcher, multiple group membership could not be accounted for in the quantitative analyses. As a result, the magnitude of various subgroup performance disparities is likely an underestimate given the disproportionate representation of certain racial groups in non-
racial categories. For example, it is well established that Black students are disproportionately represented in the economically disadvantaged category in relation to their White counterparts. In addition, a lack of student-level data made it impossible to make direct comparisons between student performance for those students with membership in a particular category and those that are not. For example, proficiency rates for students with disabilities needed to be compared to students in aggregate as opposed to a group representing students without disabilities. Because each subgroup was included in the “all students” group, performance disparities for these non-racial groups were likely underestimated.

Second, because the qualitative component of this study was based exclusively on interview data, there was a limited amount of triangulation of findings. As a result, comparing participant responses to interview questions with their professional practices was not possible. Future research should incorporate ethnographic methods such as field observations and prolonged engagement to better understand school leader sensemaking and school level processes.

Conclusions

Taken together, the findings from this study problematize and complicate our understanding of various aspects of educational equity, policy and the capacity of school leaders to disrupt the status quo. Specifically, this research problematizes the use of aggregate data with respect to student performance and accountability determinations. By looking up at high performing schools, this research also complicates our understanding of the intersections of race, socioeconomic status, and academic achievement, obliging us to move beyond simplistic explanations and policy remedies for
performance disparities based largely on poverty. And finally, the findings of this research force us to question the ability and willingness of school leaders to act as agents of educational change in the face of less than equitable policy and systems. To achieve educational justice for all students, frank conversations about equity, access, and opportunity must be accompanied by swift action across all schools, regardless of zip code, school composition, or accountability rating. As states, districts, and schools begin yet another process of transition, my hope is that the integration into policy discussions and leadership programs of insights from studies such as this one holds promise of leading to more equitable policies as well as increasing school leaders’ capacities to act as equity allies.

**Future Research**

Several directions for future research have emerged through the course of this study. First, with the availability of multiple years of waiver data across states employing similar and different school rating systems, an examination of subgroup performance under each policy system should be conducted to examine the longer term impact of school rating policy decisions on student subgroups. Second, given the inevitability of multiple group membership, it is critical to be able to access and examine student-level data to gain a more nuanced understanding of the full extent to which subgroup membership is related to academic performance and the implications these relationships may have on accountability policy.

Third, beyond more in-depth statistical investigations, qualitative explorations should be undertaken to better understand the educational experiences of minoritized students at schools earning high accountability ratings. These investigations should
prioritize student, parent, and community perspectives as these groups collectively represent marginalized voices in both educational policy research and the policy process itself. Ethnographic methods should also be used to explore the process through which within-school disparities are created, maintained, and corrected. Lastly, future research should be undertaken to further explore the process through which school leaders acquire, curate, and communicate policy knowledge in an effort to gain insight into particularly weak junctures as well as places where leaders are best positioned to engage critically with the policy process.
References


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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE EMAIL SCRIPT

Good Morning [name],

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Stacey Kesten and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Teaching and Learning in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami. I'd like to invite you to participate in my dissertation research study about how school leaders at highly graded schools in Miami think about school grades and accountability. Since your school was awarded a grade of ‘A’ last year, and since you no doubt contributed to your school’s outstanding performance, your insights on the topic I am addressing would be extremely useful.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an individual interview at a location and time that is comfortable and convenient for you. I'd be more than happy to swing by your school before or after school hours. The interview should take no longer than 30 minutes. To assure accuracy, I would like to audio record the interview. Your interview will be subsequently transcribed for use in the study, neither your name, nor any personally identifying information, nor your school’s name will be attached to the information collected. This study has been approved by UM and the M-DCPS Research Review Committee.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you agree to participate now and later change your mind, that is alright. If you would like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email me or contact me at (305)924-5859. You may also contact my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Batya Elbaum, at (305)284-4218, elbaum@miami.edu.

Thank you very much for considering this invitation.

Sincerely,

Stacey
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW OUTLINE PROVIDED TO PARTICIPANTS

Interview Outline and Sample Questions

Part 1: Background
• Describe your education and professional background.
• Tell me about your current position.

Part 2: School Grade
• What does your school’s grade mean to you?
• What are the costs and/or benefits of having “A” status?
• What is your understanding of how school grades are determined? Do you think the determination process is fair? Do you think it is effective?

Part 3: Florida’s NCLB Waiver
• How do you acquire policy information?
• What is your understanding of the NCLB waiver program?
• How, if at all, have your leadership activities/practices changed as a result of Florida’s NCLB waiver?

Part 4: Student Performance
• Who are your highest performing student? Who are your lowest performing students? How do you support your high and low performers respectively?
• How do you make sense of similarities or differences in performance between different demographic groups?
• As a school leader, how have you addressed disparities in performance between different demographic groups?

Part 5: Leadership & Accountability
• To whom do you feel accountable?
• As a school leader, what motivates you?
APPENDIX C

SAMPLE INTERVIEW GUIDE

Part I: Background and Rapport
- Tell me a little bit about yourself and your school
  - Education?
  - Professional background?
  - School composition?

Part II: School Accountability Rating
1. What does your school’s grade mean to you?
   - What does it mean to be an “A” school?
2. From an organizational or practical perspective, what does your school grade mean (i.e. rewards, resources, accolades, practice)?
   - Are there specific benefits associated with having “A” status?
   - Can you think of any costs or downsides?
3. What resources and/or practices are necessary to attain, and keep “A” status?
4. What is your understanding of how school grades are determined?
   - Do you think the determination process is fair? In what ways?
   - Do you think it is effective? How so?
5. From your experience, what components of the determination formula are important?
   - Are there components that are problematic?

Part III: Policy - NCLB Waiver
6. As a school leader, how do you acquire information about policy and policy changes?
   - Does your school’s principal communicate his understanding of policy to you and the rest of the faculty?
   - How do you think the larger school community (teachers, parents, students) acquire information about policy?
7. Are you familiar with the NCLB waiver program?
   - What is your understanding of the NCLB waiver program, in general? In what ways do you think the Florida DOE used this opportunity to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for students?
8. Are you aware of specific policy changes with respect to subgroup-specific accountability?
   - Exclusion of individual subgroup performance in accountability determinations
   - Inclusion of differentiated achievement targets?
From your experience, have these policy changes impacted your school? Have they impacted individual subgroups?

9. How, if at all, have your leadership's activities/practices changed as a result of Florida’s NCLB waiver?

Part IV: Subgroup Performance
10. Who are your lowest performing students?
   o How do you support them?
11. Who are your high performers?
   o How do you support them?
12. How do you make sense of the similarities or differences in subgroup performance?
13. How are these interpretations relayed to the school community?
14. As a school leader, how have you addressed disparities in subgroup performance?

Part V: Multiple Accountabilities
15. To whom do you feel accountable?
   o What do you feel accountable for?
16. As a school leader, what motivates you?
17. How would you define educational equity?
18. Do you believe that equity is or should be a goal of education policy?
   o Do you believe Florida’s current school accountability system highlights or hides issues of equity at your school?