The Longest Rollercoaster Ride: Ten Years with NCLB, AYP and RTTT-- An Insider's Perspective

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THE LONGEST ROLLERCOASTER RIDE:

TEN YEARS WITH NCLB, AYP, AND RTTT—

AN INSIDER’S PERSPECTIVE

Dissertation

by

VICTORIA EKK

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy March, 2014
THE LONGEST ROLLERCOASTER RIDE

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is the result of 10 years working alongside teachers whose commitment and caring for their students has been evident daily in the halls of “Southeastern.” I dedicate this work to them and to all the great teachers in public schools across our nation. Your story is worth telling!

I thank here also my wonderful family who supported my dream with patience and encouragement and my dissertation advisor, Dr. Marilyn Cochran-Smith whose inspiration and belief in this project spurred me past many an obstacle.
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ABSTRACT

THE LONGEST ROLLERCOASTER RIDE:

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AN INSIDER’S PERSPECTIVE

by Victoria Ekk

Doctor of Philosophy

Boston College, May 2014

Dissertation Committee Chair: Dr. Marilyn Cochran-Smith

This practitioner research longitudinal study examines the effects of the No Child
Left Behind (NCLB) law and the Race To The Top (RTTT) initiative on a high
performing middle school in Massachusetts between 2003 and 2013. Utilizing a
theoretical framework that combines Cochran-Smith and Lytles (2009) “inquiry as
stance” and Ball’s concept of (1990b) “policy cycles,” the study analyzes the
programmatic and structural changes enacted in response to NCLB, RTTT and their
effects on special education and low income students, their teachers, parents, and the
principal.

The study’s findings show that federal mandates and related state regulations
placed unrealistic, unfair and unreasonable demands on students, teachers and the school.
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Staff often felt as if we were riding on a rollercoaster. Massachusetts’ rating of “High” and “Very High” performance on the state test contrasted with the NCLB school report cards that labeled the school as in need of “improvement,” “corrective action,” and eventually “restructuring” because of the failure of special education or low income students to meet constantly rising targets. NCLB’s and RTTT’s requirements caused the school to prioritize courses providing remediation in tested subjects—English language arts and mathematics—reducing the availability of related arts classes and thereby narrowing the curriculum. The school’s obsessive focus on the annual state tests produced an atmosphere of anxiety for all stakeholders. Unwanted changes in the school culture eventually generated a schoolwide movement to resist the obsession with testing, reduce anxiety and expand interdisciplinary learning.

The study concludes with recommendations for further research of the effects of federal mandates on “good” schools across the US. It recommends that policymakers recognize that “one size fits all” school reform is detrimental to public schools and calls for the recognition of local knowledge in the making of policy. A further recommendation encourages school leaders to study their own practice, becoming practitioner researchers for the benefit of their schools.
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Chapter 1

The Federal Role in Education and Its Impact at the School Level

Journal entry for May, 2012:

At the beginning of our group meeting for the study, Sands asked, “Will the [Race To The Top] waiver make your study be outdated? Isn’t all of this going away now?” The room became very quiet and all eyes were on me. I chuckled and went on to explain that Massachusetts was granted a waiver from No Child Left Behind because the state presented acceptable alternatives to meet NCLB goals. Then I explained that for unreasonable deadlines and restructuring to go away, Massachusetts agreed to adopt national standards, switch to a national achievement test and put in place a tougher teacher evaluation system. John asked, “You mean this is not over, right?” I nodded and the room exploded with questions. “Is it true that tenure will go away?” “They say we’re going to get paid for better student scores, right?” “Is it true that the new test is going to be even harder than MCAS?” I could feel the tension in the room build up. What started as a near celebration for our luck in getting off the AYP rollercoaster, turned into a mix of fear, anxiety and anger about an uncertain future none of us seem to have any influence over. Where is our profession going? Where are “they” taking us?

Reflection, October 2013:

This journal entry referred to an interchange that happened during a group interview held in February 2012, shortly after the Commonwealth of Massachusetts earned a waiver from the No Child Left Behind law’s punitive measures by qualifying for a Race To The Top grant. The teachers taking part in this group interview were voicing a mix of hopeful and concerned viewpoints about what might happen as a result of changes enacted under Race To The Top. We did not have a lot of information, although rumors abounded prior to the state’s announcement that the waiver requirements had been met. Would Race To The Top be an open window to a more reasonable and positive education policy, or would it be more of the same pressure and punishment we had experienced under No Child Left Behind since 2003?

As a leader of a well ranked middle school in Massachusetts, I often experienced frustration and anxiety over the No Child Left Behind Act’s (NCLB) increasingly negative influence on the school’s reputation and morale. While Massachusetts’ annual ‘report cards’, ranking districts and schools across the Commonwealth, placed Southeastern as
‘very high’ in English language arts and ‘high’ in mathematics during the 10 year period for this study, NCLB’s rating labeled the school ‘in need of improvement’ in 2004, in ‘corrective action’ in 2006 and recommended for school ‘restructuring’ in 2009. It seemed to me, a veteran of over 30 years in the education field, that the discrepancy between labels was confusing at best, distracting our staff from their strong commitment to build a professional, democratic and positive school culture.

Certainly, as a progressive principal, I believe in the moral imperative to look after the welfare of every student by promoting a commitment to continuous improvement of the teaching craft. I am also committed to promoting the power of shared leadership, believing what J. Lytle (2010) states: “[school] reform will only happen if or when a deeper sense of community responsibility and diffused or distributed leadership can be established” (p. 83). In pursuit of my own professional growth, I enrolled in a doctoral program and worked to build a culture of inquiry, by focusing with faculty on posing questions that pointed at the “big picture” of schooling. I hoped that through modeling the study of my own practice, openly questioning and theorizing the school’s progress under my guidance, Southeastern’s teachers would begin to study their own work. Lytle (2010) calls this process, the forming of “a leaderful community” (p.104) that infuses inquiry into every aspect of schooling.

However fruitful and positive our professional, collaborative work over 10 years, the pressure and disappointments brought about by NCLB’s singular focus on one set of test scores often undermined our determination to make thoughtful, well researched educational decisions. We seemed forever in a reactive mode, trying to find one more intervention to raise test scores and restore the school’s good name. In the spirit of open
inquiry, however, I decided that it was important to conduct practitioner research to learn what was truly happening at Southeastern as a result of these federal and state mandates. I hoped that a systematic and reflective study of the changes enacted in response to NCLB would inform our staff’s work, provide useful information for other administrators and perhaps reach policymakers who wield the power to change education from afar.

The resulting longitudinal study is focused on the effects of federal mandates—notably the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and its revisions under President Obama’s Race To The Top (RTTT) initiative—at a high performing middle school in suburban Massachusetts. The study sought to learn what happens to national educational policy at ground level. While considerable research has considered the effects of NCLB on schools or school programs, studies have largely focused on the academic progress of specific, at risk student populations, seeking to determine whether particular interventions produce better assessment scores, or reporting on the success or failure of restructuring or ‘turnaround’ policies in urban or rural settings. In contrast, this study focused on investigating the effects of unprecedented and powerful federal and state mandates on the academic programs and school culture of a school ranked high by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts—having a majority of students at the proficient level—but struggling to meet NCLB targets. To determine these effects, this practitioner research study examines what happened to the programs, the school environment, the students and staff of a suburban middle school where the majority of students have typically been academically successful, from 2003 through 2013.

As Principal of the middle school portrayed in this study, I am expected to “be the gatherer and interpreter of school and classroom data as part of larger initiatives to
improve school achievement” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 1). The necessity of collecting school-wide data, as required by NCLB, prompted me to study my own school from the beginning of my assignment as Southeastern’s principal in the fall of 2003. Over 10 years, I have found that federal mandates have had a significant impact at the school, both positive and negative effects on academic progress, programmatic structures and the cultural environment of this “good” school.

The advantage of conducting a longitudinal study is the ability to gather and analyze data spanning the initial implementation of NCLB years to the present time, when some of the law’s more punitive measures were waived for some states, including Massachusetts, that agreed to additional requirements focused on a national curriculum and more a rigorous evaluation system for teachers and principals. My analysis shows how federal mandates, and state regulations responding to such mandates, produced a ‘rollercoaster’ effect as the school reacted to negative or positive test results, increasingly higher achievement targets, the threat of restructuring, the exhilaration of receiving a waiver, followed by the implementation of new requirements involved in the Race To The Top initiative.

The study begins by describing the increasingly powerful role of the federal government in public education beginning in 1950’s to today. This historical review is essential to uncover how national pressure on what had previously been considered a strictly local concern resulted in federal education policy delineated by NCLB and RTTT, mandating major reforms of educational structures and curriculum for grades K-12. Following the historical section, I state the purpose and salient questions that drive this study and point to the need for additional practitioner research to supply useful local
information and to provide information for administrators and policymakers as they consider future directions in K-12 public education.

**Research Problem: The Growing Federal Role in Education**

The role of the federal government in U.S. schools had, until the late 1950’s, been primarily to provide guidance to states in order to ensure the provision of free public education for all children. States and ultimately school districts were responsible for setting policy and deciding the specifics of curriculum for grades K through 12. State, regional and district control of public education was seen as essential to serve the specific needs of each locality. Such an arrangement resulted in great variety in the types of academic programs available to schoolchildren across the nation.

Changes in how public education was viewed began to occur as a result of a scientific ‘defeat’ in 1957 when the Soviet Union’s launching of the first satellite, Sputnik, embarrassed the United States, long expected to be the first to enter outer space. During the 1960’s, influential representatives of industry and commerce, claimed that schools were not providing a workforce with the skills necessary to generate the types of products needed for technology-oriented American consumers. These complaints raised interest in an increased and more direct federal role in public education which resulted in 1965’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The act was passed as part of President Johnson’s attempt to build a framework for what he called the Great Society. ESEA directed federal financial assistance to Local Educational Agencies (LEA) for the education of low-income children, provided guidelines for the use of school resources, educational research and teacher training, as well as setting up a grants system for
additional funding opportunities (Lagemann, 2000). A year later, the ESEA expanded its umbrella to include the education of “handicapped” children. In 1967, another amendment was included to establish guidelines for the education of Limited English Proficient students (Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 2001).

During the 1970’s and early 1980’s stiff economic competition from Asian nations prompted the federal government, influenced by American business leaders, to call for research into public elementary and secondary education. In 1983, the National Commission on Educational Excellence (NCEE) published *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (NAR). This report sounded an alarm about the quality of U.S. public education prompting questions about the effectiveness of federal guidelines, and setting the stage for a series of additional top-down reforms (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). NAR called for raising the standards for teacher preparation programs as well as more rigorous high school graduation requirements. States and school districts responded by initiating a number of reforms, such as site-based management, which gave principals more control over hiring practices, established a new structure for the education of grades 6-8 through the teaming concept, and implemented several types of innovative democratic school governance protocols that allowed teachers to participate in decision-making in their schools (Fenwick, 1987; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2006).

Despite some reforms, dissatisfaction with the public school system grew into an uproar in the mid to late 1990’s when international assessments, such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and the Programme for International
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Student Assessment tests consistently revealed that US students scored well below other industrial nations, including Singapore and Finland, in the all-important areas of mathematics and science.

Because student achievement gains, as measured by state assessments and international tests, continued to be unsatisfactory, especially for minority children, policy makers turned their attention to the standardization of school curricula. With teacher input, many states developed frameworks and guidelines in all subject areas, spurring K-12 districts to develop local curricula in alignment with these frameworks (Kendall, 1996; California Department of Education, 2010; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2010). Several organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Association for Sports and Physical Education worked towards reaching consensus on possible national standards (Kendall & Marzano, 2000; National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990; National Educational Goals Panel, 1998).

In 1994, under Democratic President Bill Clinton, ESEA became Goals 2000: The Educate America Act, setting goals for school readiness and setting the expectation that school districts must guarantee that every student would graduate from high school. The Act also convened a commission to guide the development of rigorous national standards, and declared the intent to become “first in the world in mathematics and science education” (Section 102, pg. 1). Many states established accountability systems that included annual standardized testing with accompanying reports (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).
ESEA To NCLB

Forty-eight years after its inception, the ESEA continues to be the main conduit for the federal government’s influence on public education in the United States. The federal government’s role has increased with each ESEA reauthorization, which occurs every five years. By tying federal funding to educational services for specific groups of students, the ESEA has, to a certain extent, directly affected how individual states guide educational improvement. A major overhaul of ESEA, under Republican President George W. Bush, labeled as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The new reauthorization provided tightened guidelines, demanding greater Local Education Agency (LEA) accountability to ensure the reduction of achievement gaps between middle class White students, and those in the low income, minority, or Special Education categories (OECD, 1981; Vanecko, Ames & Archambault, 1980).

NCLB is intended to “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at least, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. § 1120-1, 2001). In order to reach these goals, NCLB called for yearly assessments to be aligned with rigorous state standards and to be publicly reported through complex accountability systems. To show evidence of meeting accountability goals, schools and school districts were required to concentrate on closing the achievement gaps between White students and students included in a number of “subgroups”: students of low-income families, those with limited English proficiency, those identified as members of ethnic and/or racial minorities and students with disabilities.
The act also demanded that all school reform initiatives be based on ‘scientifically-based’ research, specifically promoting experimental or quasi-experimental designs that showed quantitative evidence of results. NCLB was intended to provide “greater decision-making authority and flexibility to schools and teachers, while increasing their responsibilities for student achievement” \(\text{No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. } \text{§ 1120-9, 2001}\). It also purported to improve “the quality of instruction by providing staff in participating schools with substantial opportunities for professional development” \(\text{No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. } \text{§ 1120-10, 2001}\). Section 1120-12 also states that NCLB “afford[s] parents substantial and meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children.”

In order to comply with NCLB, all states were required to establish and monitor standards-based accountability systems that included:

- Annual testing in reading and mathematics for all students in grades 3-8;
- The disaggregation of assessment data by race, ethnicity, English language proficiency, low economic status and disability;
- Establishment of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets that when not met places schools and/or school districts in a ‘needs improvement’, ‘corrective action’ or ‘restructuring’ status;
- Provision of annual increases in the AYP targets to ensure that every student, including those in the disaggregated subgroups, reaches at least ‘Proficient’ (grade level) status by 2014;
- Public reporting of test results; and
- Providing parents the right to transfer their children to a better school or to receive supplemental tutoring, if their school fails to meet AYP \(\text{No Child Left Behind, 2002}\).
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From 2002-2007, the first 5 years of NCLB’s enactment, some assessments documented successes in reducing the achievement gap for those K-12 students who fit within the umbrella of low income, learning disabled, language minority, and those of racial or ethnic minorities (Kosters & Mast, 2003; West & Peterson, 2003). Margaret Spellings, U.S. Secretary of Education during President George W. Bush’s second term, used early data (compiled in 2005, three years after the implementation of the law), to claim NCLB a success. The Secretary asserted that the law was already having a positive impact on the achievement gap. Speaking at a meeting of the American Legislative Exchange Council in Texas, Spelling noted that despite states’ concerns about the testing of special education and limited English proficient students, the 2004 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed gains in reading and math for fourth grade students (Ed.Gov. News, 2005).

Criticizing governmental claims, independent educational research uncovered some potentially troubling outcomes resulting from NCLB-influenced reform. For example, in High Stakes Education: Inequality, Globalization and Urban School Reform, Pauline Lipman (2004) noted that schools in probationary status under NCLB, had overwhelmingly African American and Latino student populations and that their curriculum was often scripted and limited to basic skills. The author commented, “Clearly, a basic education for students who have historically been denied an enriched and intellectually rigorous education is hardly a solution to entrenched inequalities” (p.44). Booher-Jennings (2005) also voiced concern over the ongoing negative impact of NCLB on struggling students and on teachers, who reported the inordinate pressure of internal competition for good assessment scores (p. 257).
In addition, a variety of stakeholders critiqued various aspects of NCLB. Some voiced concern over the law’s fixation on one yearly assessment as the only evidence of academic growth (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). Others called the expectation of 100% grade level proficiency for all students unreasonable and demoralizing (Rudner & Boston, 2003). The lack of funding for addressing teacher and student needs and the constant pressure on teachers, administrators and students was also called into question (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Jones & Egley, 2004; McGhee & Nelson, 2005). In addition, researchers called attention to the high drop out rates for Blacks and Hispanics (Educational Testing Service Policy Evaluation and Research Center, 2005; Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009) and to the narrowing of curriculum to focus on reading and mathematics, to the detriment of a broader education (Apple, 2001; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Rothman, 2005).

**NCLB to RTTT**

NCLB’s intended results were not easily achieved. By 2007, when the law was due for reauthorization, growing opposition from the public, from academia and from the K-12 education sector, influenced Congress to postpone a decision until after the next election. What was needed, according to these groups were major reforms of several of the Act’s key elements including: the demand that all students be measured as grade level proficient by 2014 and the requirement to dismiss administrators and staff of schools not meeting their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) targets.

After the 2008 election of Democratic President Barack Obama, and since Congress had failed to reauthorize ESEA the previous year, the new administration proposed waiving some of NCLB’S most controversial elements for states willing to
institute a number of large scale educational reforms. During the 2010-2011 school year, ESEA emphasis began to shift towards ensuring that federal funds were spent to help states increase the number of students ready for college or careers by 2020 (Klein, 2010; Office of the United States Press Secretary, 2010). While specific goals seemed directed toward improvement rather than evidence of 100 percent proficiency, the federal government’s role in guiding educational reform and accountability did not diminish. Under the RTTT waivers, some of the more punitive elements of NCLB were tempered by focusing state oversight on schools with “chronic difficulties” in reducing the achievement gap between the general student population and subgroups, such as students with special needs, English Language Learners, low income and minority students.

Whereas RTTT includes a clause permitting the firing of principals and other school personnel when a school continues failing to meet achievement goals the document is largely a template for acceptable educational reform.

RTTT introduced the concept of competition between states to qualify for Recovery Act funding and qualify for a waiver from the NCLB rules. Under the RTTT waiver, educational reforms included: the adoption of common national standards including college-and-career-ready anchor standards in reading, mathematics and science, and a related national assessment developed by state-led consortia; the establishment of efficient data systems to measure student achievement and the implementation of a teacher evaluation process linking student achievement to an educator rating system; the promotion of turnaround and other innovative programs for failing schools; and a focus on college and career readiness for teacher preparation and in service professional development (U.S. Department of Education, Race to the Top, Phase
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2, 2008).

Thus, for states ‘earning’ the RTTT waiver, such as Massachusetts, the federal government’s role strongly influenced what the students learned, especially in English Language Arts, Mathematics and Science. The RTTT version of NCLB also contained a requirement that states establish a timeline for reducing the academic gap between successful and struggling students – in Massachusetts, the gap was to be reduced by half by 2016. By directly tying student achievement on standardized tests to teacher evaluation, pay and the earning of professional status, the RTTT version of NCLB seemed to be moving a step closer to changing the teaching profession to reflect corporate employment systems. Berating RTTT’s emphasis on monetary reward for better assessment results, Maxcy (2011) argues that “performance accountability [i]s part and parcel of a neoliberal reconsideration of schooling laying the political and conceptual groundwork for school reconstitution and performance-based models of remuneration” (p. 266). He maintained that RTTT continued the shift to control education from the top, “proffering an alternative narrative of the need and proper form of public education reform” (p.266). McClung (2013) pointed out that this type of public school reform, “driven by the business model of competing in the global economy” (p. 37), and focusing education solely on creating workers that will assist the nation’s competitive edge is logical, under our current economic conditions. He pointed out, however that business structures and incentives are not appropriate for the education field, calling instead for a civic model to better serve the needs of our diverse student population with a focus on critical thinking to create an active and informed citizenship (McClung, 2013).

While it is too soon to fully determine what a new federal focus on college and career
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readiness and competition for federal funding will do for (or to) schools, researchers continue to investigate the impact of federal mandates on schools. As elements from (RTTT) begin to influence what happens in education under the Obama administration, NCLB’s requirements continue to influence all schools. In Massachusetts, at the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year, despite the state’s high rating on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a majority of public schools—including Southeastern—were placed in the “restructuring” category (CEP, 2010b). Schools designated “restructuring” were those that had not met their AYP goals for 5 or more years, having consistently failed to meet assigned targets for either the entire (aggregate) school population, or for one or more subgroups of at risk student populations. Subgroups include low income, ethnic and racial minority, and special education students. Under NCLB restructuring, districts were obligated to implement systemic interventions that include reopening the school as a public charter school, replacing all or most of school staff, or allowing the state or a private management company to operate the school (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002).

Under NCLB, while many urban and rural schools found themselves in the restructuring category because their aggregate school population was struggling to meet their AYP targets, other schools were included because one or more subgroups, (which in Massachusetts was defined as a group of 40 or more students), did not meet AYP growth target in reading or mathematics. By the fall of 2010, more than 70% of middle schools were categorized as needing corrective action or restructuring (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2010). Paradoxically, many schools on the restructuring lists in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts—including
Southeastern-- were also ranked high above state averages for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) for the aggregate school population (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2010). Thus, a “good” school could find itself in the NCLB restructuring category because students who need special education services or those who are not yet proficient in English were severely challenged to show proficiency on rigorous state assessments.

In February 2012, Massachusetts qualified for a waiver from NCLB under the Race To The Top initiative. Under the RTTT waiver, Massachusetts schools were placed at one of 5 levels. Level 1 indicated a school or district where all student achievement targets were being met. Level 2, by far the largest number of public schools in the state—Southeastern among them-- designated schools or districts that missed at least one target for a specific subgroup, but were making sufficient progress to qualify for little state supervision but strong district monitoring. Level 3 schools were not progressing sufficiently and required some state support and monitoring. Levels 4 and 5 were schools requiring strong state monitoring and possibly a state takeover. While the subgroups under the original version of NCLB continued to influence school accountability, a new “high needs” group ensured that no student remained uncounted. Thus, while under NCLB, Massachusetts set a target for any ‘subgroup’—a student group of 40 or more special needs, low income, English Language Learners (ELL) or minority children--under the RTTT waiver, the count is lowered to 30 or more and all students who fit more than one subgroup or do not fit any are counted in the High Needs column. While the NCLB focus was to get 100 % of public school students to be grade level proficient in reading and math by 2014, RTTT required that schools reduce the gap between proficient
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and non-proficient students by half of what it was in 2008 by the year 2016.

**Curriculum Reform- Who Should Decide?**

In Democracy and Education, John Dewey (1916) cautioned that teachers were the only true curriculum reformers. Twenty first century educational researchers agree that school reform is best when educators are part of the decision-making system (Hargreaves, 2007). The federal government’s top-down reform attempts, well meaning as they may be, compete with local reforms of curriculum and instruction, resulting in what Apple (2000) calls the ‘deskilling’ of teachers, poor staff morale, student anxiety over testing and a growing public distrust in our educational system. Under NCLB, schools with one or more failing subgroups were required to reform their curriculum to ensure that students were better able to raise their state assessment scores. While some specific reading programs were promoted at the elementary level, secondary level schools were to find resources that better mirrored the elements of English Language Arts, and Mathematics standards developed at state level.

Under the RTTT waiver, however, the concept of teachers developing a working local curriculum took a further step behind as states were required to adopt a national curriculum and subsequently, a national assessment based on the same, federally approved standards. In addition, powerful federal influence over the K-12 curriculum was enhanced by the linking of teacher evaluation to student scores on annual tests. Under NCLB, state assessments, based on state-designed standards, were found to vary in rigor and to produce invalid comparisons of academic achievement state to state. (These discrepancies were reflected through NAEP results, which ranked states, showing those
closer to the government’s grade level expectations at the top of the list.) Schools and
districts failing to meet their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals were required to
decide which staff members were not contributing towards student success in the
assessments and in turn, correct their inefficiency through professional development or
move to remove them and their administrator as a result. Under the RTTT waiver, teacher
evaluation must link student success or lack of success directly to the educator, requiring
that teachers be rated in accordance with their contribution towards success in annual
assessments based on national standards and by 2014, a national test.

Thus, the growing federal role has moved inexorably towards removing the Local
Education Agency (LEA) as the determiner of what is an appropriate K-12 public
education for the children of their locality. By dictating what happens to schools and staff
who do not meet pre-set assessment targets, establishing a required national curriculum,
and reforming the educator evaluation system to mirror a business model, federal
education policy has had a direct effect on what happens in every public school and in
every classroom.

Purpose of Study and Essential Questions

The purpose of this practitioner research study is to examine what has happened
academically, structurally and culturally at Southeastern Middle School from 2003 to
2013 in response to the requirements generated by the No Child Left Behind Act and its
Race To The Top addenda. In particular, this study highlights the effects of these
educational policies on special education and low income students, their parents and their
teachers. In addition to generating local knowledge to assist the school in making
appropriate and effective curricular, instructive and administrative decisions, this study
provides useful information for school administrators as for policymakers who may not be fully aware of the varied effects of top-down educational policy on a school that is ranked higher than the state average.

Believing in the power of research, I took on the dual role of researcher and administrator and began the study by asking general questions that would help to uncover existing data, systematically collected, to provide useful local knowledge and inform public policy.

Initial Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore this overarching question:

What happened to special education and low income students and to their teachers in one school setting from 2003 through 2013, as a result of changes enacted in response to mandates of the *No Child Left Behind Act* and subsequent requirements through the *Race To the Top Initiative*?

Specifically, the study addresses several related sub-questions:

- Over time, what curricular, programmatic and instructional reforms were implemented in response to the school's failure to meet the NCLB and RTTT targets for special education, low income and high needs students? How did students, their parents and teachers respond to these reforms?

- Over time, how was school culture affected by NCLB and RTTT mandated reforms? How did the media, community and parent react to AYP status? How
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did media, parent and community reactions affect school culture and morale?

These initial questions prompted me to uncover underlying assumptions, theorize and generate additional areas of inquiry in the iterative process of practitioner research.

In this study, I argue that the dramatically increased and powerful role of the federal government in education is placing “good” public schools at risk. The heavy-handed imposition of a high stakes testing environment, changes that make the teaching profession mirror the structure and employment practices of commercial enterprises, and the imposition of a national curriculum have taken even ‘good’ schools on a long roller coaster ride.

In Chapter 2, I provide a conceptual framework for the analysis of data collected through 10 years of implementing, analyzing and reporting the results of academic, structural and school culture changes enacted in response to federal mandates. Chapter 3 provides a description of the research design, including specific data collection methods and a list of the many data sources. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the process of data analysis divided into sections in accordance with the selected theoretical framework. Chapter 4 is focused on federal education policy from the 1950’s through the present, utilizing Ball’s (1990b) concept of the contexts of influence and text production to analyze the foundations of NCLB and RTTT. Chapter 5 concentrates on the context of practice, how Southeastern responded to the requirements of federal mandates by making structural and programmatic changes. Chapter 6 continues examining the context of practice, providing an analysis of the effects of NCLB and RTTT on stakeholders,
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drawing heavily from interviews and my own practitioner’s journal. Chapter 7 presents a summary of findings and implications for further research, policy and practice.
Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework and Related Empirical Research

Journal entry for 5-16-13:
Assistant Principal North walked into my office to let me know that at today’s Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting, the English Language Arts (ELA) Department had a meltdown over the Appendix B portion of the Common Core Standards. They were debating whether they should just adopt the recommended books—lots less novels, mostly non-fiction books and just focus on teaching how to answer questions for the national test that will be replacing the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). North said she had to tell them: “You are a great English department, just teach your kids like you do now!” One of the teachers said “But their scores will be in our evaluation!” “I repeat, you are a great English Department, don’t teach to the test!” She told me the panic was evident and she was concerned for their morale. Our students scored a Comprehensive Performance Index (CPI) of 95.1 and 94.4 the past two years, at the top of a possible index of 100, why are these poor teachers panicked and insecure, wondering if they need to change to a mandated (and limited) curriculum! What are we doing to our best professionals?

Reflection, October 2013:
The Common Core State Standards require an emphasis on teaching students to think critically, a focus many Southeastern teachers prefer. The standards, however, emphasize informational text, as if a deep analysis of great literature was less important than understanding a newspaper article. I was very concerned that English teachers would feel obligated to have students read only the state recommended texts, causing a type of narrowing of the curriculum in this subject area. We were already struggling to overcome other unintended consequences of federal mandates. I did not want to give in to the pressure, not this time!

The journal entry quoted above illustrates how Southeastern Middle School’s teachers reacted to the news that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), adopted by Massachusetts in 2010, had just published a list of recommended texts that would help our students be ready for the new state test next year. Southeastern’s English Language
Arts teachers who had prided themselves on an excellent record of preparing their students to be competent readers and writers voiced their fear of teacher evaluations based on student test scores soon to be dependent on a new, CCSS-based standardized assessment. They noted that the CCSS reading list reduced the number of literature texts by two-thirds, placing informational text at the forefront. That would mean changing their entire program—a program they had designed, implemented and refined over five years. They were shaken and unsure despite a decade of successful teaching experience that clearly meets and exceeds the needs of their students! This is an example of a negative effect on teacher morale brought about by the latest developments in the Race To The Top initiative.

This dissertation, a practitioner inquiry study, aims to provide valuable information about the effects, over a decade, of federal and state policy on one middle school where I served as principal beginning in the fall of 2003, continuing to the present. The study focuses on how we constructed and experienced school reform at Southeastern Middle School in response to federal and state mandates, highlighting how these reform efforts in response to NCLB requirements affected Special Education students, their parents and teachers.

**Constructing a Complex Theoretical Framework**

As a theoretical framework for this longitudinal study encompassing 10 years of school reform efforts in direct response to federal mandates, I combine complimentary theoretical approaches that allow me to analyze how federal mandates-- policy writ large—translate to field level practice and how changes in practice—policy writ small--affected Southeastern’s school culture.
Figure 1. Theoretical Framework: Inquiry as Stance in practitioner research and analysis of educational policy through the Policy Cycle.

Figure 1 represents the connections between the study’s methodological framework and conceptual framework, employing Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1999, 2009) theory of inquiry as stance, which “is intended to offer a closer understanding of the knowledge generated by practitioners in inquiry communities, how inquiry relates to practice and what teachers learn from inquiry” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 118).

The conceptual framework is grounded in Stephen J. Ball’s (1994) notion of a “policy cycle”, which combines critical, post-structuralist and ethnographic perspectives to investigate educational policy. Ball’s “policy cycles” theory provides the tools to unpack policy writ large and to determine how that policy is interpreted by practitioners and how it is then translated into field practices.
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Ball’s (1990b) policy cycle concept recognizes that educational policy is a complex process that cuts across theoretical frameworks. By including a combination of critical, and post structuralist theories along with ethnographic methodology, Ball (2004) argues he is better able to reflect the complexity of the school and the classroom. He argues that the inclusion of different theories allows the researcher to use different lenses to analyze data. He states:

Theory can be both exciting and appropriately dangerous. It is constructive and Invigorating, as well as violent and destructive. It plays a vital role in challenging cherished orthodoxies. Theory is for me not a perceptual straitjacket but a set of possibilities for thinking with. Theory should not bear down upon us and stultify our thinking, it should not ‘terrorize’ us with its speculations, but can be used as a toolbox… Epistemologies and ontologies may clash and grate but the resultant friction can be purposeful and effective in providing different lenses through which to see and think about the social world. This means stepping back from simple certainties and thinking instead in paradoxes or holding onto ambivalence (Ball, 2004, p.2)

Ball (2004) concedes that the products of this multi-lens analysis are “necessarily imperfect” (p.3), but that they better reflect “events and specific locations, … contingencies, concatenations and contexts, in the odd as much as the typical giving voice to the normally disregarded or silenced” (Ball, 2004, p. 3)

Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1999, 2009) “inquiry as stance” provides the structure and tools for practitioner research grounded in systematic, reflective analysis and theorizing about educational policy writ small. The merging of these two frameworks forms a theoretical foundation for understanding mandated school reform from the inside. This framework informs how I, as Southeastern Middle School’s principal, thought about and theorized the effects of school reform over a 10 year period, a time when educational policy, first through NCLB and later RTTT, changed nearly every aspect of our school’s programs and culture.
At the Ground Level—Conducting Practitioner Research

In 1986, Shulman pointed out that most research on teaching could be categorized in two major constructs: (1) process-product studies that viewed teaching as a set of behaviors correlated with student learning and (2) qualitative/interpretive investigations based on the view that education is a complex, interactive process where local differences matter. In 1990, Cochran-Smith and Lytle first pointed out that although these approaches differed significantly in terms of underlying assumptions and research designs, both of these paradigms relied on the perspectives of outsiders—researchers from universities and other powerful institutions—observing and collecting data from classrooms and schools where teachers and other practitioners were the objects of study, expected to implement other people’s knowledge. Cochran-Smith and S. Lytle (1999) proposed that both types of research “constrain[ed]… and at times even ma[d]e… invisible teachers’ roles in the generation of knowledge about teaching and learning in classrooms” (p. 7). They pointed out that, in contrast, teacher or practitioner research presented a third paradigm where educators in the context of their practice conducted a “systematic and intentional inquiry” that yielded knowledge based on the educators’ perspectives and honored classroom (and school) practice and experience.

Practitioner research is intended to inform and improve a practitioner researcher’s own practice by providing a structure for reflective questioning and theory development that may well be useful and relevant beyond the local level. Cochran-Smith and Lytle use the term “practitioner research” as an umbrella term to describe related categories of research on education that may differ in form, focus or function, but share key elements that differentiate them from other major types of inquiry (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 2004,
Practitioner research/ inquiry diverges from other research approaches that set the researcher apart from the educator, finding virtue in the supposed neutrality of an outsider unattached to the actual practice being studied. Weaving research procedures into the daily work of educational practice blurs the boundaries between researcher and practitioner but does not diminish the rigor of research. Data are collected, recorded and examined systematically. Practitioner inquiry empowers the teacher and other practitioners to operate simultaneously as both practitioners and researchers and to analyze and develop useful theories about data collected from daily practice. The process of practitioner research is non linear and complex and is directly focused on generating knowledge about and directly improving the work of education. This type of inquiry assumes that the practitioner has access to valuable knowledge and that he/she is capable of “making the familiar unfamiliar” in order to “reconsider what they already know and what they observe in their schools and classrooms” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) suggest that “practitioner inquiry is an overarching category of research with five major genres” (p. 39): action research-- often collaborative studies between universities and schools or community partners; teacher (or administrator) research-- studies by K-12 educators seeking to generate local knowledge; self study-- teacher educators at the higher education level investigating their own practice; the scholarship of teaching and learning-- delving into teaching and learning across disciplines at the university level; and using one’s practice as the site for research—usually placing university-based researchers as teachers in K-12 schools for the purpose of studying classroom practice. A shared feature of all five genres is the dual
role of practitioner as researcher:

Duality of roles enables the classroom teacher, the student teacher, the school principal, the school district superintendent, the teacher educator the professional development leader the community college instructors, the university faculty member, the adult literacy program tutor, the fieldwork supervisor, and many other educational practitioners to participate in the inquiry process as researchers, working from the inside. This is quite different from most research on teaching or school leadership, where practitioners are the topics of study, the object of someone else’s inquiry, or the informants and subjects of research conducted by outsiders. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 41)

Because practitioner inquiry is empirical research conducted from an emic perspective, it can be challenging, since the study site is both complex and familiar to the researcher. In The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty, Herr and Anderson (2005) delineate the actual process of action for administrators who intend to collaborate as equals with teachers, providing an important set of guidelines for conducting rigorous research. For instance, they suggest that challenges to a study’s transparency and rigor can arise as a result of the influence of positionality. A principal practitioner who is both researcher and the direct supervisor and evaluator of the teachers with whom she collaborates, may be concerned as to how positionality may affect responses or reactions. Dana (2009) emphasizes that administrators must begin by questioning their assumptions as well as ensure the inclusion of teacher, parent and student voice in their research.

Susan Lytle (2000) provides a useful framework for framing practitioner research in terms of positionality, legacy, and orientation. She notes that in order to “reveal what is at issue in the contact zone of teacher research” (p.692) practitioner researchers must investigate areas commonly contested. To address the challenges of positionality—how study participants relate to one another as to perceived or actual power or status-- Lytle
suggests a thorough examination of the various perspectives and relationships of all study participants. The concept of legacy refers to unpacking the traditions or disciplines that are connected with what is being studied as well as the social, cultural, political and educational traditions that inform the researcher. The practitioner researcher must also address the study’s orientation, inquiring about the purpose, initial framing and subsequent development of questions as research progresses.

Other common features of practitioner inquiry include: the importance of the local community as the place where knowledge is constructed, used and initially made public; the assumption that every participant of a community of inquiry is considered able to know, learn and research within their own practice; the willingness to challenge the notion that knowledge from one site can be unproblematically transferred to another; a commitment to first apply any knowledge generated through practitioner inquiry to the local context from which it first generated; and the willingness to share local knowledge with a view to inform educational practice beyond its original context. These common features often are considered counter-hegemonic in view of the current emphasis on evidence-based research that privileges a more linear and technical perspective on educational inquiry. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) note that

unlike the knowledge generated by outside researchers, the knowledge generated through practitioner inquiry, which often takes the form of enhanced conceptual frameworks, altered practices, and/or reconstructed curricula, is intended primarily for application and use within the local context in which it is developed. (p.42)

Developing local knowledge may not seem to be as useful as studies that focus on generalizing what is learned, finding a solution that can transform many if not all
educational challenges. Stringer (2007) reminds us, however, that “[all problems are de facto local” (p. xi) and that studying one’s own practice is a way to honor local knowledge above outside ‘expert’ knowledge, honoring the learning and viewpoints of all members of a community of researchers.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) point out that practitioner inquiry is not merely professional development at the local level, but that it is also a “valuable mode of critique of the inequities in schools and society and of knowledge hierarchies which have implications within as well as beyond the local context.” (p. 42) The idea of practitioner inquiry acknowledges that educators have considerable knowledge about their sites of practice and that “this means that all the participants in inquiry communities are regarded as knowers, learners, and researchers” (p. 42).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) also suggest that practitioner research utilizing inquiry as stance

        turns on its head the usual knowledge hierarchy that privileges academic over local knowledge, has the potential to redefine power relationships between outside researchers and practitioners. From the perspective of local knowledge, research is an entitlement and a responsibility of practitioners who are confronted on an ongoing basis with local, but globally influenced, problems for which solutions do not already exist and questions for which answers are not already known. (p. 127)

It is precisely this globally influenced local knowledge that has the potential to “function as public knowledge by informing practice and policy beyond the immediate context (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Meyers et al, n.d. in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

In addition to collecting data generated in the classroom (and the school), practitioner researchers often include some form of collaborative work and reflective or narrative writing that highlights the researcher’s reactions and viewpoint. Practitioner
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inquiry often includes collaboration with other researchers to make work public and open to critique from colleagues in order to advance learning. In Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research, Carr and Kemmis (1993) advocate for educators to use the action research model, requiring the practice of reflection before action as a way to “become aware of how those aspects of the social order which frustrate rational change may be overcome” (p. 179). The authors ask for the formation of “self-critical communities of action researchers” (Carr & Kemmis, 1993, p.179) that research their own work in order to discover how they may improve in every aspect of teaching in order to transform social reality. Promoting the role of narrative and dialogue in research, Cooper (1995) notes that human beings interpret experience in concert with their worldview, thinking “in narrative structures” (p. 123) and making sense as they consider the “story” being told. Narratives capture life in all its complexity and interconnectedness, and assist us to make sense of the past, clarify the present and envision the future. The added information assists in clarifying underlying assumptions, and opens the pathway to further inquiry. Clandinin (1992) and Connelly (2000) propose that the judicious use of narratives can: make data more transparent, assist the researcher and study participants to theorize learning, and aid all who hear or read the narrative to experience personal growth. Narrative and dialogue provide school leaders with an opportunity to display the elements of critical thinking and creativity that provide foundations for decision-making.

Some administrator practitioner studies utilize narratives to provide rich descriptions of their practice. Reitzug & West’s (2008) study for example, used narratives to shed light on how administrators conceptualize their work as instructional leaders in
their daily work. Jetter’s (2009) dissertation, “Examining School Leaders’ Narratives as a Lens for Understanding Leadership Identity and Agency Within a High-Stakes Testing Culture of Accountability” provided details of the values, emotions, beliefs and understandings related to the high-stakes testing culture challenging today’s administrators. Polletta (2006) supports the use of narrative in research, suggesting that it can provide the historical detail and texture lacking in non-narrative analyses. It can also capture the contingency of historical developments, the intersection of multiple causal paths, the importance of temporal sequencing, and the power of agency and events to transform structures. (p.179)

Poletta (2006) maintains that including narrative in research does not replace or diminish the importance of quantitative data and its analysis, but rather can provide a “picture” of what that data is showing and “it can generate new and better questions” (p. 179), a clear benefit for practitioner research.

By engaging in reflective and systematic inquiry on their own daily work, practitioner researchers generate viable and important knowledge for teaching and learning. As Lytle (2010) suggests, reflecting and dialoguing about our work leads us to “make inquiry a core process; tying accountability (e.g. performance and descriptive data) to institutional research; …us[ing] data for formative purposes, with the emphasis on interpreting, redesigning, and changing practice (p.85).” Freeman (1998) points out that inquiry pulls the practitioner researcher toward “questioning the bases of [his] actions and what [he] assume[s] to be true (p. 86).”

Expanding on the concept of practitioner research as applied to school and district administrators, Lytle’s (2010) Working with Kids: Education Leadership as Inquiry and Invention focuses on the challenges of “leading in a dysfunctional policy environment”
Agreeing with Elmore (2000), Lytle notes that educational change only happens when the community (school) develops a deeper sense of responsibility and some type of distributed leadership is established (p. 83). An administrator who studies his/her own practice is seeking local knowledge, often beyond the quantitative analysis of assessment data. In this study, as a practitioner researcher, I sought to uncover the complex web of factors, human and non-human that affected school reform and success at Southern. Both Evans (1995) and Lytle (2010) suggest that practitioner inquiry develops the researcher into a “skilled sensor” (Lytle, p. 83) who can interpret hard data, such as test results and attendance rates, as well as soft data, such as people’s affective response to mandated changes.

To achieve justice and promote a democratic education, everything must be open to question, including the researchers’ own interests and biases. In order to ensure open inquiry, the researcher must utilize a framework that requires continuous questioning of both data and process in collaboration with a group of critical friends. In the next section, I describe the importance of systematic inquiry in providing a structure for continuous and careful analysis and the creation of theory during the research process.

Practitioner research is especially appropriate for analysis of policy implementation and policy making at the school level. As a practitioner researcher, I believe it is essential for me to include all levels of policy in the study of my own practice. To investigate the effects of federal mandates on a suburban middle school, practitioner research provided me with the tools to create connections between laws and regulations and the daily practice of education. For this study, I included data sources such as assessment results and field notes that are typically included in both process-
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product and interpretive research. These essential sources of information were enhanced by the inclusion of audio taped, open ended group and individual staff and parent interviews as well as a practitioner journal providing reflective and rich descriptions of the researcher’s perspectives on the focus of inquiry.

Inquiry As Stance

While I began my journey as Southeastern Middle School’s principal in 2003, I did not begin to study my own practice until 2009 when I attended a course on practitioner research at Boston College. At that time I initiated a practitioner research study animated by Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1999, 2009) concept of “inquiry as stance”, which provided a structure for utilizing inquiry and reflection to unpack assumptions, consider different and sometimes opposing ideas, and providing structures to iteratively analyze and theorize on data as the research progresses.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue that practitioner research is strengthened by adopting a stance of ongoing inquiry. They define inquiry as stance as a grounded theory of action that positions the role of practitioners and practitioner knowledge as central to the goal of transforming teaching, learning, leading and schooling. “We see inquiry as stance as a positive thesis that goes beyond mere critique of the current educational regime and contributes to efforts to re-envision the work of practitioners in global societies” (p. 119). They define “stance” as a way to make visible and problematic the various perspectives through which researchers frame their questions, observations, and interpretations of data. In our work, we offer the term inquiry as stance to describe the positions teachers and other who work together in inquiry communities take toward knowledge and its relationships to practice. We use the metaphor of stance to suggest both orientational and positional ideas, to carry allusions to the physical placing of the body as well as to
intellectual activities and perspectives over time. In this sense, the metaphor is intended to capture the ways we stand, the ways we see, and the lenses we see through. Teaching is a complex activity that occurs within webs of social, historical, cultural and political significance. Across the life span, an inquiry stance provides a kind of grounding within the changing cultures of school reform and competing political agendas (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999b, pp. 228-229).

In Inquiry As Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) suggest that inquiry as stance goes beyond simple inquiry which is often limited by study design to examine a specific time, place and strategy or result, as if “inquiry is something one turns off and on” (p. 120). Instead, inquiry as stance is “a critical habit of mind” (p. 120), that problematizes every aspect of teaching and learning, utilizing a “continual process of questioning and using the data of practice” (p. 121). Inquiry as stance recognizes that knowledge of educational practice is fluid, depending on ever-changing situations and relationships between stakeholders. Inquiry as stance is utilized to provide a substantial structure for studying one’s own practice in a systematic process that generates and theorizes local knowledge.

To illustrate how inquiry as stance informs practice, teacher-researcher Campano (2007) notes,

My research method has developed out of my day-to-day work as a teacher researcher []. [I]t is an organic model in the sense that my design intention, data collection and means of interpretation were not formulated a priori and then applied to my practice; rather, full immersion in the multiple and interacting currents of the life-stream of the classroom was the first in a series of moves intended to generate knowledge of practice (p 112).

Practitioner research is often a collaborative process, thus opening knowledge and analysis to co-participants in the study. In this study, inquiry as stance guided the analysis of the effects of NCLB and RTTT on school programs and school culture. The process of inquiry allowed me to detect and question assumptions within the different texts as well
as my own beliefs and understandings. The practitioner research process encouraged me
to include other stakeholders’ viewpoints and questions to provide opportunities for
Improving Classrooms and Schools, Robison and Lai (2006) note that
good practice requires values and skills associated with inquiry. The values
include openness to evidence and argument, which means being willing to
uncover and check one’s own and others’ taken-for-granted assumptions. Another
important value is a deep concern for accuracy, so that what one believes is, as far
as possible, based on the best available information. A certain humility is also
required, so that there is space for differing views—views that are treated as
sources of learning and improvement rather than as personal challenges. These
values and skills are also widely accepted as essential qualities of a good
researcher (p. 7).

Inquiry as stance is a commitment to conduct practitioner research that iteratively
questions and theorizes the daily work of school. During this study, inquiry as stance
guided the open-ended interviews of staff and parents, allowing for questioning and
type development by all participants. Inquiry as stance framed democratic collaboration
between the administrator, parents and staff in the collection, discussion and analysis of a
variety of data.

Teachers, (and administrators) who study their own practice blur the distinction
between teaching and learning (Branscombe, Goswami & Schwartz, 1992), opening the
door, as Freire (1979) did, to learning from their own students. Practitioner researchers
who construct inquiry-based learning with their students are living inquiry as stance,
linking their learning from their everyday educational experiences to new ideas of what
classroom environments can provide for all students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).
Donald Freeman (1998) noted that research into one’s own practice, even in its
preliminary stages, is “pulling [the teacher] toward questioning the bases of [her] actions
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and what [she] assume[s] to be true (p. 86).” Inquiry as stance leads the practitioner to pose questions about everyday routines, looking at the daily crises with a desire to slow things down so that reflection will take place before making a decision that can affect a child’s life (Christman, (1995). This is rigorous, iterative inquiry that generates knowledge powerful enough to make changes that make a difference for all students (Campano, (2007).

In this dissertation, I use the notion of inquiry as stance as a methodological foundation that honors the role of practitioners as constructors and researchers of local knowledge made public and open to inquiry for the benefit of others. The intention is to provide information that may benefit other practitioners and policymakers. Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (2009), work on inquiry as stance provides a lens that positions inquiry as “perspectival and conceptual—a worldview, a critical habit of mind, a dynamic and fluid way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice,”(p. 120) allowing the unpacking of assumptions, an openness to questioning the interpretation of data and the ability to develop theory while analyzing complex information. They suggest that teachers, teacher-leaders and administrators who also act as researchers of their own practice provide the field with an “emic perspective, unique insight, and the longitudinal viewpoint (p. 101)” that is necessary for positive educational reform.

To illustrate Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s point, I use works by Campano(2007), and Ballenger (1998, 2009) to provide extensive examples of how inquiry plays out in classrooms, where practitioner researchers adopt a more expansive role for themselves as not merely appliers, but also as theorizers and as generators, of empirical and conceptual knowledge. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) note that inquiry as stance blurs the
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boundaries between teaching and learning, working the dialectic between theory and practice, researcher and practitioner, what is conceptual with what is considered empirical. These terms—theory and practice, researcher and practitioner—often considered opposites, are all found together in the conversation created by examining one’s work, questioning assumptions and reframing solutions to problems. Thus, the researcher is constantly interpreting, analyzing and theorizing, ‘mining’ the dialectic as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) suggest. This dialectical relationship between learning and doing is similar to what Lather (1986) referred to as educational “praxis”, a juxtaposition of knowledge and action.

**Ball’s Policy Cycle—Unpacking Educational Policy Writ Large**

While inquiry as stance allowed the researcher to analyze the effects of federal policy at the school level, Stephen J. Ball’s concept of the Policy Cycle provided a framework for analyzing educational policy as it is generated, promoted and implemented at the highest levels of government. Ball (1994) combines critical, poststructuralist and ethnographic lenses to analyze the different contexts within which federal educational policy influences school practice. While his research focuses mostly on the United Kingdom, there are clear parallels in Australia and the United States because of growing global connections. In Education Reform: A Critical and Post Structuralist Approach, Ball (1994) notes that his “aim is to theorize educational reform and thereby achieve an ‘unmasking of power for those who suffer it.’” (Sheridan, 1980, p. 221 in Ball, 1994, p. 1). Ball utilizes three major analytical viewpoints to develop educational reform theory: critical social research, post structural analysis of discourse and texts, and ethnographical methods and procedures for data collection. Ball explains that critical analysts are
engaged in risk taking, reflexive and social justice oriented research. They “examine the moral order of reform and the relationship of reform to existing patterns of social inequality …(p. 2).” In addition, Ball moves beyond the critical arena utilizing a post structural lens to investigate the texts and discourse generated by educational policy. Finally, ethnography provides him with the tools to access “situated discourses’ and ‘specific tactics’ and ‘precise and tenuous’ power relations operating in local settings (Ball, 1994, p. 2). Recognizing that the combination of theoretical approaches, while complementary is complex and, as such, can generate some controversy. He notes,

I recognize that I am straddling, somewhat uncomfortably, a crucial epistemological divide in trying to marry and use these different perspectives. I am also not unwilling to admit my ambivalence about certain versions of post-structuralism, to own up to a modernist material context or to wanting to retain some version of purposive agency. But I am also clear that modernist sociology cannot ignore either the epistemological challenge or analytical insights provided by post-structuralism (p. 4).

Ball’s combination of critical and post structuralist methods, different, yet complimentary theoretical stances, prompted critical theorist Miriam Henry (1993), to note that this type of theoretical framework veers away from a solidly Foucauldian paradigm, and arbitrarily separates discourse and text (p.102), concepts that Henry believes are in a direct and indivisible relationship. As stated above, Ball (2000) recognizes the contradictions inherent in utilizing normally competing theories, while restating the need for any analysis of educational policy to reflect the complexity of a field which encompasses Ball’s use of post-structuralism. This “shift[ed] the study of education away from a ‘technical rationalist’ approach… towards an ‘intellectual intelligence’ stance that stresses contingency, disidentification and risk –taking.” (Ball,
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1995, p. 255 in Vidovich, 2001, p. 9) Ball maintains that these combined approaches produce a central framework suggesting that educational policy is formed, enacted, interpreted, and implemented in self-perpetuating cycles.

In addition to utilizing critical and postructural perspectives, Ball (2007) also notes the usefulness of an ethnographic viewpoint to assist in unpacking the beliefs and values underlying teachers’ actions as they enact policy in their classroom. With this additional lens, he moves policy beyond ideas and words to focus on the elements of school and classroom culture, providing a three dimensional picture of the complex network of forces, texts, actions and reactions that shape the education field in our nation and across the world. This varied and complimentary framework is thus able to analyze policy from its generative source and intent to its ‘reformation’ as it is implemented in the classroom, and back to its source and the next level of changes.

Three Policy Contexts

The concept of a Policy Cycle was first proposed by Ball, Bowe, and Gold in 1992’s Reforming Education and Changing Schools. The authors maintained that education policy could not be treated as a simple, top-down linear model, ignoring the play between opposing discourses as policy is generated and promoted and the varied interpretations about policy implementation in the classroom. Ball (1994) notes that

Any decent theory of education policy must attend to the workings of the state. But any decent theory of education policy must not be limited to a state control perspective. Policy is…an ‘economy of power’, a set of technologies and practices which are realized and struggled over in local settings. Policy is both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended….Policies are always incomplete insofar as they relate to or map on to the ‘wild profusion’ of local practice. Policies are crude and simple. Practice is
sophisticated, contingent, complex and unstable. Policy as practice is ‘created’ in a trialectic of dominance, resistance and chaos/freedom. Thus, policy is no simple asymmetry of power: ‘Control (or dominance) can never be totally secured, in part because of agency. (p. 11)

To “capture the scope of change” (p.11) generated by educational policy, Ball highlighted three major contexts present in a continuous, iterative cycle. The first is labeled as the ‘context of influence,’ highlighting the individuals, organizations and movements that wield sufficient power to influence education discourse and to set goals affecting an entire nation. In The Education Debate, Ball (2008) examines the powerful influence of economic cartels, think tanks and pundits, social forces that at any one point in time are allowed to “speak” for what is right in education. While these forces of influence advocate for what seems a common cause and program, he argues that analysis shows that “[t]here is a great deal of ad hocery, short-termism and bluster in the recent history of education reform (p 108).”

The second context is identified as that of ‘text production’ where guidelines, regulations and other documents exert direct governmental influence on public education. In this second context, he also notes that texts often display conflicts and incongruities that complicate how policy translates into practice. The third context is the ‘context of practice’, at the school and classroom level, where policy is interpreted and carried out as understood by practitioners. Ball maintains that these three contexts interact as stakeholders generate information, regulations and responses, setting the process of education policy in in a continuous cycle—a Policy Cycle.

Ball (2008) suggests that the growing lexicon of this new discourse in education intends to recreate schools in the manner and reflection of business. He calls this the
move towards a “performative society”, defining it as

...[A] culture or a system of ‘terror’. It is a regime of accountability that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change. The performances of individual subjects or organisations serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’ or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. These performances stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgment (p. 49).

Working with Ball’s Policy Cycle, Taylor et al (1997) examine the struggle between supporters of policy that limits education to preparing workers and those who see schooling as an opportunity for “both individual and social purposes—it seeks both to instill those capacities and qualities in students that help them to lead creative and fulfilling lives and to create conditions necessary for the development of a caring and equitable society. ” (p.19) They note that the current discourse of power, accountability, and global competition attempt to limit the field to a simple connection between education and available jobs. In resistance to this view, Taylor et all (1997) agree with Ball that policy analysis should be treated as a cyclical, non linear process that must be explored in all its interconnecting, multi-level characteristics. It is through this cyclical process that educators can interpret, resist and change policy in practice.

Examining the context of text production assists in the analysis of the evolving discourse of what counts as education, and how (and who) may transmit knowledge to current and future generations in the educational policy cycle. Ball states that texts reveal the intent of educational policy by providing “an ‘attitude’ and an ‘ethical framework’ within which teachers and researchers in schools, colleges and universities are having to work and think about what they do and who they are! ” (Ball, 2000, p.2) Texts that
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delineate policy, handed down from the macro level, set goals and parameters to be translated into micro level texts and related actions at the local level. Texts give us ‘new’ words to describe what educators must do in order to be authentic and valuable contributors to a society. By changing the words that lend credibility to one’s professional practice, these texts create new social identities—what it means to be educated; what it means to be a teacher or a researcher. This remaking can be enhancing and empowering for some but this has to be set over and against various “inauthenticities.” (p 2)

Text production generates changes in the education profession by imbuing descriptions of what is valuable and authentic education in the language of the office and boardroom. Beyond laws and regulations other kinds of texts that are utilized to move policy forward often illustrate what is considered important in education. Supporting the notion of education as a type of business, data and databases become acceptable information, audits and inspection runs (sometimes called ‘walkthroughs’), promotional rewards or demotions follow evidence-based evaluations of teacher productivity and ‘added’ (or subtracted) value. Educational policy researchers Taylor et al (1997) point at the power of text which is rapidly changing the field of education by narrowing its focus to students’ readiness for the workplace which is heavily influenced by the pressures of globalization. They argue that new technological advances are whittling away at national boundaries, shrinking time and space and changing the way we look at the practice and management of education. This flow of ever-changing demands produces an atmosphere of uncertainty about what it means to be accountable, how to prove that one is valuable and sufficiently productive.
Texts do not simply guide content and practice, they also generate culture by working into the way educators think about their daily practice. For example, Ball (2000) notes changes in what makes an educator proud of his/her professionalism. Exposed to the notion of education as a business, twenty-first century educators may better identify with their best products, ratings, their winnings in competitions or their shame in not meeting a target or following a protocol rather than their expertise in meeting the academic, social and emotional needs of students. “Crucially, and this is central to my argument, together, these forms of regulation or governmentality, have a social and interpersonal dimension (Ball, 2000, p4).” Thus, texts that redefine teachers’ work, based in the vocabulary of market forces, treat teaching as an output measure and students as commodities.

The third major context in the policy cycle framework is practice, what actually happens in schools and classrooms. Ball, (1994, 2000) described policy as not merely macro versus micro level progressions, but as a cycle where different contexts affect one another to produce policy that is in a constant state of redevelopment. While introducing case studies of educational policy analysis, Vidovich (2001) utilizes Ball’s Policy Cycle, defining the context of practice as the point at which “policy is subject to interpretation and recreation (p 7).” Vidovich (2001) points out that utilizing a critical, “macro-oriented” (p 3) viewpoint, generally oriented towards state-level policy making, ignores what happens when policy is translated for the actual work of schooling. Agreeing with Ball (1994), Vidovich points out that districts, individual schools and teachers are also policy makers as they interpret the intention of policy writ large into action in the field of the classroom. She supports Ball’s inclusion of a post structural perspective, working “on
the cusp” (Vidovich, 2001, p. 4) of intersecting theories, allowing the researcher to
switch focus from macro to micro level elements as needed.

In Teacher Education in Transition: re-forming professionalism? Furlong (2000)
also utilizes Ball’s Policy Cycle to examine case studies on teacher education in Great
Britain. Furlong (2000) points out that “[i]f [policy] texts are to be influential, they have
to be what conventional policy analysts would call ‘implemented’. But implementation
allows, indeed demands, interpretation and the policies themselves in a real sense are
changed in this process (p 7).” School and classroom enactment of policy depends upon
how the enactors perceive the intent and protocols of mandated policy. Teachers,
responsible for the carrying out of mandated policy, are generally absent from its
generation, but are nonetheless influential in its devolution. In his review of Ball’s
theoretical approach to educational reform Lingard (1996), reflects on the view of teacher
as “ ‘deliverer’ of a curriculum determined elsewhere and as a ‘technician’ for testing and
(product) accountability purposes.” (p 72)

Vidovich (2001) argues that the practice context problematizes policy
implementation in that outcomes cannot be predicted with certainty because they are
greatly influenced by local realities. The context is complex in that factors seemingly
unrelated to policy discourse have considerable effects on how its tenets are carried out.
Budget cuts, social and economic circumstances, local resources and staffing make up are
local components seldom taken into account. Furlong (2000) points out, “[w]e therefore
need to ask how particular policy texts are responded to—accepted, challenged, bypassed
and in some cases transformed by those outside government who are responsible for
implementing them (p. 8).” Asking questions about what happens at the school and
classroom level is essential to a study of the effects of a major policy such as NCLB.

Figure 2 depicts Ball’s concept of the cyclical processes of educational policy as reflected in three contexts: the context of influence, represented in this study by the discussion of the history of federal mandates, their proponents and supporters and the specific discourse of neoliberalist focus on education as access to jobs; the context of text production as represented by federal and state documents related to NCLB and AYP; and the context of practice as represented by school, staff and administrator response to NCLB.

Stephen Ball’s cyclical view of education policy has been utilized in a number of studies (e.g. Vidovich 2001, 2007; Furlong et al, 1996; Furlong et al, 2000) as a way to disentangle the complex web of data connecting macro (government generated) policy making with actual micro (district and school level) policy implementation. The policy cycle framework is particularly useful in this study of how NCLB policy and regulations affected what happened at Southeastern Middle School from 2003 to 2013. Utilizing the three contexts of education policy: the context of influence, text production and practice, I have analyzed existing data that reflects the context of influence that generated NCLB, gives evidence of related text production examples, and reveals how policy is interpreted and implemented in the context of practice.

**Combining Practitioner Research and the Policy Cycle**

While a critical perspective on federal education policy matches my own beliefs as an educator with a strong sense of social justice, my 17-year experience as a school administrator, also provides me with considerable experience about what top-down policy looks like at ground level. I agree with Vidovich (2001), Furlong (2000) and Ball
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(2008) that the outcomes of education policy are found in areas far beyond presidential speeches and state reports. With Vidovich (2001), I believe that policy casts a wider net than the words found in a government document or in a series of state-generated regulations. Policy travels across national, state and regional boundaries to be enacted in districts, schools and ultimately in classrooms, and then returns to its source as the local

Figure 2. Cyclical Process of Education Policy
effects of policy influence further regulations and mandates in what seems like a never
ending circle of data flow. I have learned that teachers are not robotic enactors of public
policy; students are not cogs made of the same malleable material, reaching a given target
in response to a scripted lesson plan. Education is complex, and policy affecting
education reflects that complexity as it is crafted, argued about, understood (or
misunderstood), implemented and its success or failure is determined by human beings at
every step of its pathway. Like Ozga (2000), Vidovitch (2001) and Spillane (1999 a,b ), I
believe that teachers themselves are policy makers as they interpret macro policy and
enact micro policy in their classrooms.

As described earlier in this chapter, policy making in education is a messy process
that does not flow smoothly from goal setting at the highest levels to implementation at
the school and classroom level (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992; Harker & May, 1993). As a
practitioner researcher, Ball’s policy cycle allowed me to analyze education policy writ
large from the inside by focusing on three major policy contexts: influence, text
production and practice. Utilizing a variety of Southeastern’s NCLB and RTTT-related
data, systematically collected from 2003 through 2013, I explored how the three contexts
were reflected in the school’s information. Inquiry as stance provided the framework for
the unpacking of assumptions and the creation of questions relative to how influential
ideas translated at the school level.

Investigating laws, regulations and a variety of written and spoken texts available
from Southeastern’s study data provided the opportunity to examine the context of policy
text production as experienced by our school. Practitioner research provided the
framework for systematic collection and collaborative analysis of state generated
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guidelines, assessment reports, school report cards, and other texts related to the federal and state mandates affecting school programs and culture.

The third major context is that of practice, where the texts are interpreted into action. This context, where policy is actually implemented at district and school level, is influenced by diverse interpretations, varied resources and individual viewpoints, thus becoming policy making at the ground level. Inquiry as stance provided an outstanding framework for individually and collaboratively researching how educational policy writ large was interpreted, implemented or resisted, and analyzed for positive or negative effects on the school, its students and staff.

The next section of this chapter explores recent research on the effects of NCLB, and of RTTT on schools, programs, teachers and students.

Literature Review

This section includes a review of literature relevant to this study. The first portion of the literature review positions the study within the research base on the effects of the ESEA reauthorization of 2001, commonly known as the No Child Left Behind law. The review concentrates on empirical and conceptual literature that analyzes positive and negative effects on schools, students and teachers, as a result of NCLB regulations and the neoliberal educational policies that generated these federal mandates. Because this study is focused on a school that was labeled “in need of restructuring” for the failure of students with disabilities and, later, low income students to meet their AYP targets, this literature review includes a number of studies and peer reviewed articles on the effects of NCLB, and the high stakes testing culture that spawned the law, on special education,
their teachers, and the schools they attend.

The *No Child Left Behind Act* has generated much interest among researchers, educators and policymakers. Research on NCLB and the culture of high stakes testing is plentiful. A general search for peer reviewed or dissertation papers on the law revealed over 26,000 studies. For the purposes of this study of a middle school’s response to the consequences of not meeting AYP because of the Special Education student subgroup, this literature review includes recent empirical work, reports and peer reviewed articles yielding relevant information. The selected literature focuses on the law’s impact on school reform in general, middle schools in particular and, on special education students, their teachers and programs. I also selected studies conducted by school administrators focusing on NCLB’s impact on their own or other administrators’ practice.

As of February 2012, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was granted a waiver from the more punitive portions of NCLB by agreeing to implement a number of curricular, assessment and educator evaluation changes under the *Race To The Top* (RTTT) initiative promoted by the Obama administration. The final section of this literature review provides an overview of RTTT and the specific regulations that currently affect Southeastern as it transitions from one accountability framework into another that promises to continue the rollercoaster ride for the students, parents and staff of this high performing yet ‘failing’ suburban school.

**Looking at *No Child Left Behind* as education policy.**

This portion of the literature review is focused on the purposes, elements and school reform generated by the *No Child Left Behind Act*. The first section includes
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information on key provisions of NCLB, while a subsequent section reviews literature on school reform in response to federal mandates. State regulations and accompanying punitive measures for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the state where SOUTHEASTERN is located, are included here, as is literature studying schools failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress targets.

To begin, a general review of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act itself is essential for an understanding of the law’s intent. NCLB’s vision was to ensure a high quality, grade level education for all students, expecting to reduce achievement gaps for minority, low income, limited English proficient and special education students (No Child Left Behind Act, 20 U.S.C. 6301 § 101, 2002). To achieve this purpose, states were to implement a standards-based testing system to monitor the effectiveness of reading and mathematics programs in grades 3-8. The Act presented specific criteria for states to monitor Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) to ensure that, by the school year 2013-2014, 100% of all students, regardless of background or disability, would achieve at least grade level proficiency in reading and mathematics (No Child Left Behind Act, 20 U.S.C. 6301 § 1103, 2002); Guide to ESEA Formula Grants, 2002).

To ensure that the public had access to information on a school or district’s success or failure to make AYP, states were required to publish annual “report cards, reporting the progress of each school district and school, and detailing demographic information of the teaching staff“ (No Child Left Behind Act, 20 U.S.C. 6301 § 1116, 2002). AYP reports would include the progress of all students (the aggregate), as well as the achievement of selected student subgroups: those belonging to ethnic and racial minorities, students from low income families, English Language Learners (ELL), and
those receiving special education services. Since these subgroups have traditionally shown a significant achievement gap in comparison with White and middle/high income students (No Child Left Behind Act, 20 U.S.C. 6301 § 1103, 2002), the law ensured that schools would focus on reducing the achievement gap by setting consequences for any school where even one subgroup failed to meet the annual AYP target. Therefore, while a school’s aggregate population might consistently meet AYP, a small subgroup of students with disabilities not reaching the constantly rising AYP target would earn that same school a punitive measure. In addition, any Local Educational Agencies (LEA) that received Title I funds from the federal government was required to provide any parent of a child in a ‘failing’ school the opportunity to transfer to a better school—one with better test scores-- or to receive supplemental services, such as after school tutoring through an outside agency approved by the state (No Child Left Behind Act, 20 U.S.C. 6301 § 1116, 2002).

In addition to testing, reporting and choice requirements, NCLB provided increasingly punitive consequences for schools that continued to fail at meeting annual AYP targets. Schools not reaching AYP for two years were labeled “in need of improvement” and were required to provide the public with an action plan for remediating poor test scores. Those failing to meet targets for four years were identified as needing “corrective action,” requiring district technical assistance and monitoring, continued parental notification, and, for Title I schools, the parental right to transfer students to ‘better schools’ or receive tutoring services. These failing schools needed to design, publish and implement a detailed Corrective Action Plan (CAP) to be filed with their district and with the state’s education department (No Child Left Behind Act, 20
U.S.C. 6301 § 1116, 2002). The last stage of consequences for schools not meeting allotted targets for five or more years, placed them in the “restructuring” category. Schools in restructuring continued to receive district and state technical assistance, but were required to:

(i) Reopen … the school as a public charter school.
(ii) Replace all or most of the school staff (which may include the principal) who are relevant to the failure to make adequate yearly progress.
(iii) Enter… into a contract with an entity, such as a private management company, with a demonstrated record of effectiveness, to operate the public school.
(iv) Turn… the operation of the school over to a State educational agency, if permitted under State law and agreed to by the State.
(v) Any other major restructuring of the school’s governance arrangement that makes fundamental reforms, such as significant changes in the school’s staffing and governance, to improve student academic achievement in the school and that has substantial promise of enabling the school to make adequate yearly progress as defined in the State plan…

Supporters and detractors.

Since its implementation in 2002, NCLB has attracted the attention of academics and other stakeholders. For the first few years, pundits and researchers focused on the law’s school reform agenda. Supporters of NCLB praised its clear guidelines for school reform which included: the development and implementation of state-developed standards and assessments in the key areas of reading and mathematics; the transparency of public reports on a school’s standing according to its performance on state assessments; the provision of transfer choice for parents whose children were assigned to failing schools; the establishment of a firm timeline for compliance with NCLB student achievement goals; and the rigorous consequences awaiting schools not working hard enough to meet set targets (Kosters & Mast, 2003; Anderson, 2005; Borkowski & Sneed, 2006; Paige, 2006).
Defenders of the law also maintained that by meeting Adequate Yearly Progress targets a school or district showed evidence of their intention to follow reasonable guidelines for improvement (Brown, 2002; Paige 2006). The disaggregation of achievement scores according to subgroups was praised as a tool to finally force schools to close the achievement gap between minority, low-income students, English Language Learners (ELL), special education and middle class background students (Kane & Steiger, 2003; Paige 2006; Sunderman, Kim & Orfield, 2005).

As NCLB’s ‘reign’ approached a decade critics of the law pointed at a variety of concerns about its effects on U.S. public education. In “No School Left Behind” educational psychologist Gregory Schraw (2010) summarizes some of the key points made by detractors of high stakes testing. Citing Lin (2003) who calculated that students would have to raise assessment scores 5 to 10 times over the allotted time to reach the NCLB target of 100% proficiency, Schraw (2010) notes that the “most commonly mentioned weakness is that the ultimate goal of 100% efficiency is statistically unattainable.” (p.72) The author also highlighted scholars’ claims that the current system combining standards, assessments and classroom instruction lack the perfect alignment necessary to garner reliable achievement data, threaten to narrow the curriculum in an effort to focus on tested subject areas, emphasize proficiency over academic excellence (Baker, 2007; Au, 2007; Zvoch, 2006 in Schraw (2010).

Early opponents of federal education policy proposed that NCLB’s tenets were a thinly disguised pathway to the privatization of education in the United States (Apple, 2004; Jeffords, 2004; Sunderman, Kim & Orfield, 2005). Supporters of the law’s visionary principles may have disregarded such critical statements as paranoid or
reactionary, but confirmation of these concerns is found in a 2008 Time interview with former Assistant Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education Susan Neuman. Dr. Neuman stated that while President Bush and Education Secretary Paige were firm believers in the letter and spirit of NCLB,

> There were others in the department who saw NCLB as a Trojan horse for the choice agenda—a way to expose the failure of public education and “blow it up a bit…There were a number of people pushing hard for market forces and privatization.” (Neuman in Wallis, 2008, np)

Citing alarmingly poor preliminary data on NCLB progress, school reform researcher David Hursh (2007) called attention to the connection between NCLB, the rise of globalization and neoliberal policies. He noted that neoliberalism values the privatization of all goods and services and is “replac[ing] the social democratic policies that prevailed from the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt through to the election of Ronald Reagan.” (p. 495)

The law’s influence on public education is also opposed because of the emphasis on high stakes testing. Critics believe that this single lens places too much weight on the quality of the tests themselves and on a single ‘picture’ of a student’s academic achievement (Meier, 2004; Nichols & Berliner, 2005, 2007). In addition, some researchers question the validity of making inferences from a single assessment that does not take into account complex factors such as student ability, amount of parental support, socioeconomic level, placement program, and access to supplemental services (Wiliam, 2010; Fuller et al, 2007)

Other critics focus on the narrowing of curriculum to give increased time to the tested subjects of reading and mathematics and the temptation of teaching to the test
rather than exposing students to a wide field of learning (Apple, 2006; Popham 2004; Cochran-Smith, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006, Spring 2011). In a qualitative metasynthesis investigating the effects of high-stakes testing on curriculum, Au (2007) concluded that NCLB’s requirement of testing reading and mathematics has “induced curricular control” (p. 258) which is dependent on the nature and structures of each state’s assessment. Finding that for the majority of the tests studied, studies reported that curriculum and instruction were geared towards tested subjects and that pedagogy was reverting back to teacher-as purveyor of information strategies.

Looking at the effects of the NCLB’s punitive consequences, Forte (2010) posits that the law does not provide funding and appropriate resources to address the needs of failing schools, and does not have the capacity to properly monitor the system. Questioning who is gaining from NCLB, Arce et al (2005) suggest that “under the guise of accountability, there are multiple gains for multimillion-dollar corporations.” (p. 59) The authors cite the example of the state of Connecticut’s lawsuit against the federal government claiming that NCLB’s demands were underfunded and requiring the state to look for loans to cover costs of providing additional services to failing schools or face having to restructure their expenditures. Suggesting that a switch from a testing-obsessed environment to focus on research-based school effectiveness would be more reliable than the present regulation-laden mandates (Arce et al, 2005 p. 59).

In addition to concerns about hidden purposes, the reliance on a single measure of achievement, and the limitation of learning through a narrowed curriculum, those challenging No Child Left Behind point out that the law shows major structural flaws. For instance, NCLB’s mandates do not guarantee the equality and cohesiveness of state
standards, state-designed assessments, or state regulations on how to determine AYP (NCES, 2009). Thus, states like Massachusetts or New York, which, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), have rigorous standards and high numbers of academically successful students, are compared to states like Mississippi and Texas who consistently rank far below on the national assessment (NAEP, 2009). David Karen (2005) notes that, although allowing states to determine standards and testing was a way to “keep the 800-pound federal gorilla from inflicting too many constraints on state and local autonomy” (p.166), the lack of common standards and tests renders comparisons across states meaningless. Critics note also that by disaggregating data on specific subgroups, the law inadvertently places large schools and school districts with large numbers of minority students at a disadvantage over those who, through smaller subgroup numbers, manage to stay under the AYP radar (Tracey, Sunderman & Orfield, 2005; Sunderman, Kim & Orfield, 2005).

**NCLB and students with disabilities.**

Previous literature review sections dealt with NCLB, its purposes, requirements and the types of school reform expected as a result of its implementation. Because Southeastern’s failure to met the requirements of NCLB was more often predicated on the struggles of students with disabilities to reach their AYP targets, the following section is focused on the impact of NCLB on Special Education students, teachers and programs.

Students with disabilities (SWD) are counted as one subgroup under NCLB, however, there are a great variety of disabilities and levels of disability, under one testing label. Many SWD are able to attend general education classes with their non-disabled peers and achieve proficiency at grade level with appropriate supports. Other SWD in the
moderate or severe categories, need considerably more assistance to access the general curriculum, and some need extensive modification and substantially separate classrooms. Several of the studies in this section of the literature review focus on the requirements of NCLB and IDEA, how these two laws work together or create difficulties in decision-making. The studies and articles in this section vary in tone and subject—some are supportive of NCLB’s goals and processes, many point at both positive and negative effects, and some are critical of the effects of the law on disabled students and their teachers.

In a policy study of the NCLB and IDEA acts, Bechtoldt and Bender (2008) found areas of congruence and conflict between the laws in four major constructs: the balance between federal and local control, the meaning of what is a free public education, efforts towards closing the achievement gap, and the burden of funding mandates. The study found that common elements of both laws were: a focus on early education; the collection and analysis of data for evidence of compliance and progress towards expected educational outcomes. Both IDEA and NCLB assign consequences for schools and districts not meeting expectations, and both do not provide adequate funding to support implementation and progress. Bechtoldt and Bender (2008). The laws were found to be in conflict in several key components:

IDEA is process driven in both implementation and compliance…tells educators what they must consider in drafting instruction for an individual student [and] outlines timelines and due process. The specifics of instruction are left to the Individual Education Plan (IEP) team members. (Yell et al, 1998; Baird & Weatherly, 2005 in Bechtoldt & Bender, 2008, p. 6)

In contrast, the authors state, NCLB is more detailed in the who and what of education, including specific methodologies with a focus on what all students will learn at each
grade. NCLB sanctions go beyond the loss of funding for noncompliance to increasingly punitive measures that culminate in restructuring schools—replacing staff and even handing school or district control over to the state.

Researchers and other educational stakeholders who focus on students with disabilities also differ on their views about NCLB. Lawyer and policy analyst Rutherford Turnbull (2009) maintains that NCLB’s pressure on the school system has effected some welcome changes for the education of children with disabilities. Citing data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), he notes that the “Response to Intervention” movement, a system to provide assistance to struggling students in general education programs, has reduced the number of students identified for special education. He also points to the increased numbers of learning disabled students able to move on to higher education or receiving services to transition to the world of work. Investigating the increase of inclusion programs across the United States, Simonsen et al (2010) conclude that legal mandates to close the achievement gap have spawned school-wide intervention programs where both general and special education students are included.

Supporters of the intent and structures set in place by NCLB note that the law has already benefited special education students. Some researchers find that NCLB has brought attention to SWD students’ need to have access to the regular curriculum. “Not to be overly dramatic but the insistence that schools (and students) make AYP was really a watershed moment for students with severe disabilities. Not since PL 94-142 has legislative action made such a strong statement, indicating that the education of students with severe disabilities is important” (Ayres, 2012 p. 154). Bechtoldt and Bender (2008) point out that supporters of the NCLB mandate call for the need to raise academic
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expectations for SWD students so they will have access to life choices equal to those of general education students.

Some researchers claim that the rise of inclusion programs, (where special education students receive support to attend general education classes,) is due to NCLB pressure for full proficiency for all students. Antley (2010) cites Nagle’s (2006) findings that many educators support inclusion of students with disabilities in school accountability because they believe the practice ensures that these previously underserved students have access to the curriculum and appropriate instruction. Howard’s study of NCLB’s impact on inclusion programs finds that the law forced the expansion of inclusive programs so that SWD students could benefit from knowledgeable subject area teachers.

Researchers and educators who do not support all or part of NCLB, note several challenging areas for schools and districts: a shortage of highly qualified special education teachers who are also qualified in content areas, what instructional methodology is best for SWD, how to qualify special needs students for general or alternate state assessments, what is a reasonable subgroup size, and lack of funding for staffing and resources (Bechtoldt & Benner, 2008). Each of these challenging areas are the focus of the next portion of the literature review.

Special education teachers are not normally plentiful in any area. Study findings included a look at specific challenges brought on when districts and schools have to deal with the demands of both acts: rural and urban schools are finding it difficult to hire and keep teachers who are highly qualified, especially those who must be qualified in Special Education and the content areas they teach (Collins et al, 2005; Ayres, 2012). Bowen and
Rude, (2006) and Hodge and Krumm, (2009) also noted the difficulty of attracting highly qualified teachers and in being able to implement sufficient support services and resources. Looking at the impact of high-stakes accountability on Special Education teachers, Zane (2012) posits that this group of educators is under significant stress because their responsibilities, resources and the curriculum with which they work have changed dramatically. She finds that some educators embrace the change, some are coping and some are rejecting the reform. High stress levels and additional requirements to become highly qualified are likely to make finding special education teachers even more difficult in the continuing era of high-stakes testing.

NCLB affects different types of students with disabilities differently. Among studies highlighting negative effects of NCLB on SWD, Goodwin’s (2011) study of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD) encapsulates many of the current concerns about a variety of outcomes. This phenomenological study looked at high school EBD students’ academic achievement rates and the perceptions of their special education and general education teachers on student progress under NCLB. Interviews indicated that teachers were concerned about increasing academic pressure, decreasing motivation, student ‘shut down’ and rising drop out rates. Teachers shared strategies for assisting their students to succeed by positive feedback, school-home collaboration and providing lots of opportunities for success. Goodwin (2011) called for increased collaboration among teachers and the provision of professional development about EBD to general education personnel. Studying the effects of NCLB on deaf students Cawthorn (2007) cautions policymakers that many deaf students who are not grade level proficient in English should be allowed to take an assessment at the grade
level of English proficiency, rather than take an assessment on a curriculum not yet taught.

Bechtoldt and Bender (2008) note the extensive literature on NCLB’s effect on the narrowing of the curriculum towards tested subjects and the constraints placed by demanding that all curriculum and instruction must be adopted from scientifically based research. They point out that,

-opponents feel that by definition, special education students have disabilities that prevent them from accessing the regular curriculum in the same manner and time frame as regular education students. They note that historically IDEA eligible students have always been measured according to individual growth patterns as dictated by their IEP. Many educators are also concerned for the social and emotional well-being of special education students when their schools do not make AYP due to their IEP subgroup, in terms of both placing blame and the added pressure to perform. (Bechtoldt & Bender, 2008, p. 62)

Collins and Salzberg (2005), summarized evidence of scientifically based research (SBR) practices required by NCLB, commenting that many are “difficult to determine for students with severe disabilities in general, and even more problematic to do so for students with severe disabilities in small schools in rural communities” (p. 62) because they often have less specialized staff and little access to staff development to address these concerns.

While it is agreed that NCLB’s strong emphasis on all students reaching grade level proficiency has brought SWD into focus and provided access to the regular curriculum, many studies point at mixed results for children with disabilities. Several authors described a conflict brought about by NCLB’s strong demands on assessment of academic skills for all students. Collins et al (2005) interviewed rural Special Education directors about the effects of NCLB on their schools, districts and students with
disabilities. One major concern was the requirement for setting academic goals—some judged to be unattainable—to the exclusion or great reduction of goals to advance life skills. Traditionally, SWD with severe disabilities were provided a curriculum focused on functional life skills, developing appropriate social and daily life habits. The current focus of bringing all students to 100% academic proficiency can reduce functional life skills to find enough time to concentrate on meeting academic goals (Ayres 2012; Bowen & Rude, 2006, Collins et al. 2005). Advocates of SWD note that the measurements by which these students are measured must be so revised so that functional life skills are treated equally important to accessing the general curriculum (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Bowen & Rude, 2006; Ayres 2012).

Several studies indicate unsuccessful efforts to improve how SWD fare in their state assessments. Utilizing critical theory, Lewis conducted a study of testing progress for SWD in Texas. His findings indicate that students with disabilities are not making adequate progress, and suggest that there may indeed be indication of low expectations for minority SWD, especially African American students. He proposes that neoliberal organizations intending to display American public schools as failing and needing to be privatized may “well be on their way to achieving their prime directive.” (p.117)

In a study on the effects of staff development to address achievement gap concerns in an elementary inclusion program, Owens-Twaites (2013) concluded that short term, focused professional development did not result in a significant difference in math or English language arts scores or an increase in teacher’s sense of self efficacy. Studying the AYP progress of students and teacher’s perceptions in a California district, Akintade-Ogunleye (2012) found that statistical patterns indicated slight growth in
reading for SWD, but that the achievement gap with non-disabled students remained steady. A similar study conducted in Georgia by Laws (2008) produced comparable results, concluding that despite some gains in both mathematics and reading, SWD continued to lag behind non-disabled students. Foorman and Nixon (2006), conducted a study comparing NCLB data on 4th grade reading to data published by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The researchers point out that although NCLB shows reading improvement at that grade level for SWD and minority students, the NAEP results do not confirm that measurement. Researching the achievement gap for SWD in one suburban district, Driscoll (2012) found that despite some gains in reading and math achievement for both SWD and non-disabled students since NCLB was implemented in 2002, the size of the gap persists. He notes that the study’s findings are similar to those of national studies on the same subgroup of students. He calls for a systematic implementation of [best practices] free from the pressure of high stakes testing and punitive accountability measures imposed on teachers for failure to meet these lofty goals. The goal should be how we can help educators connect the goals and the essence of the NCLB legislation in order to improve educational achievement and significantly narrow the achievement gap, while also allowing local educational agencies to hold true to their community core beliefs and value systems. (p. 133)

While the majority of studies show no reduction of the achievement gap between SWD and non-disabled students, there are a few that claim success. One study finds three intermediate level schools to make their AYP targets, by falling under a safe harbor provision. To attain safe harbor a district or school may demonstrate that they have been able to reduce a subgroup’s non proficient rates in one subject area by 10%. Antley’s (2010) study found that student scores improved as a result of teacher flexibility to adjust and differentiate curriculum, the provision of adequate time for student and teacher learning, and a strong commitment to collaborative work, and adequate knowledge of
teaching and learning. Bittinger (2012) found mixed results investigating the correlation between SWD scores on value added growth measures, criterion referenced school assessments and AYP determinations of proficiency on the regular state assessment. The results showed that SWD who met or exceeded their expected growth targets for value added growth were still on the state test non-proficient listing. This points out the challenges of variance in test designs and formulas for determining proficiency.

NCLB allows for up to 3% of SWD to take an alternate test more suited to their capacity. Some studies noted a concern with unclear guidance on how students are selected for alternative state tests. In an eight-state comparison of alternative assessment placement processes, Harsen (2009) finds that unclear guidelines and insufficiently trained IEP teams have difficulty in deciding who must take an alternative test. The study also revealed discontent with the content of alternative tests focused solely on academic objectives, disregarding that severely disabled students need to be competent in life skills. Gillespie (2011) conducted of a suburban district in Missouri, focusing on their decision-making process for determining if a student with disabilities would take alternative assessments. The study highlighted the staff’s disagreement with the requirement to include even severe and moderately disabled students in the tests. They also voiced concern over inadequate accommodations, claiming that students could not show what they knew with minimal support. Gillespie (2011) recommended clearer state guidelines and training for the IEP teams that make the crucial decision as to what is the appropriate test for each SWD.

There is a concern that states differ in the procedures to determine who qualifies as having a type of disability that does not allow them to take the regular assessment
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(Bowen & Rude, 2006). For instance, a significant increase in the number of students taking the alternative state test route in California, yielded an equally significant rise in AYP across the state (Fearn, 2012). Cho and Kingston (2011) voiced similar concerns when studying the learner characteristics of students selected to take alternative assessments in a Midwestern state. The study found that nearly 6% of the students in the study were placed in an alternative assessment in 2009, despite the fact that they had scored proficient on the general assessment in 2008. This finding raised questions as to the appropriateness of other placements and the reasons why students might have been “pulled back” to an alternative test.

A negative impact on special education students was reported by Shippen et al (2006), who conducted a quantitative study on two middle schools’ utilization of Success for All and Direct Instruction models as Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) models in response to NCLB mandates. Findings revealed that students with disabilities did not show reading achievement gains and continued to have a significant achievement gap when compared to general education students. The authors asked, “Can the majority of schools ever make AYP if students with disabilities are held to the same accountability standard as students without disabilities?” (p. 326) Shippen et al (2006) went on to question the wisdom of comparing special education students with varying levels of disability to their general education peers and called for a change to growth norms and varying measurement techniques depending on the disability. In a large scale cross-state study to examine the effects of NCLB on special education students Eckes and Swando (2009) found that schools most often failed to meet AYP because of the special education subgroup (p. 2480). They noted that students with disabilities, often have lower baseline
scores to start with, yet are required to reach the same proficiency level. This requirement results in a discrepancy, for when a non-disabled student must grow at a rate of 4%, his disabled peer is required to show a 9% gain! (Eckes & Swando, 2009) Several researchers, (Bethel, 2008; Faircloth, S., 2004; NEA, November 2004, Eckes & Swando, 2009) suggest that the Individual with Disabilities Education Act’s (IDEA) mission to provide an appropriate, individualized education for disabled students is violated by some of the more rigid NCLB testing requirements. Eckes and Swando (2009) conclude that the special education subgroup’s failure to make AYP poses an unfair challenge to their schools and school districts. They go on to state: “Specifically, if the special education subgroup dictates the AYP decision of the entire school, NCLB is a law that is not concerned with improving overall student achievement or identifying truly high- or low-performing schools” (Eckes & Swando, 2009, p. 2500).

NCLB and middle schools.

As noted above, research on the effects of NCLB on students with disabilities, their programs, teachers and schools has become robust and varied in the latter years of the law’s implementation. Studies have included mostly urban and rural school systems, as well as two suburban districts (Driscoll, 2012; Gillespie, 2011). Several studies focusing on urban schools designated as NCLB “corrective action” or “restructuring” sites (Staten, 2009; Craig, 2004; Heckman & Montera, 2009; Morocco, Brigham & Aguila, 2006) highlight the challenges faced by administrators serving in areas highly impacted by poverty and accountability pressure. A thorough case study of an urban middle school undergoing restructuring under NCLB provided rich, naturalistic inquiry focused on teacher, student and administrator perceptions in the process of mandated
The author’s use of Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) characteristics of naturalistic research supplied a framework to “explore[e] the experiences and perceptions of participants [that] provide[d] an opportunity for increased understanding of the restructuring process” (Moulden, 2009, p.2). The researcher’s intent was to provide a “holistic picture” (p.3) of the entire school community’s response and reaction to the restructuring process. As a state department of education consultant, the researcher worked directly with the school being studied and declared her interest in the effects of the NCLB guidelines as well as her positionality as a participant observer.

Utilizing Bolman & Deal’s (2008) model of “Reframing Organizations,” Moulden’s (2008) study investigated four areas: structural changes, human resources, political and symbolic elements (p.17). Triangulation of document collection, interviews and observations provided the researcher with evidence that the restructuring process provided some benefits as well as “severe costs” such as the loss of staff members who had shown ability to positively affect student achievement (p.155). Moulden concluded that, in this case, restructuring was used as a way to reconstitute a school that was not given a chance to improve through the research-proven paths of providing appropriate professional development, facilitative leadership and input from all stakeholders. He suggested that,

>a well-developed plan is one in which everyone can take ownership and no teacher is left behind. The goal should be that everyone involved knows the plan thoroughly and changes may be made along the way, thereby allowing the plan to become a living document that is shared by all stakeholders. (p.176)

Study recommendations included the call to provide time, resources and support for schools in restructuring to analyze, plan, and collaborate in designing their own school
improvement solutions.

A thorough search for studies focusing on NCLB’s impact on middle schools whose special education subgroup failed to ‘make’ AYP revealed three dissertations specifically focused on this challenge. One study investigated the implementation of whole school reform in response to the need to restructure (Locson, 2009). The study focused on whole school reform elements including professional development, curricular and instructional changes, and determining teacher attributes necessary for improving the achievement of Special Education students. Locson (2009) found that students with significant disabilities were consistently less able to show improved achievement. The study also found that general education teachers’ subject area expertise and ability to differentiate instruction were seen as more important than Special Education teachers’ skills in providing special services. Over all, the study concluded that the type of research-based practice defined by NCLB is not reflective of current education research.

Bethel (2008), conducted a critical inquiry on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act’s (IDEA) 2004 NCLB reauthorization with a focus on the promotion of equity and access for special needs students. The study concludes that, although the law’s intent—to provide an equitable education for all students—is commendable, “the current use of scientific and efficiency discourse in public educational policy “is antithetical to the educational needs of students generally and students with special needs in particular” (p. 149). Bethel (2008) suggests that imposing the same standards for all students result in setting unreachable goals, since Special Education students are assigned individually selected educational plans to ensure the most efficient learning for their particular disability.
Since this study is focused on the effects of NCLB on one high performance suburban middle school in Massachusetts, a study by Wilson (2008) is of particular interest. Wilson’s study of two suburban middle schools in Massachusetts focuses on their response to failing AYP because of the Special Education subgroup did not meet their targets. As the researcher explains, the study of these “good” but failing schools is important as there is an increasing number of high performing schools not reaching their federate mandate targets. Wilson (2008) conducted a qualitative study to investigate staff perceptions about AYP failure, school-wide strategies to address SWD needs and implications for practice and research. Study results revealed that the failure of SWD to make AYP is embedded in the complexity of accommodating student individual needs while trying to reach a common grade level goal. Time for collaboration, the encouragement of a reflective practice, additional knowledge in Special Education for general educators and in the content area for Special educators were highlighted as recommendations for improving the schools’ “problem solving kit” for this subgroup. Information from Wilson (2008) provides a useful point of reference for this ten-year study of Southeastern, a high performing Massachusetts middle school whose SWD population struggled to reach AYP goals in mathematics under NCLB.

**Transitioning to Race To The Top.**

As mentioned earlier, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was granted a waiver from No Child Left Behind in February 2012. The waiver came just in time! The Center on Education Policy’s 2011 report published Massachusetts, a state proud of its ranking at the top on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, as being among 5 states
where 75% or more of its schools failed to meet their AYP goals (CEP, 2011, p. 4). The removal of NCLB’s punitive consequences for not reaching targets towards 100% proficiency by 2014, set off a wave of relief at Southeastern. However, while the waiver under RTTT gave Massachusetts schools a reprieve from the threat of restructuring and state takeover, the Obama educational agenda provided new regulations that continued the move towards increasing federal control of public education.

In order to qualify for an RTTT waiver from NCLB, states had to agree to set in motion a number of school reforms described in detail in the 37-page application for the competitive grant. Following is the description of the purposes behind the RTTT initiative:

The purpose of the Race to the Top fund, a competitive grant program authorized under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), is to encourage and reward States that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform: achieving significant improvement in student outcomes, including making substantial gains in student achievement, closing achievement gaps, improving high school graduation rates, and ensuring student preparation for success in college and careers; and implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas:

a) Adopting internationally-benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace;
b) Building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals in how they can improve their practices;
c) Increasing teacher effectiveness and achieving equity in teacher distribution; and
d) Turning around our lowest-achieving schools (Department of Education, 2010, pp. 19496-19497).

In order to accomplish these goals, states were directed to submit detailed plans for: a comprehensive approach for school reform; curricular emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics; a solid early learning program; a statewide data system to provide fast and accurate information on student achievement; a vertically and
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horizontally aligned PreK-20 educational system; and provisions for flexibility to allow school level opportunities for innovation. While RTTT goals seem general, laudable, and positive in contrast with the language of NCLB, the rubrics that describe how a state may earn enough points to qualify for the grant, provide a more transparent view of federal education policy under RTTT.

States may prove that they are implementing comprehensive education reform by:

1. Achieving “significant” progress in student achievement through required assessments (NAEP and required state tests under ESEA), including substantial reduction in achievement gaps for subgroups—students are expected to grow at least one year at each grade level.
2. Adopting “internationally benchmarked” common standards.
3. Implementing standards-aligned assessments.
4. Developing and expanding a statewide data system.
5. Developing alternative routes for preparation and licensing of teachers and principals that include a reduction in the number of required coursework.
6. Implement an evaluation system for principals and teachers that is: based substantially on student progress on achievement tests; allows for monetary incentives for “highly efficient” educators; provides tenure through rigorous procedures not including a set number of years in education; includes procedures for removing unsatisfactory teachers and principals.
7. Provide a process for intervention in the lowest performing schools
8. Encourage the development and support of high-performing charter and innovative schools. (Department of Education, 2010, pp. 19503-19505)

It is clear from the carefully worded language in the RTTT application, that some of the same assumptions that fueled NCLB are well and alive under a new, Democratic administration.

In a review of RTTT and its response to concerns about NCLB, Berry and Herrington (2011) suggest that although the new initiative addresses some of the challenges, RTTT “fails to acknowledge the sheer magnitude of the challenges states face” (p. 272). While the “Obama Blueprint acknowledges but does not fully address the
importance of teacher and leader quality and … distributional challenges,” (p.272) it does not focus on the issue of poorly funded and often inappropriate interventions.

While it is early in the implementation phase of RTTT, new conceptual literature is addressing some of the elements of education reform already at work. Looking at the development of common assessments, such as the tests produced by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), Gewertz (2012) notes the emphasis on the use of technology, higher order thinking and performance items.

Teachers interviewed for this article stated enthusiasm for the variety of testing modes in PARCC, but questioned the capacity of schools to test all students electronically. Jones, Buzick and Turkan (2013) address the challenges of connecting subgroup student achievement to the evaluation of general education teachers and provide suggestions for valid and fair ways to account for students often kept out of the accountability equation.

No doubt researchers and educators will have much to investigate, reflect upon and discuss as RTTT begins to change the face of education. Since this study includes the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years, complete with RTTT data, it sheds some light on the differences, challenges and questions raised by the transition from NCLB to the “Obama Blueprint.”

Following this literature review, Chapter 3 will describe the study’s research design, data sources, and methodology for data analysis.
Chapter 3

Research Design

Journal Entry October, 2011:
I’m getting ready to send the NCLB results, couched in careful wording, to our parents. This is the first year the aggregate student population is not meeting AYP for math. Of course, we have a CPI in the high 80’s, so much higher than it was when I started as principal in 2003! We were in the high 40’s then! But that does not matter to parents. They just want to know that their child is OK and will pass the MCAS so they don’t have to worry about it when it becomes essential for graduation! So I have to be careful how I pass this information on to our “clients”. I do NOT want them to lose trust in our work! I feel like explaining the data sounds like I am making excuses for us. Do they know that Massachusetts’ curriculum is the toughest in the nation? Can they tell that Special Education and Low Income subgroups are counted within the aggregate and are pulling all scores down? Do they realize that their children manage excellently when they transition to high school? How do I keep all the plates up?

Reflection November, 2013:
I struggled to write this letter because I wanted to make sure parents understood that our school continued to provide an excellent education for all students despite the fact that about 15% of our students were struggling to meet a target CPI of 92.2. I was aware that the majority of the struggling students were part of the same subgroups that were improving too slow to reach their ever rising AYP targets. I could not, however blame it on the children! I did not want to pass my anxiety on to the parents and the students—well, at least not add to the anxiety that was clearly there! Being transparent and sounding hopeful under such pressure-laden, unrealistic expectations was nearly impossible!

This study contributes to the research field investigating the impact of NCLB on a school designated for restructuring due to the failure of Special Education students to meet AYP goals. As noted above, despite the high number of middle schools in restructuring, only one other study of a high performing suburban middle school in restructuring due to special education students’ inability to meet AYP was found.
In order to investigate the impact of federally mandated accountability models, primarily *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), on special education students, their parents and teachers at a suburban middle school, this practitioner research examined assessment and school reform data related to NCLB and RTTT from 2003 to 2013. A practitioner analysis of this extensive data was supplemented with additional data generated through a series of teacher and parent interviews, field notes, and the researcher’s practitioner journal. The interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed for the analysis work. Through an iterative process of utilizing inquiry as stance, and policy cycle theory, I unpacked assumptions, analyzed and theorized on the varied data generated by systematic and purposeful collection during a decade at Southeastern Middle School.

**The Research Site and the Researcher’s Role**

As noted in the literature review, there is very little research examining the influence of federally mandated accountability models on middle school special education students, their teachers, and their parents in a high performing, suburban school system. In this study I investigated the impact of NCLB at Southeastern, a large suburban New England middle school, which was placed in the restructuring category for the failure of students with disabilities to meet their AYP targets. Below is a description of the selected site of study, followed by the researcher’s profile.

Southeastern Middle School was first labeled as a corrective action school, requiring significant curriculum and instruction reforms, in 2005-2006. In response, the staff adopted a whole-school collaborative model, eventually adopting a Professional
Learning Community (PLC) (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004) structure in 2007. By using the collaborative inquiry process within the PLC framework, Southeastern’s staff designed student-centered strategies sensitive to local culture. While improvements were initially successful, moving the special needs subgroup to meet AYP target scores in the spring of 2007, the success was short lived. As the AYP target was raised to meet the federal deadline of 100% proficiency by 2014, the subgroup, again, slipped below the required threshold in mathematics. In fact, by the fall of 2009-2010, the same subgroup did not meet AYP goals for English Language Arts, placing the school in the “needs improvement” category for that subject.

As Southeastern’s principal, I worked alongside my staff, participating as described by Herr and Anderson (2005), in collaborative inquiry cycles as an “insider in collaboration with insiders” (p. 31) in a series of school-wide reform efforts to address the needs of all our students.

As a doctoral candidate, I focused much of my work on educational policy and school reform with a view to promote equity and social justice in my own school and district. Lit by the fire of Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968), my desire to fight for socially just educational change fueled my drive to uphold teacher empowerment as an ethical and moral duty, resulting in the provision of increased opportunities for shared decision-making and professional collaboration. As a teacher/learner, I am grounded in the tradition of practitioner research, and informed by the notion of “inquiry as stance” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Thus I took on the task to use inquiry as stance to ask, answer, analyze and re-ask questions to uncover investigate what happened at Southeastern as a result of the federal mandates of NCLB
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and RTTT over a decade, inviting the voices of fellow Southeastern educators to contribute to the work.

Figure 3. Representation of research design: Studying a middle school’s response to the failure of student subgroups to meet AYP targets. Analyzing state-provided AYP data as well as school-generated archival document, field note, interview, and practitioner journal data through practitioner inquiry.

As a practitioner researcher intending to generate knowledge about how federally mandated educational change has affected the specific student populations it was intended to benefit, I engaged in an investigation of what happened to my own school’s special education and low income students, their teachers and parents in response to the challenges posed by NCLB. Utilizing Herr and Anderson’s (2005) continuum of positionality, I framed my study as an insider in collaboration with other insiders, the principal practitioner researcher working alongside teachers and parents. As a practitioner researcher I chose to act both as principal and researcher within my own school.
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(Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) Following traditional practitioner research, I invited members of Southeastern’s staff to collaborate in the study by participating in group or individual interviews that allowed their voice to be heard and honored and provided their views of the effects of NCLB on Southeastern.

In the spirit of promoting a democratic and just educational environment, Southeastern established several collaborative governance structures, a Faculty Senate, a Professional Development Committee, and a multi-level professional learning community (PLC) structure, utilized as an organic framework to engage in a continuous inquiry cycle – question, research, create, discuss, reflect – in order to develop programmatic, curricular and instructional changes with a focus on raising academic achievement, improving social and emotional development and promoting a positive school experience for every student. Field notes from a variety of Senate, PLC and other meetings, conferences and communications were included as part of the empirical knowledge base.

As an insider, I provide a unique emic perspective; as a principal of over ten years at this school site, I provided a longitudinal view of my practice – a high performing yet AYP failing middle school. As is noted in Herr and Anderson, (2005), as a practitioner researcher who is also Southeastern’s principal, I acknowledged challenges related to power relations in the process of developing a collaborative framework for the study. In order to meet those challenges, I established a research plan allowing for maximum freedom of expression for staff members, providing an opportunity to those who wished to participate in interviews to voice their viewpoints, knowledge and critiques.
Data Sources

Utilizing Southeastern Middle School as both my professional context and the site of inquiry, I conducted extensive interviews with teachers, other staff members and with parents of special needs students who experienced the mandates and consequences as well as the school reform efforts generated by NCLB since 2003. The interviews were voluntary, audiotaped, professionally transcribed and were focused on examining, analyzing and theorizing on the extensive NCLB-related data (see Data Source Chart). In addition to teacher interviews, I conducted several interviews of parents whose special education children were enrolled in Southeastern during the study’s decade.

Archival data related to NCLB and RTTT, dating from 2003 through 2013 includes: state, district and school-generated student achievement data and communications, relevant staff and parent communications; agendas, meeting/field notes and other documentation generated in response to the school’s efforts to address ongoing AYP concerns; my own professional journals and annotated logs, and a variety of relevant artifacts. Guided by the practitioner research model, teacher and parent interviews allowed for participant to openly respond to questions, generate additional inquiries, make comments, and theorize on the data.

A study of what happened to special education and low income students and their teachers as a result of curriculum and instruction changes and other actions enacted in response to NCLB mandates, included many rich sources of archival data. Below is a listing of data sets utilized in this study:

- Electronic Data Sources: NCLB law; school report card data from the
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE);

- Written formal documents: letters about NCLB/ AYP from DESE; annual letters from the principal to parents regarding AYP reports; newspaper reports regarding AYP status; district/school documents regarding funding/professional development/staffing changes in response to the special education subgroup needs;

- Agendas/ minutes, notes from Professional Development Committee, Faculty Senate and PLC meetings where special education student needs were discussed;

- Written communication to staff regarding AYP; regarding changes in response to special needs students’ challenges in mathematics and English Language Arts;

- Principal’s Journal entries;

- Staff and parent interviews; auditory records and transcripts;

- Correspondence with parents and community regarding AYP;

- Principal’s personal narrative in response to field notes;

I believe that studying how practitioner inquiry constructs local knowledge to effect meaningful educational change, will result in a counternarrative to NCLB’s premise that educational reform can only be successful if it is initiated, monitored and enforced by “outsiders.” Such a counternarrative may be beneficial both locally, and, when shared publicly, may be useful information for other administrators of high performing schools subgroup populations struggle to meet federal and state requirements.
Another hoped for advantage of collaborating with interview volunteers was that they may be inspired to take the concepts and skills learned in this process to foster their own practitioner inquiry. It is also intended that this practitioner research dissertation may inform policymakers, providing them with a clear view of the positive and negative effects of education policy as it stands at this time.

By taking an inquiry stance towards the curricular, instructional, structural, and cultural changes that have happened at Southeastern Middle since the enforcement of NCLB mandates in 2003, I unpacked of a number of assumptions about educational reform, student achievement, teacher status and school leadership. Questions evolved in an iterative process as data was analyzed, revealing additional depths to be investigated (Freeman, 1998; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Anderson, Herr & Nihlen (2007). While I, as the researcher framed the initial questions, interview participants will be encouraged to ask questions, voice opinions and theorize as they examine the study data. Practitioner researchers Ballenger (2009), Campano (2007) and Blackburn et al (2010) show excellent examples of how research questions evolved as they proceeded through the inquiry cycle.

Since I intended to generate knowledge that is of use locally, I wrote in a way accessible to the stakeholders while still reporting data in a scholarly manner. As a practitioner researcher I believe with Evans (1995) in the judicious inclusion of narratives within the inquiry process as one opportunity to provide voice to the experiences and perceptions of teachers, students and myself as principal and researcher.

Analysis Of Data

The collection and analysis of data in a practitioner study is a complex process.
Table 1. Data Sources for Rollercoaster Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATA</th>
<th>DATES</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>QUANTITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NCLB ACT</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>ED.Gov</td>
<td>1 document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AYP/ CIP Status Notification</td>
<td>2003-2013</td>
<td>MA DESE</td>
<td>1-3 communications per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School AYP Action Plans</td>
<td>2004-2011</td>
<td>PERSONAL Archives</td>
<td>1 plan per year, reports to School Council and School Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper articles &amp; reports</td>
<td>2005-2011</td>
<td>Sun Chronicle, Boston Globe Archives</td>
<td>1-2 articles related to Southeastern and/or middle schools per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication to and from parents re: AYP/NCLB</td>
<td>2004-2011</td>
<td>PERSONAL Archives</td>
<td>Annual parent letter in October; 2 dozen related notes, emails, letters, field notes from face to face meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional DESE communication re: AYP/NCLB, MCAS</td>
<td>2005-2011</td>
<td>PERSONAL Archives</td>
<td>2-3 information packets per year; equal amount of response letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCAS Data and Analyses</td>
<td>2004-2011</td>
<td>PERSONAL and MA DESE Archives</td>
<td>2 sets of reports for each grade level per year; annual alternative test reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development re: AYP/NCLB/ MCAS</td>
<td>2004-2011</td>
<td>PERSONAL Archives</td>
<td>103 separate artifacts collected from 3 professional development days per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLC Agendas/ summaries</td>
<td>2007-2011</td>
<td>PERSONAL Archives</td>
<td>Approximately 30 meeting summaries per subject area, per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty and School Council Agendas/ Minutes</td>
<td>2006-2011</td>
<td>PERSONAL Archives</td>
<td>2 meetings per month, September-May each year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal’s Journal Entries</td>
<td>2008-2011</td>
<td>Personal Archives</td>
<td>2 journals per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcripts of Staff and Parent Interviews</td>
<td>Spring 2012</td>
<td>PERSONAL Archives</td>
<td>16 staff interviews, some in groups, some individual; 10 parent individual interviews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Freeman (1998) suggests that conducting practitioner research requires “maneuvering between doubting what you are finding and what you are becoming certain of” (p. 86).

A commitment to maintain a stance of continuous and open inquiry required reflection, the questioning of assumptions, and theorizing while considering the developing patterns. In addition, the policy cycle provided the capacity for investigation. Freeman (1998) compares the collection and analysis of data as an iterative process, using a food preparation analogy to find the parallels. A cook looking at what is already in the refrigerator resembles a practitioner researcher examining existing data to see what is useable; considering a recent meal is like weighing in related learning/research, and making a list of what must be acquired from the market is like planning to secure additional data. Both processes are iterative, because additional data may suggest a change or refinement of the plan, the research questions or determining further informational needs.

For this dissertation, the existing data, while extensive, does not provide conclusive evidence to answer the research questions. Analyzing assessment data can reveal some challenges of meeting AYP under the increasingly rigorous accountability system set in place by NCLB. In order to make the research “sturdy”, Freeman (1998) suggests that triangulating data sources and data analysis helps the practitioner to minimize bias and increase confidence in the findings. Therefore, this practitioner study utilized several data sources: documents (as delineated in the Data Source Chart), a series of interviews, notes from Senate and PLC discussions, a practitioner journal and annotated logs. In addition to this methodological triangulation the utilization of more than one theoretical perspective strengthened the research analysis. Utilizing inquiry as
stance and policy cycle theory assisted me in what Freeman (1998) terms as “disassembling and reassembling” (p. 99) the data, questioning it, questioning myself as the researcher and seeking to better understand how other stakeholders perceive the same data. Since practitioner research focuses on studying one’s own practice, the “aim is to make the regular appear new, to put a different frame around what is usual and taken for granted in everyday teaching and learning and thus to perceive it and understand it in new ways” (Freeman, 1998, p. 99). In addition to the archival data, interviews, and the practitioner journal provided the additional information to generate the grounded codes needed to find deeper, more complex answers to the research questions. The process was not linear, but iterative since a pattern found in the documents was often reflected or contradicted by supplementary data from interviews, or journaling.

To analyze federal, state, district and school NCLB/RTTTT related documents, as well as field notes collected from a variety of school and district-wide meetings, and communications also related to the federal mandates, I utilized Ball’s (1990b) concept of the context of text production. This aspect of the policy cycle framework assisted me in teasing out the “the language of public good” (Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992, p. 20) which provided each document’s specific intentions and intended consequences. Thus, every official document was read multiple times and individually analyzed with the purpose of gathering both its key language and ideas. These themes were noted on index cards. The notion that “texts have to be read in relation to the time and the particular site of their production… and have to be read with as well as against one another” (Bowe, Ball and Gold, p. 21) led me to set up a second analysis structure that compared documents generated in the same time periods. Notes were taken as the comparisons generated
questions and additional themes. This process revealed the sometimes incoherent and contradictory directives in different state documents. (See the comparison of NCLB and IDEA directives on accommodations for special education students in Chapter 4). More informal documents, such as notes from Faculty Senate, Professional Development Committee and Leadership meetings as well as communications from and to parents and staff were also categorized by time of publication, read multiple times, analyzed and coded for key words, and ideas and coded for themes both individually and in comparison to one another. Themes from the formal and informal NCLB/RTTT data sources were then compared and those themes best related to the research questions were then analyzed through the inquiry process. A detailed analysis of NCLB/RTTT related data is found in Chapter 4.

Another set of data sources were contained in the parent and staff interviews as well as the practitioner journal I kept from 2009 to 2013. The interviews took place from January through July 2012 and included 10 individual parent interviews, 2 individual staff member interviews and 4 separate group interviews totaling an additional 24 staff members. Individual interviews were conducted at various locations of the participant’s choosing. Six parent interviews took place immediately after school in a conference room at Southeastern. Of the remaining four parent interviews, two were held at a local coffee shop and two at the participants’ homes. Staff interviews were all held after school at Southeastern. The two individual staff interviews were held in the staff members’ work area, while the group interviews were held in a small conference room at the school’s main office.

Individual interviews were held for one hour, with an option of a second hour at
the participant’s discretion. Group interviews were set for two meetings of one hour
apiece, and all but one participant attended both meetings. All interviews began by
spending a few minutes reviewing a chronological chart of NCLB/AYP school report
cards (See Figures 6 and 10 in Chapter 5) and a poster showing the changes made at
Southeastern in response to NCLB/RTTT (See Table 2 in Chapter 5). Then participants
were asked the study’s research questions as a point of departure for discussion.
Audiotapes of the individual and group interviews were professionally transcribed.
Transcripts were read multiple times and cross-checked for clarification by listening to
the audiotapes. Notes were taken and then summarized on index cards, noting themes and
highlighting key language. Themes not related to the study questions were set aside for
future analysis.

The same procedure was used in reviewing practitioner journal entries collected
since 2009. All entries were read to cull out those related to the study questions. Out of
213 entries, 104 were selected as directly or indirectly related to the study questions.
These entries were read multiple times and simultaneously analyzed for common themes
and key language. Several entries were then selected as representative of major themes in
the journal and placed at the beginning of each chapter.

All interview and practitioner journal themes related to the study questions were
then compared to the themes found in the NCLB/RTTT formal and informal document
data. Index cards were color coded to indicate the original data source, and themes were
then collated to determine which were common to all or most data sources.

Several key themes were common to all sets of data: the influence of
NCLB/RTTT and its related high stakes testing system permeated all programs and activities at Southeastern; programmatic and structural changes and their related effects had considerable influence on the school’s students, parents, teachers and school culture; law and regulation requirements fed a top-down decision making structure; stakeholders found the demands of the federal mandates to be unrealistic, unfair and unreasonable; NCLB/RTTT requirements caused unintended consequences on students, but more specifically on special education students. Related subthemes expanded on these main ideas.

The following chapters provide a detailed analysis of the data included in this study. Chapter 4’s analysis falls within the context of influence—who were the influential individuals and organizations that set educational policy that produced NCLB/RTTT?—and the context of text production at the federal government level—what were the key documents that “spoke” educational policy from the 1950s to the present. Chapter 5, within the context of text production at the state, district and school level deals with the regulations and communications that translated educational policy for Southeastern. It also moves within the context of practice to analyze the changes enacted by the school in response to requirements and regulations related to NCLB/RTTT. Chapter 6 remains within the context of practice, but turns its focus on the voices of the stakeholders as they relate their perceptions of how the NCLB/RTTT related programmatic and structural changes have affected Southeastern.
CHAPTER 4
Public Education Policy:

The Growing Role of the Federal Government in Education

From the 1950’s Through the Present

Journal Entry for October, 2009

This morning’s local paper reports that our school’s aggregate student population did make adequate yearly progress! Last Monday’s paper had reported the opposite to be true—erroneously, as it was reporting the results for all district middle school students, including those in out of district programs. The correction made me feel better—I spent a restless week, not much sleep and lots of extra time trying to figure out what happened! Of course, the target scores are getting closer and closer to the 100% proficiency figure, but we should still be OK. We are, but we are getting closer to not making AYP for the entire population in math, and this was too close. I am always worried about the school’s reputation and so upset that it feels like fingers are always pointing at us—the child in the middle syndrome! I know it’s because we test every grade and that the tests are particularly difficult at grades 7 and 8 so the students will be ready for the 10th grade test, which is necessary for graduation. All the same, the pressure this week was incredible. Now we are back to working on the Special Education kids—their difficulty with math is dragging us down and we have changed their program each year to see what works to help them raise their test scores. Math and Special Ed have become attached to each other—always together at each meeting. There is no rest for the weary!

Reflection, November 2013:
The early journal entry above reveals the frustration of having our school’s standardized test scores be reported erroneously by the local media, causing a local furor and a week’s worth of investigation by our staff and the superintendent’s office. Although the error was corrected, the original report left a lingering fear among the math and special education teachers. The “target scores”, those indicating the school was in the correct path towards meeting the goal towards all students being proficient by 2014, were constantly rising. Each year, there were higher expectations for all students, including those with learning disabilities. Every staff member was wondering, what would happen next year if the aggregate population did not reach the expected target score?
In “The Order of Discourse”, Foucault (1981) proposed that powerful discourse is determined by decisions as to who is excluded and who gets to speak about education policy. Expanding upon that premise, Ball (2004) suggested that discourses are constructed by those who are allowed to wield great influence to define the field, articulate the allowable positions, and thus “subtly set limits to the possibilities of education policy” (p. 26). Ball further claimed that by setting these limits, the government created

a set of sacred objects, statements and concepts …thematically welded into a powerful regularity… [that] capture and evoke a whole range of commonsense fears and concerns…[where] it is sensible to consider that which is excluded or displaced in the new emergent dominant discourse…What is the world that we have lost? (p. 31)

Who is allowed to speak and what is spoken-- the common discourses-- about US education determines how education policy is structured and ultimately shapes the fate of public schools across our nation.

In his analysis of the process of policy development, Furlong, (2000) noted that groups with close government connections help ‘create’ a policy discourse to initiate specific policies friendly to their purposes. These pressure groups—think tanks, foundations and leaders of commerce and industry—often do not recognize that policies created under such circumstances do not necessarily remain consistent with the original intent as they are translated into policy texts.

There is… an uneasy relationship between the ‘context of influence’ and the ‘context of text production’ where ‘texts’ include both the official documents that ‘represent’ the policy and the ‘spin’ that is put upon them for the benefit of the contexts of influence and practice (Furlong, 2000, p. 7).
It is because of this ‘uneasy relationship’ that it is important to trace the process by which policy moves from an idea based on accepted discourse to its enactment at the school level.

Utilizing Ball’s theoretical framework on education policy cycles (1991, 2004), this chapter begins by reviewing and analyzing federal and state roles in US K-12 education reform from the 1950’s through the present, with the intent of showing how that role increased to gain direct and powerful control over public education, thrusting aside the centuries old states’ and local rights to decide how to educate children. Lingard and Sellar (2013) described Ball’s policy cycle as depicting the “non-linear, interactive, multidirectionality of policy as both text and process across three interactive contexts: the context of influence, the context of text production and the context of practice” (p. 268).

As noted in chapter two, the context of influence involves the processes by which the federal government, its advisors, politicians and individuals or groups deemed of interest to the process, share their views about education. The context of text production relates to the translation of the original policy documents into laws and regulations that are specific enough to reflect the intent and expected results of the policy. The context of practice involves the interpretation and enactment of policy by practitioners in the field.

Ball’s policy cycle highlights the way in which influence is wielded through public discourse, carefully guided to support the government’s agenda to develop the “right kind” of human capital through investment in specific aspects of education expected to strengthen the nation’s global economic standing (Brown & Lauder cited in Ball, 2004, p. 131). Ball argues that

[p]olicies are pre-eminently statements about practice—the way things could or should be—which rest upon, derive from statements about the world—about the
THE LONGEST ROLLERCOASTER RIDE

way things are. They are intended to bring about idealized solutions to diagnosed problems. Policies embody claims to speak with authority, they legitimate and initiate practices in the world and they privilege certain visions and interests. They are power/knowledge configurations par excellence. (Ball, 2004, p. 26)

While Ball’s work originated in the United Kingdom and focused mainly on developments in British educational policy, the policy cycle framework works well in an investigation of American educational policy, which has in many ways progressed in similar pathways for the past decades.

Figure 4 illustrates the growing federal role in US public education from the 1950s through 2013 as described in detail in this chapter. In the first column, the graphic reveals that, during the 1950s, Local Education Agencies (LEA) held the power to make all decisions about curriculum, instruction, assessment and professional development in accordance with local needs. LEAs also decided whether their district was to provide an “open door” policy for constituents to be able to enroll their children in a school of their choice. During this period the federal government’s role was to set the mission and vision for public schools, providing the “big picture” of the purposes of education in light of the nation’s current circumstances and needs. States were responsible for setting and monitoring the rules for licensing teachers and administrators. The 1960-1980 column shows that although LEAs continued to make most curriculum and instruction decisions, the federal government, through ESEA 1965 gathered power by providing funding for programs for low income children and for the pre-school Project Headstart through Title I. This law required that states monitor the use of funds by establishing an audit system that judged the appropriateness of programs and resources implemented with federal funds.
THE LONGEST ROLLERCOASTER RIDE

Additional federal power over public schools was gained from 1980-2000 after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (NAR), which led to a public discussion of educational policy to increase public school accountability. During this period, LEAs continued to make instructional and professional development decisions, as well as decisions as to whether to be a “choice” district, allowing open enrollment or limiting enrollment to neighborhood schools. The Federal government’s role continued to grow through Title I, II and III funding sources for programs for low income, special education and limited English proficient students. In addition, educational policy put pressure on states to make schools accountable for student achievement. In response to federal demands, states developed subject area standards and assessments and related monitoring systems, removing the election of what was to be taught and assessed from local hands. States continued to monitor licensure, but began to set rules and requirements for teacher preparation and continuing education.

From 2000-2013, the Federal government’s power over public education ‘spiked’ to an all time high when ESEA 2001—the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act required that schools and districts be held rigorously accountable for student achievement by monitoring state test results. Schools and districts not meeting strict federal requirements were to receive punitive consequences. Depending on school accountability status, districts were to provide choice of enrollment. The federal government also set guidelines for teacher quality, routes to licensure and for professional development based on scientifically based research. States were to interpret, implement and monitor all federal mandates. After 2009, with the advent of the *Race To The Top* (RTTT) grant competition, qualifying states were to revamp teacher evaluation systems to align with student
achievement results, agree to adopt national standards and assessment and expand the number of charter schools and other enrollment choice programs. In contrast, LEA responsibility was relegated to responding to state and federal requirements through curriculum alignment and test preparation. In essence, public education was no longer in local hands.

Figure 4 illustrates the growth of US federal power over public education for the past 60+

**Fig. 4. The Growing Federal Role in US Public Education**

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<tr>
<td>1950-1960</td>
<td>Develop/ implement curriculum, instruction, assessment</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>Choice/no choice</td>
<td>Align curriculum to state/national standards</td>
<td>Federal: Funding (app. 10%) Title I</td>
<td>State: Administers licensure requirements</td>
<td>Monitors test results*</td>
<td>Supervises Teacher Preparation and quality*</td>
<td>Federal: Compliance Audits, Accountability, implements standards &amp; related assessments*</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960-1980</td>
<td>Align curriculum to state/national standards</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>Choice/no choice</td>
<td>Align curriculum to state/national standards</td>
<td>Federal: Funding (app. 10%) Title I</td>
<td>State: Administers licensure requirements</td>
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<td>1980-2000</td>
<td>Align curriculum to state/national standards</td>
<td>Federal: Funding (app. 10%) Title I</td>
<td>State: Administers licensure requirements</td>
<td>Monitors test results*</td>
<td>Supervises Teacher Preparation and quality*</td>
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<td>2000-2013</td>
<td>Align curriculum to state/national standards</td>
<td>Federal: Funding (app. 10%) Title I</td>
<td>State: Administers licensure requirements</td>
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years. As this figure has shown, during the 1950s through the 1970s Local Education Agencies were responsible for designing, selecting, implementing and monitoring all curriculum programs and materials. LEAs were also responsible to select and implement a staff evaluation system connected to acceptable instructional strategies.

Teachers and subject area departments designed, selected, implemented and monitored student assessments, designed to inform instruction and student placement (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). LEAs decided whether there was to be inter or intra district school choice. The federal government’s responsibility before 1960 was to guide public schools’ mission and vision. Beginning with ESEA 1965, however, with the inception of Title I services and Headstart, the US Department of Education was responsible for monitoring the appropriate use of federal monies through bureaucratic regulation and state-managed audits. After the publication of NAR, federal demands for the creation of standards and related assessments launched state initiatives to publish and require the adoption of guidelines and frameworks for core subject areas. Many states, including Massachusetts, the state where this study is placed, developed standardized assessments based on state designed standards. The US Department of Education also required the participation of all states in the National Assessment of Educational Progress to monitor state progress in raising student achievement across the nation (Ravitch, 2013).

Since the new millennium, federal power has grown stronger, first through the *No Child Left Behind Act*’s requirements including: state designed standards, aligned assessments and public reporting of student achievement results; requirements for highly qualified teachers—meeting specific federal regulations; the provision of choice to parents of students who attend failing schools; and consequences, including termination
of staff, restructuring or closure for schools not meeting state-selected AYP targets (HR 107, 2002). The second growth step has recently been established for qualifying states through the RTTT initiative including: the connection of teacher evaluation to student achievement scores; the adoption of national standards and related assessments and the increase of charter schools and other educational options (CFR, 2009).

In the subsequent sections of this chapter I use Ball’s (1992) policy cycle, specifically his concepts of the “context of influence”, the “context of text production” and related discourses, to assist in charting the course of education policy in the US from the late 1950’s through the present. The next chapters take up “the context of practice” as I analyze the effects of policy on Southeastern Middle School. My chapter subheadings are based on major federal laws and/or documents that provided the ‘map’ for states and for each Local Education Agency to develop regulations and monitoring structures to reform K-12 public schools in the United States from 1957 through 2013. For the purposes of this study and its limited scope, sections of this chapter that outline educational policies from the 1950s through the 2000s are intended to be broad, revealing major patterns in the context of influence. The sections from 2001 forward, however, which describe No Child Left Behind and Race To The Top are more detailed because they analyze the time period that encompasses this longitudinal study.

For this study of the effects of NCLB and RTTT on a high performing Massachusetts middle school, its special education and low-income students and their teachers, it was essential to establish and analyze the foundational premises of these laws. In this chapter, I showed how the influence of government and business leaders increased the government’s role in US public schools and reduced local power to make educational
decisions for local children. This was the setting in which Southeastern middle school found itself from 2003 to 2013, the period covered by this study. Understanding the national context through an analysis of the context of influence and text production (Ball, 1990b) was critical to understanding chapters 5 and 6 which analyze the context of practice (Ball, 1991b) -- what happened at Southeastern, as the school responded to federal, state and district directives for the past ten years.

The Federal Role—1950-1970: Saving the Nation or Serving the Children?

Until the late 1950s the US government had a limited influence on K-12 education; Washington DC’s main interest in public schools was to ensure that all American children had access to a free public education, leaving the primary decisions about educational structure, curriculum and instruction to local education agencies. As noted in Chapter 1, the federal role began to change in 1957, when the USSR, then a primary foe in the Cold War between communism and capitalism, developed space travel ahead of the United States. In a New York Times editorial for the 50th anniversary of the launching of Sputnik, John Wilford (2007) noted:

No event since Pearl Harbor set off such repercussions in public life,” Walter A. McDougall, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania, has written. A younger generation may draw comparison with the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. Sputnik plunged Americans into a crisis of self-confidence. Had the country grown lax with prosperity? Was the education system inadequate, especially in training scientists and engineers? Were the institutions of liberal democracy any match in competition with an authoritarian communist society?

In The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age, McDougall (1985) wrote that before Sputnik the cold war had been “a military and political struggle in
which the United States need only lend aid and comfort to its allies in the front lines.”

Now, he continued, the cold war “became total, a competition for the loyalty and trust of all peoples fought out in all arenas of social achievement, in which science textbooks and racial harmony were as much tools of foreign policy as missiles and spies. (np)

Along the same lines as Wilford’s editorial, the Harvard Gazette of October 11, 2007, reported on a panel discussion sponsored by the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE). The panel concluded that the educational impact of the Sputnik launch was significant in that the government’s reaction emphasized science curricula and program reform, practically disregarding the humanities, except for expanding foreign language offerings. Immediate government response to the perceived Sputnik ‘crisis’ resulted in the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), a law that provided “increased funding for education at all levels, including low-interest student loans to college students, with the focus on scientific and technical education.” (Powell, 2007, np). One of the panel’s leaders, John Rudolph, of the Education Department of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, argued, “We were getting outworked by conscientious, dedicated Russian students … The launch revealed missile technology that could deliver a bomb to the U.S. … Sputnik raised the stakes” (Powell, 2007, np). The implication was that unless US schools produced hard working, dedicated and science-oriented American students, the nation would be in danger.

Ball’s idea of the “context of influence” is particularly helpful in understanding this “starter” event, which unleashed a discourse of educational reform focused on blaming US schools for endangering the nation’s security by not producing sufficient numbers of scientists and mathematicians. Speaking shortly after the launching of the
Soviet satellite, President Eisenhower (1957) told the American public that his scientific advisors were calling for thousands more scientists and that federal, state and local governments must all “do their share” to bring that about. Eisenhower also claimed that a comparison of standards for mathematics and science education between the Soviet Union and the US, indicated that our nation was at a clear disadvantage, which was an alarming situation. Eisenhower’s State of the Union speech in January, 1961, continued this theme. The speech contained the word education 18 times, referring to the creation of the NDEA and a new Department of Health Education and Welfare, and making several references to the need for increasing the role of science in education reform. The last paragraph of Eisenhower’s State of the Union, notably the speech of an outgoing president, summarized:

At home, several conspicuous problems remain: promoting higher levels of employment, with special emphasis on areas in which heavy unemployment has persisted; continuing to provide for steady economic growth and preserving a sound currency; bringing our balance of payments into more reasonable equilibrium and continuing a high level of confidence in our national and international systems; eliminating heavily excessive surpluses of a few farm commodities; and overcoming deficiencies in our health and educational programs. (Eisenhower, 1961, np)

The dominant discourse of this time clearly indicated displeasure with American public education, blaming “deficient” programs that did not produce the type of workers that were needed—scientists and mathematicians who would ensure the nation’s safety by advancing new technologies for the exploration of space and for defense purposes. There was clearly a sense of urgency and a reminder to states and local education agencies of their responsibility to contribute towards the improvement of education.
THE LONGEST ROLLERCOASTER RIDE

The debate on American public education intensified after World War II, rising to a fever pitch after the launching of the Soviet satellite. A major writer of the “New Generation Science Standards”, Rodger Bybee (1997), argued that at this time, John Dewey’s progressive education theories came under attack by critics who proposed a “back to basics” movement. Bybee maintained that this controversy paralleled education debates in the late 1800s, distorting facts and relying “on personal opinion and rhetoric” (p. 2) rather than citing evidence to support claims. According to Bybee (1997), public support for progressive education had waned, lending critics additional power to recommend an increased focus on higher standards, especially in science and mathematics. Sputnik ignited so much concern about the national interest that there was a great demand for educational reform. The National Defense Education Act of 1958, which was a clear federal invasion into state and local LEA territory, was generally accepted.

During this time, the discourse about public education focused on “restoring” learning, as if no learning had been occurring before 1958. It emphasized science and mathematics and the teaching of fundamental facts, and reflected a distrust of progressive or student-centered schooling. The argument was that the United States needed more mathematicians and scientists to protect its citizens from aggressive foes and move forward as a democratic world leader. Bybee (1997) argued that although Sputnik era school reform initiatives did not achieve all they set out to accomplish, and the more abstract mathematics curricula were eventually dropped, they did ultimately change public education in several major arenas:
Reports in the late 1970s indicated that the curriculum programs had broad impact. The new programs were being used extensively and commercial textbooks had incorporated these approaches … Reviews of the effect of science curricula on student performance indicated that the programs were successful, (i.e., student achievement was higher in Sputnik-era programs than with traditional curriculum) ... (p. 7).

Bybee also pointed at some changes in teacher education and professional development programs where “senior scientists, mathematicians, and engineers worked along with teachers and other educators … [to] set a precedent for current and future reforms of education” (p. 7).

My point here is that the Sputnik crisis fostered the beginning of a move towards a national curriculum, emphasizing mathematics and science in order to meet the nation’s needs including military safety at this point in history. This federal policy was the beginning of what Ball (1990b) calls an “authoritarian curriculum”, one that may be implemented in a “series of ratchet steps, each one based upon a firmer, more clearly defined and more clearly determined curriculum” (p. 147). As I show in the following sections, a similar push towards federal influence on the US curriculum arose during the following decades.

On February 20, 1961, newly sworn President John F. Kennedy set a federal vision for education:

Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education. Our requirements for world leadership, our hopes for economic growth, and the demands of citizenship itself in an era such as this all require the maximum development of every young American's capacity.

The human mind is our fundamental resource. A balanced Federal program must go well beyond incentives for investment in plant and equipment. It
must include equally determined measures to invest in human beings - both in their basic education and training and in their more advanced preparation for professional work. Without such measures, the Federal Government will not be carrying out its responsibilities for expanding the base of our economic and military strength.

Kennedy sought to increase the number of teachers and classrooms across the nation, calling for federal aid to K-12 schools and to colleges. He pointed out the difficulty of attracting good teachers to poorly paid jobs and called for pay to match the cost of professional preparation. From the perspective of Ball’s (2004) policy framework, Kennedy’s statements can be understood as the leader of a powerful nation referring to what Ball calls “a set of sacred objects, statements and concepts… thematically welded…” (p.30) to bring to light the struggles of the educational establishment in order to provide adequate services, especially to the poor and students with disabilities.

Ball (1992) noted that policy is initiated within the context of influence where interested parties compete to determine the purpose and meaning of education. President Kennedy’s words reflected a paradox in the educational policy discourse of the time. While Kennedy fought for better schooling for the poor and disabled, he also used key statements— the need to expand the American economy and improve the nation’s defense capabilities, and the “human mind as an essential resource”—to connect his social justice goals, which focused on investment in human beings, to a more national focus on education as a way to enhance the country’s economic outlook and military readiness. Ball (1992) argued that policy discourse is often challenged by interested parties with differing agendas. In Kennedy’s case, congressional opposition, fed from a
variety of camps, defeated the bill as it was proposed. Opponents included those who did not want direct federal involvement in education, representatives of parochial schools, which would not be benefiting from federal funds, and supporters of segregated schools. Congress eventually passed the portions of the bill that benefited higher education and an end to segregation in schools.

Just before his assassination, Kennedy appointed a new US Commissioner of Education, Francis Keppel, Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE). Keppel had been a controversial Dean in that his background was not in education. He brought a variety of non-education practitioners into the HGSE (Hanna, 2005). His non-orthodox methods were accompanied by an ability to work collaboratively, and he brought these qualities to bear as he later crafted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, the precursor of ESEA 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act. ESEA opened the gates toward a more active federal role in public education, as I argue in the following sections, a role that strengthened through the decades.

Ball (1994) noted that ideological tension is often present in the process of influencing policy creation. “[T]here are real struggles over the interpretation and enactment of policies. But these are set within a moving discursive frame which articulates and constrains the possibilities and probabilities of interpretation and enactment” (p. 23). During President Johnson’s administration, his Cabinet and other close advisors supported a number of initiatives for the creation of what Johnson called the building of a “Great Society” and the “War on Poverty”. In addition to the President’s chosen advisors, the circle of influential voices expanded to include advocates for the rights of minorities and the poor. The struggle for policy influence included those who
did not want the federal government to be involved in education, those who did not want to desegregate schools, and those who were fighting for minority children to have the right to attend the same schools as their more advantaged middle class white neighbors.

As part of Johnson’s War on Poverty, the ESEA reflected major policy changes. Two key reforms were the provision of Title I funds to schools with a high percentage of low income students and the creation of Project Headstart, a federally funded preschool program. In addition, Johnson’s educational policies supported the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by monitoring federal funding which ensured that segregated school programs were not allowed to receive funds. ESEA provided detailed standards for how federal monies were to be spent in securing resources, professional development, grants and educational research. In 1966, an amendment ensured that students with disabilities were included under the public education umbrella. In 1967, the ESEA also included a framework for the education of Limited English Proficient students. To assist in these new processes, the federal government demanded the creation of state departments of education.

In the two years following the passage of ESEA, the U.S. Office of Education's annual budget for some 27,000 school districts jumped from $1.5 billion to $4 billion, marking the federal government's definitive entry into public education.

(Hanna, 2005, np)

As a result of these initiatives, educational policy expressed in ESEA 1965, added a new set of expectations-- public schools were to be a major tool in the righting of wrongs for minority children. Schools were to: prepare more scientists and mathematicians for the nation’s defense, train workers for a more technological society, and serve the needs of low-income children and ensure that civil rights were safeguarded for minority, second
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language and handicapped students. Kantor and Lowe (2013) argue that by prioritizing education reform over strengthening the welfare state, President Johnson modeled what the authors call “the federal government’s favored solution to problems of poverty, inequality and economic insecurity” (p.25). Placing school reform at the center of solving the nation’s problems ignored the effects of segregation and poverty on the nation’s schoolchildren, a practice that has continued with each ESEA reauthorization.

During the 1970s, US public schools continued to experience strong impact from governmental policy. Wagonner and Urban (2009) note that the focus on social justice issues continued to be highlighted through legislation and Supreme Court decisions that brought additional expectations for the education of children with disabilities, limited English proficient, gifted and talented and Native American students and to prevent gender, national origin or racial discrimination in a variety of school programs. The federal government also established standards for educational research through funding for the National Institute of Education (later the Office of Education Research and Improvement).

Early in the 1970’s a combination of higher inflation, a high unemployment rate and poor economic growth reawakened concerns that US schools were not up to the task of preparing workers for 20th century jobs. Despite a continued drive to make justice a product of a solid public education, the state of the US economy brought back finger pointing and negative comments about K-12 education. Wagoner and Urban (2009) pointed out that the costs accrued as a result of the Vietnam War and the doubling of gasoline prices brought about by Middle East conflict and high demand were responsible for much of the decade’s crises. They also noted that manufacturing jobs were outsourced
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to nations with lower minimum wages signaling a transition from an industrial to a service-based economy, and increased competition from more efficient economies in Europe, Asia and Latin America. Other contributors to the nation’s predicaments were the loss of major manufacturing industries including steel, car manufacturing in the Midwest. Busing for desegregation resulted in “White flight” to the suburbs from urban areas and although more women joined the workforce they earned lower wages, resulting in the feminization of poverty (Wagoner & Urban, 2009, p. 358). The US found itself in the middle of a multifaceted economic crisis, which was largely ignored in proposals for education reform. Ball’s (2004) analysis of circumstances in the UK was similar:

In failing to take account of the ways in which education is embedded in a set of more general economic and political changes, educational policy researchers close down the possibilities for interpretation and rip the actors who feature in the dramas of education out of their social totality and their multiple struggles. (p. 20)

Ball’s statement was a reminder that education did not exist in a vacuum. In agreement, I argue that while schooling can positively or negatively affect an individual’s life chances, schools themselves are greatly affected by a complex web of factors, both national and local. This point will be illustrated in the next chapters as I analyze the effects of federal mandates on Southeastern Middle School.

During the 1970s, scholars, media and social critiques of education were plentiful (Wagoner & Urban, 2009). Critics focused on the failures of urban education, ignoring the effects of poverty and segregation. Educational researchers focused on the reform of curriculum and instructional methods, however, any educational changes of long-lasting value were generated from “federal laws and court decisions. Thus, efforts to change pedagogy in these years achieved, at best, a record of mixed success and segregation.
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Educationa Ignoring economic challenges set up education as a “soft target” undefended by public educators’ voices… always muted and somewhat discordant …[now] rendered silent within policy debate” (Ball, 2004, p. 32). The voice of practitioners was left out of the education policy debate of the 1970’s, a pattern that was to be repeated in later decades. This pattern is significant in that it leaves teachers out of the context of influence, and as we will see later in this chapter, out of the context of text production as well, relegating them to implement what others, outside of the education field, or outside of their local context demand from them.

The 1980s—A Nation At Risk or Public Education at Risk?

By the end of the 1970s, as a new Republican administration under Ronald Reagan took the reigns of the nation, the government established a National Commission on Educational Excellence (NCEE) to conduct research into public elementary and secondary education. The Commission was formed by Education Secretary T.H. Bell to research "the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system" … and to fulfill his "responsibility to provide leadership, constructive criticism, and effective assistance to schools and universities" (NCEE, 1983, Introduction, np).

In 1983, the NCEE published its final report on the state of American public education in A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (NAR). The report created a stir by sounding the alarm about American public school education as, at best, mediocre and as having been in a “fifteen year decline” placing the nation at risk of losing its leadership standing among industrialized nations. The Commission warned:
And perhaps most important, citizens know and believe that the meaning of America to the rest of the world must be something better than it seems to many today. Americans like to think of this nation as the preeminent country for generating the great ideas and material benefits for all mankind. The citizen is dismayed at a steady 15-year decline in industrial productivity, as one great American industry after another falls to world competition. The citizen wants the country to act on the belief, expressed in our hearings and by the large majority in the Gallup Poll, that education should be at the top of the Nation's agenda. (NCEE, 1983, np).

Kantor and Lowe (2013) propose that the NAR authors and the federal government chose to ignore the problems of poverty and segregation, preferring to focus on the ‘problem’ of poor educational achievement (p.33). The authors point to the creation of an unprecedented number of new business associations, think tanks, foundations, and lobbying organization to develop an intellectual rationale for applying market-oriented principles to social policy and to elect political leaders who supported those principles (p. 34).

The NCEE conducted their investigation gathering data on teacher quality, student readiness for college, and on how American students compared to those in other industrialized nations. In addition, the Commission also considered how “societal and educational changes in the last quarter century” (NCEE, 1983, np) affected student academic achievement.

The report did, indeed, focus on the status of teaching and learning, especially at the secondary level, but there was little if any in depth consideration of the major social changes that may have affected education. This was a troubling oversight in an era following a major recession, a war that made many Americans question their own loyalty and ended the military draft system, and dramatic changes in the types of jobs available to recent graduates. These social and economic issues were noted briefly in the report’s now famous introduction, setting the tone of emergency:
Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility... [T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur-- others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.

… That we have compromised this commitment is, upon reflection, hardly surprising, given the multitude of often conflicting demands we have placed on our Nation's schools and colleges. They are routinely called on to provide solutions to personal, social, and political problems that the home and other institutions either will not or cannot resolve (NCEE, 1983, Introduction, np).

This fiery condemnation of public school education, was indicative of what Ball (1994) would call the “discourse of derision” (p. 33), a negative perspective that seemed to justify top down reform into present times. There was a paradox here, since this mediocre and almost unrecoverable public education was required to rescue the nation from its problems.

While the introductory section of NAR admitted the existence of “personal, social and political problems,” which may have had some effect on the nation’s educational achievements, the conclusion began with a sobering statement:

We conclude that declines in educational performance are in large part the result of disturbing inadequacies in the way the educational process itself is often conducted. The findings that follow, culled from a much more extensive list, reflect four important aspects of the educational process: content, expectations, time, and teaching. (NCEE, 1983, Findings section, np)
To support these bold statements about educational failure, the report used statistical data, but there was little or no indication as to how the data were collected or how comparisons between national assessments were arrived at. Test results were reported as unsatisfactory both internationally, where the US scored last on 7 out of 19 tests, and at the national level, where high school students showed persistently decreasing average achievement on standardized tests, science assessments and a decline in SAT scores since the 1950’s. NAR also noted that both adult and high school-age illiteracy in the millions and bemoaned the lack of higher order thinking skills for nearly 40% of 17 year olds.

Significantly, the report claimed that “[b]usiness and military leaders complain that they are required to spend millions of dollars on costly remedial education and training programs in such basic skills as reading, writing, spelling, and computation” (NCEE, 1983, np). The statistical data section warned that educational researchers were particularly concerned about a new generation of Americans that is scientifically and technologically illiterate” (Paul Hurd in NCEE, 1983).

Ball (1994) argued that discourse, whether positive or negative, wields power by producing ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ that fits the agenda of those generating it. Quoting Foucault, Ball proposed that “discourses are ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak… Discourses are not about objects…they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention” (p.21). Through its dramatic (and largely unproven) conclusions about the failures of American education A Nation at Risk produced a ‘truth’ about education that has endured through the decades. The media and public view of education eroded and the status and morale of educators eroded with it.
The major conclusions from NAR had to do with curriculum, academic expectations, the use of school time and teaching concerns. The Commission found that the secondary school curriculum showed signs of dilution and lack of central purpose. The report noted with alarm that 42% of students were in a “general track” rather than college-bound or vocational courses and that students were choosing a ‘lighter’ fare of courses rather than those with rigorous content. In the area of rising expectations, the NCEE pointed to deficiencies in textbooks that did not challenge students, decreasing homework requirements, low registration in foreign language courses, a reliance on ‘minimum competency tests, and higher grades despite lower over all achievement. Comparisons to the education systems across the globe yielded sobering information: In many other industrialized nations, courses in mathematics (other than arithmetic or general mathematics), biology, chemistry, physics, and geography start in grade 6 and are required of all students. The time spent on these subjects, based on class hours, is about three times that spent by even the most science-oriented U.S. students, i.e., those who select 4 years of science and mathematics in secondary school (NCEE, 1983, Findings section, np).

The appropriate use of time was another area of concern. According to the report, American students spent less time on schoolwork, did not use class time effectively and their schools were not specifically teaching study skills necessary for successful academic work. While there was no explicit directive as to what was to be done about the curriculum in US schools, the negative comparison to programs of study in other industrialized nations clearly denoted a need to reform what American students learned and how much time they should be adding to their study regimen. Ball (1994) described a
similar comparison between the British and French curricula, which was the precursor to the creation of a national curriculum in the UK.

In terms of teaching, the NAR’s main worry was that candidates for teaching positions did not come from among top college students and that teacher preparation programs needed substantial reform to reduce methods courses and increase subject area knowledge. A shortage of teachers in key fields such as science, foreign language, special and gifted and language minority education was noted. Teachers were said to suffer from a “poor professional working life” (NCEE, 1983, np) partially because of low pay and inadequate opportunities to participate in key decision-making in their own field of expertise. The paradox here of course, is that A Nation At Risk advocated for top-down education reform including an overhaul of instructional practices, an increase in time on learning, and a national curriculum—all policy decisions that did not include teacher voice. This is an example of what Ball (1994) denotes as “significant changes in teachers’ classroom practice [that] can now be achieved by decisions taken ‘at a distance’…” (p. 50). It could easily be assumed that teachers’ low morale would continue or even increase as a result of the conclusions made in this report. The top-down reform paradigm continued throughout the 1980’s and as will be reported, increased in intensity through the present.

Ball (1994) suggests that utilizing adverse discourse in documents dealing with education policy reveals, “links with desire and power” (p.22) to move forward and “get [] things done… gather authority” (p. 22) for top-down reform. A Nation At Risk is considered a key document in the history of school reform in the United States. The NCEE report put a singular focus on education reform as the major solution to the
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economic and social shortcomings of the nation. To describe how the public felt about
public education, NAR utilized many critical terms we can still see in later versions of
ESEA. The report employed negative phrases such as: deficient schools, mediocre
education, not ready for college or work, frustrated parents and students, basic promises
Alarming, unsupported claims were peppered throughout the document: that teachers
were recruited from the lowest 10 percent of college graduates, that American students
were not achieving on a par with students of other nations, and that despite the best of
intentions, schools were not meeting the needs of most of the students they served
(NCEE, 1983, p. 11). The power of positive statements was often annulled by negative
assertions. For instance, in looking at the education of average citizens, the report noted
that:

It is important, of course, to recognize that the average citizen today is better
educated and more knowledgeable than the average citizen of a generation ago--
more literate, and exposed to more mathematics, literature, and science. The
positive impact of this fact on the well-being of our country and the lives of our
people cannot be overstated.
Nevertheless, the average graduate of our schools and colleges today is not as
well-educated as the average graduate of 25 or 35 years ago, when a much
smaller proportion of our population completed high school and college. The
negative impact of this fact likewise cannot be overstated. (NCEE, 1983, np)

The report consistently combined positive, visionary statements with negative comments
about education. For example, in the paragraphs above, the acknowledgement that more
Americans were better educated than the previous generation was negated by the
argument that current high school and college graduates were “not as well educated” as
the smaller number of earlier graduates. These NAR assertions were written as factual
statements; however, no corroborating evidence was presented.
In *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, Deborah Stone (2002) suggested that, “behind every policy issue lurks a contest over conflicting, though equally plausible, conceptions of the same abstract goal or value” (p. 12). In another example of the “positive to negative” statement pattern, the Commission declared a belief in both excellence and equity as worthy educational goals. The public and the policymaker would most likely agree that educational excellence is a worthy goal, as is equity of treatment for all students. In an excerpt of *A Nation at Risk* the two worthy goals were placed in conflict, as if it would be difficult to attain both concurrently. The reader is invited to conclude that there was something wrong with the education system because both goals were not being attained. A somber ending to the paragraph warned that not meeting both goals would result in acceptance of mediocrity—a statement already made about the educational system of 1983-- or the creation of an “undemocratic elitism” (NCEE, 1983, np).

Despite substantial attempts to highlight excellence, promote lifelong learning and recognize the potential in the nation’s teachers and students, the over all tone of *A Nation at Risk* was a mix of fear and frustration, and a thinly veiled threat of political pressure to come:

On a broader scale, we sense that this undertone of frustration has significant political implications, for it cuts across ages, generations, races, and political and economic groups. We have come to understand that the public will demand that educational and political leaders act forcefully and effectively on these issues. Indeed, such demands have already appeared and could well become a unifying national preoccupation. This unity, however, can be achieved only if we avoid the unproductive tendency of some to search for scapegoats among the victims, such as the beleaguered teachers. (NCEE, 1983, np)
Ball (1994) argued that the promotion of top-down reform, as is suggested in the quote above, creates circumstances for teachers to simultaneously be scapegoats and victims as “[p]rofessionality is replaced by accountability, collegiality by costing and surveillance…. The meaning of the teacher and the nature of teaching as a career are at stake, as is, in general terms, the future of education as a public service” (p. 64).

A Nation at Risk set the stage for top-down education reforms such as changing the content and requirements of teacher education programs, and raising high school graduation requirements to increase mathematics, science and foreign language requirements. States began the process of reforming curriculum, setting standards and focusing on student achievement and student assessment.

**The 1990s and 2000s—Goals, Standards and Proficiency Targets**

International tests continued to show American students at a disadvantage in comparison to students in other industrialized nations; it was noted that much smaller nations such as Singapore and Finland did better than the US in mathematics and science assessments. To increase student achievement, there was a national drive for the establishment of rigorous standards (Kendall, 1996; California Department of Education, 2010; Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2010).

Finding that public schools continued to struggle in the early 1990’s, the federal government concluded that current research showed considerable achievement gaps for minority, special needs and limited English proficient students. The studies cited claimed that:
A majority of public schools in the United States are failing to prepare students to achieve the National Education Goals… The Federal role in educational research has been closely identified with youths who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, are minorities, belong to a language minority, or have a disability. The Federal commitment to education was sufficient to serve not more than--

(A) in 1993, 1 out of every 6 low-income children in need of preschool education;
(B) in 1990, 3 out of every 5 children in need of remediation;
(C) in 1991, 1 out of every 5 children in need of bilingual education; and
(D) in 1992, 1 out of every 20 youths eligible for assistance under the Job Training Partnership Act. (HR 1804-103, 1993, Section 902).

Continuing the tradition set by the first ESEA of 1965, President Clinton, with the collaboration of the 103rd Congress, launched Goals 2000, an ambitious plan for the improvement of K-12 schools. The purpose of Goals 2000 was to

...improve learning and teaching by providing a national framework for education reform; to promote the research, consensus building, and systemic changes needed to ensure equitable educational opportunities and high levels of educational achievement for all students; to provide a framework for reauthorization of all Federal education programs; to promote the development and adoption of a voluntary national system of skill standards and certifications; and for other purposes. (HR 1804-103, 1993, Sec 1)

This national framework, to be achieved by the year 2000, included goals to:

ensure readiness for school by establishing funding for preschool programs, parenting education and support and prenatal health care education; increase graduation rates to 90% of all high school students, reducing dropout rates, and eliminating graduation rate gaps for minority students; assess students in grades 4, 8 and 12 to demonstrate competency in English, math, science, foreign language, the social studies, physical education, health and the arts. The goals also called for providing teachers with improved preparation and professional development programs to raise student achievement in mathematics and science so that the US would place first in international assessments.

Goals 2000 also recommended increasing the number of qualified teachers in high
priority subjects.

In Goals 2000, even post 12th grade learners were included, with the intent of ensuring adult literacy, providing access to lifelong learning and training in emerging fields such as technology. The plan was intended to increase the number of two and four year college students and included a goal to certify that all schools would provide a learning environment that is safe, free of drugs and alcohol, and sexual harassment.

Parent partnerships were to be promoted to assist the “social, emotional, and academic growth of children”, communicate with teachers and school staff, and collaborate with administration to hold schools and teachers accountable (HR 1084-103, Section 401). To ensure that student achievement improved, the law established a council to oversee the development of national content and opportunity to learn standards and the approval of state standards in both areas. Another council was to oversee the development of state-developed assessments of academic achievement.

The 1994 version of ESEA established rigorous, specific expectations for public schools, teachers and even parents. The intent was to improve the education of children and adults in order to ensure that they were able to be ready for the new century’s more technologically and service oriented work environment. The discourse of Goals 2000 was full of high expectations, monitoring, approvals, rules and regulations. The document was an example of what Ball (1994) called “market-based terminology”. This type of discourse, he argued, treated education as a form of production. The ‘soft’ services like teaching, which require human interaction, are necessarily made just like the ‘hard’ services (book supply, transportation, catering, instructional media), which can be standardized, calculated, qualified and compared. This involves the ‘flattening’ into crude
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representations of complex human and social processes. (p.12)

ESEA 1994, however was written in a less critical style than A Nation at Risk. For several of the sections dealing with standards and assessment, the act included teachers, administrators and higher education representatives as consultants and decision-makers. The language of accountability was focused on improving student achievement rather than blaming teachers or schools for poor test scores. Coupled with an increase in state-provided funding, schools and districts were to reformulate their curricula in accordance with a state-designed set of frameworks and guidelines for every core subject area and grade level. Accountability for student learning was to be determined through results on a new, state standards-based “high stakes” assessment as well as the establishment of school councils, requirements for continuing education for all teachers and administrators.

As a result of Goals 2000, many states established frameworks and standards, assessment systems and established detailed school reforms based on the targets of the national law (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Massachusetts, where the study reported in this dissertation takes place, was one of the first states to answer the call for implementation of frameworks and standards. As an example of state response to Goals 2000, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts enacted its own version of educational transformation through the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993. The state designed curricular frameworks and guidelines as well as an aligned, standardized set of assessments. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) was to “identify individuals and schools which need attention in particular areas”(MA Dept of Ed, 1993, np) with the intent that any school or district found to be “underperforming” could be taken over by
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the state. MCAS was at first assigned to grades 4, 8 and 10, with a key provision that passing the 10th grade MCAS was made a graduation requirement (Comm. of Mass. Gen. Laws, Ch 71, p. 173). School districts were required to increase time on learning to 900 hours per year at the elementary level, and 990 hours per year at the secondary level.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act also established rules for the establishment of public charter schools, required to be open to all student populations and subject to the same accountability requirements as traditional public schools. In addition to accountability for student achievement, the Act also required that all teachers pass a two-part test including:

- a writing section which shall demonstrate the communication and literacy skills necessary for effective instruction and improved communication between school and parents; and … the subject matter knowledge necessary for the teaching specialization endorsement or the general subject matter knowledge for the elementary endorsement… (Comm. of Mass. Gen. Laws, Ch 71, p. 201).

Massachusetts’ interpretation of Goals 2000 was thoroughly outlined in the Education Reform Act and subsequent guidelines and regulations added to the production of text representing federal education policy at the state level.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act was the state’s entrance into the neoliberal market-based concept of public schooling. Ball (1992, 2004) called attention to the discourses of quality, effectiveness, accountability, and performativity, words commonly used in commercial endeavors but now attached to the classroom and the school. He pointed to the “attempted fragmentation of the education services… including measures for competition among schools” (Ball, 2004, p. 10) an element found in the establishment of charter schools and the eventual posting of rankings based on test scores.

Massachusetts was already on its fifth year holding annual MCAS testing by the time the
federal No Child Left Behind Act required all states to develop and implement standards-based testing in reading and mathematics.

No Child Left Behind and Race To The Top: Setting Schools Up to Fail?

In this section, I focus on two documents that directly affected Southeastern Middle School during the time of this study. The No Child Left Behind Act, the 2001 reauthorization of ESEA which was signed into law in January 2002, and Race To The Top, a competitive grant initiative first implemented in 2010. NCLB’s intended outcomes, the law’s text, and the state regulations instituted to ensure the law’s implementation, were apparent on a daily basis at Southeastern from the inception of NCLB through February 2012 when the Commonwealth of Massachusetts received a waiver from the law by participating in President Obama’s Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative. RTTT’s competitive grant program based on the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 was to take NCLB’s place for all states that qualified for the grant. Through an analysis of these documents, I show that the federal government’s growing power greatly affected every aspect of public education in the US.

To analyze NCLB, I utilize Ball’s concept of the policy cycle, as presented above. Ball (1992) noted that the context of influence is revealed in the debates and negotiations conducted by influential representatives of specific interests and ideologies who exert power to bend government policy towards their intents. Agreeing with Ravitch (2013) that “[s]chools and society are intertwined” (p. 7) I believe that in order to define the context of influence during the creation of NCLB, it is essential to consider the state of the nation at the beginning of the new millennium. What was the discursive terrain of the time? How were these basic tensions reflected in ESEA 2001?
One salient issue, first brought out during the Sputnik crisis and consistently brought forward during each ESEA reauthorization, was the apparent need to increase the nation’s production of science, mathematics, engineering and technology workers to ensure that the US remain globally competitive. The federal government claimed that, according to commerce and industry spokespersons, there were not enough students entering the “right” kinds of careers so that US companies were forced to import engineers or outsource jobs. Additional claims noted that incoming college freshmen were unprepared, lacking adequate reading comprehension, critical thinking and writing skills. Ravitch (2013) also stated that American students’ poor performance on international tests, “a recurring phenomenon since the first international test was offered in the mid 1960’s” (p. 10) was used to blame public education for competitive losses to other nations in the automobile, technology and manufacturing arenas.

Given the belief that federally and state-supported public schools were responsible for the country’s growing inability to compete with other nations required the government to act. The view that American schools were failing the nation was shared across party lines. In former President George W. Bush’s (2010) memoirs, Decision Points, he states that both he and then Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy were “appalled by the results coming from our public schools” (p.273). He went on to explain, “I was excited. No Child Left Behind stood a much better chance of becoming law with support from the Lion of the Senate. It was the beginning of my most unlikely partnership in Washington”(p. 274). The law itself was co-sponsored by John Boehner (R-OH) and George Miller (D-CA) in the House of Representatives, and by Ted Kennedy (D-MA) and Judd Gregg (R-NH) in the Senate. The House voted 384-45 for NCLB, while the
Senate vote was 91-8. Clearly, the vast majority of lawmakers held the view that US schools were in a desperate state and needed major reform.

While there was widespread support of the NCLB Act, there was considerable disagreement on the reason for its implementation. Former Republican Governor Rick Perry (2010) of Texas stated that the “willingness to turn power over to Washington DC driven in significant part by the desire to further expand federal faith-based initiatives and to provide for the increased possibilities of school choice” (p. 86). On the Democratic side, however, Ted Kennedy (2001) who consistently opposed vouchers said, “I don’t think we ought to abandon schools by taking money away from public schools in order to save them” (np).

Even though states rights advocates and a number of local school leaders were opposed to the NCLB reform strategies, a number of different groups stood by its principles. The George W. Bush administration sponsored the law, intending to reform public education by placing the responsibility for its survival upon the schools themselves. Kantor and Lowe (2013) argue that Bush’s NCLB “codified the rejection of compensatory and redistributionist strategies of educational reform” (p.36). Democrats were interested in the possibilities of reducing educational inequalities and providing struggling schools with increased resources. Kantor & Lowe (2013) also note that NCLB was “attractive … to many suburban Whites who favored expanding educational opportunities for the least advantaged while preserving their own access to good schools” (p. 36). Civil rights groups appreciated the shift of blame for “educational failure from the child to the school” (Kantor & Lowe, 2013, p. 36).
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Market-based solutions, accepted by both conservative and liberal camps were included in the law. The concept of choice for parents was incorporated through the opportunity to transfer students out of failing schools to other public schools making adequate progress in state assessments. In Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools, Diane Ravitch (2013), once an education advisor under the G.W. Bush presidency and a promoter of NCLB, remarked, the most curious development over the three decades from A Nation at Risk to the 2012 report of the Council on Foreign Relations was this: what was originally seen in 1983 as the agenda of the most libertarian Republicans—school choice—had now become the agenda of the establishment, both Republicans and Democrats (p. 43).

How were market principles translated to the educational field through a government policy that directly affected every public school in the United States?

Kantor and Lowe (2013), noted that business leaders, “faced with declining profits and an increasingly competitive international economic environment …turned their back on the employment based system of public/private provision they had helped to construct after World War II” (p.34). Promoting the concepts of the free market as the solution to economic and social problems, think tanks, foundations and lobbyists were put in action to apply “market-oriented principles to social policy and to elect political leaders who supported these principles” (Kantor & Lowe, p.34). What Kantor and Lowe call a movement to “remodel” public education was designed around “business-derived models of organization that heightened expectations for education but left intact inequities between schools with wealthier students and those with large numbers of low-income and students of color” (p.35).

Ravitch (2013) argued that labeling NCLB as educational “reform”: 
is really a misnomer, because the advocates for this cause seek not to reform public education but to transform it into an entrepreneurial sector of the economy. The groups and individuals that constitute today’s reform movement have appropriated the word “reform” because it has such positive connotations in American political discourse and American history. But the roots of this so-called reform movement may be traced to a radical ideology with a fundamental distrust of public education… (p.19)

The former Assistant Secretary of Education called this initiative a “corporate reform movement” supported by foundations, Wall Street, and individual entrepreneurs. Ball’s (1994) proposition that policy tends to make legitimate the viewpoints and interests of those in power was reinforced by Ravitch’s (2013) contention that supporters of the corporate reform movement believed that “they [were] promoting a necessary but painful redesign of the nation’s ailing schools” (p.20).

Supporting Congress and President Bush, there were a number of organizations, (for example the American Federation for Children, Black Alliance for Educational Options, the Education Equality Project, etc.), that were aptly named to convey a positive notion of their educational reform goals. Ravitch (2013) pointed out that the law and its purposes were also supported by powerful groups across the conservative/liberal divide: The aims of the corporate reform movement are supported by a broad array of think tanks, some purportedly liberal, some centrist, some on the right, and some on the far right. These include the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for American Progress, the Center on Reinventing Public Education, Education Sector, the Thomas B Fordham Institute, the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, the Goldwater Institute, the Heartland Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institute, and Policy Innovators in Education Network, as well as a bevy of state-level public policy think tanks that support privatization. (Ravitch, 2013, p.22)
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Claiming that the corporate reform movement intends to eventually privatize public education, Ravitch highlighted the work of foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in their effort to directly influence school reform through choice, the development of national standards, “test based evaluation of teachers and merit pay” (p. 23).

Such strong-armed influence on educational policy, focused entirely on schools as the solution to the nation’s problems ignored another ongoing (and many say growing), challenge to the nation at large --the growing earning gap between the well to do and those below the poverty line. US Census Bureau income inequality data showed that the gap between the top and bottom five percent wage earners had increased from a difference of over $54,000 in 1983 to over $127,000 by the year 2000. The rich were getting richer while the nation’s “working poor” were struggling in urban and rural areas, the poorest among developed nations (US Census Bureau, np).

The inequities found in the public school system reflected those in society at large. The Condition of Public Education Report, an annual report published by the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) informed Congress that by 2010 there were over 42 million schoolchildren who qualified within the poor or near poor categories, a growth of over 6 million students since 2000, while the non-poor school children ranks shrunk by 3 million, from 61 to 58 million. The report also showed that in the same period of time the number of students labeled as needing specialized education grew from a little over 4 million to nearly 6.5 million (NCES, 2012, p. 32). Statistics showed that there were higher numbers of poor and special education students in cities, where 14,431,591 students attended public schools. In contrast, a little over 23 million
students attended town/suburban schools in districts with more financial resources and less poor and special education students (NCES, 2012, p. 173).

Since the late 1990’s the federal government promoted a neoliberal stance, utilizing market-based strategies to manage social problems. Little was done to address poverty or the resource inequalities between urban and non-urban areas. However, by the time NCLB was enacted, the focus on dealing with societal ills was on schools and a market-orientation for public education was well established. *No Child Left Behind*’s purpose was to place education in the place of responsibility, helping to level the playing field for all students to access careers in the new “knowledge economy.” Kantor and Lowe (2013) noted that in order to access good jobs and be competitive in a globalized society, twenty-first century students were expected to earn a college diploma and have advanced skills in mathematics, science and reading. These requirements were especially daunting to students of low income families, especially students of color, who were faced with a new public school system restructured

around the principles of flexibility, competition and choice… putting families in competition with one another for access to educational resources at the expense of more collective remedies intended to address the racial and economic arrangements on which public school systems have long been based. (Welner & Carter, 2013, p.36)

Choice was also difficult for families of special education students who needed access to specialized services at a chosen school. When the poor and disabled were to compete to have their children selected for the “best” schools, some inevitably lost out and remained in failing school systems with insufficient human and monetary resources. In some urban school districts like Philadelphia funds were funneled to charter schools leaving traditional schools overcrowded and short of basic supplies (NPR, Nov 23, 2013, np).
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Similarly, in post-Katrina New Orleans, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported that the city’s charter schools turned away students with disabilities, relegating them to schools with poor resources, resulting in a disabled student graduation rate that was less than half that of general education students (SPLC, 2010, np).

NCLB proposed to reform education by utilizing the business-based concept of accountability and high standards. Kantor and Lowe (2013) suggest that many of the law’s provisions were based on the government’s assumption that “the chief problem facing American education had less to do with the inequitable distribution of resources than with the bureaucratic arrangements that protected underperforming schools from the consequences of failure” (p.36). To solve this problem, sanctions were to be enacted against schools that failed to meet prescribed state standards. Schools failing to reach government set goals were to allow parents to move children to “better” schools or provide funding for after school tutoring services. Schools chronically failing to meet targets were to be restructured: staff terminated, and a new system of governance implemented-- for example setting up a charter school, or assigning the school to a for-profit organization.

The discourses of commerce and free market influence were salient in the debates about education policy in the early 2000s. In his description of the context of text production, Ball (1994) states that texts represent policies and have to be considered in relation to the specific time when the text was produced. It is evident that key components the No Child Left Behind Act were designed utilizing business language. Concepts such as standards, accountability, and restructuring were more likely to be used in the marketplace prior to the 1990’s, but were now an integral part of the vocabulary of
schooling, Ball (1994) noted, however, that policy texts often include common sense language referring to results good for the public at large.

The purpose of the 2001 reauthorization of ESEA was to: “close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (HR 107, 2002, p.1425). The goal of reducing the gap between middle class, mostly white students and low-income, ethnic or racial minority, second language, or special education students was considered laudable. Certainly, no parent, policymaker or educator would accept lower test scores or graduation rates for students because of their racial, ethnic, special education, or financial background!

*No Child Left Behind* differed in focus and tone from the 1994 Improving America’s Schools Act. As did the 1994 ESEA, NCLB set specific goals for implementation of standards, assessment, teacher preparation, and professional development. The 2001 law, however, added a number of consequences that made the over-all tone of NCLB punitive. For instance, while ESEA 1994 required that states have in place academic and student achievement standards, NCLB declared that states not meeting such deadlines would be penalized, losing 25 percent of federal funding (HR 107, 2002, p. 1457). NCLB also went beyond ESEA 1994’s recommendations for teacher preparation programs and professional development, based on scientific research, by requiring schools to inform parents about teacher licensure and academic preparation. To meet the requirements as a “highly qualified” teacher, substantial content area knowledge was required above pedagogical preparation. The act also encouraged alternate routes to licensure, sidestepping normal teacher preparation programs in favor of experience in a subject area.
The concept of accountability for student achievement was relegated to improved scores on state-designed tests based on state-selected academic standards. Progress on academic achievement was to be measured, monitored, and published on a yearly basis. Parents were to be informed of student and school progress in reaching assessment goals. Schools were to be measured not only on the overall scores of the aggregate student population, but also by the scores of disaggregated student populations—students with disabilities, English Language Learners, low income students and ethnic minorities. A school was to be labeled as making Adequate Yearly Progress when both the aggregate and subgroup student populations met the required annual targets towards an ultimate goal of 100% proficiency by 2014 (HR 107, 2002, p. 1447).

Any subgroup not making the pre-set AYP target would place a school in a “needs improvement”, “corrective action” or “restructuring category” and the school would then be subject to punitive consequences.

Parent rights were delineated at every step of the process. Parents were to be informed about teacher qualification, the results of student, school, district and statewide achievement on state tests, as well as the AYP status of their child’s school (HR 107, 2002, p. 1461). Parents were to be informed of their right to remove a child from a “failing school,” to receive transportation to a non-failing school or to choose a state-approved tutoring program paid for by the student’s home school. The school was also required to include parents in the process of creating a school improvement plan.

Specific consequences were delineated for schools and districts not making “adequate yearly progress”. Schools were notified of reaching a “needs improvement level” after two consecutive years of not meeting AYP for either the aggregate or a
particular subgroup of the student population. Schools in need of improvement must immediately inform parents of their choice to transfer their children to a district school in good AYP standing. The law also required needs improvement schools to implement policies and programs that would ensure that students would succeed in core subject areas. Teachers were to be encouraged to use instructional strategies based on scientifically based research that will strengthen the core academic subjects in the school and address the specific academic issues that caused the school to be identified for school improvement, and may include a strategy for the implementation of a comprehensive school reform model. (HR 107, 2002, p. 1480)

To achieve these reforms, at least 10% of federal funding was to be used by the needs improvement school to provide staff with appropriate professional development. After failing to ensure that the aggregate student population and every subgroup reached their assigned Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for a third year, a school would move on to “corrective action”. A school in corrective action must implement at least one of a list of recommended strategies: adopt a new curriculum in the area of low performance and provide professional development to support the new program; replace school staff “relevant to the school not making adequate progress” (AYP, 2009a, p.10); change the school’s governance system or restructure the school’s organization; or secure outside assistance to revise the school action (improvement) plan and assist to “address the specific issues underlying the school’s continued inability to make AYP” (AYP, 2009a, p. 10).

If a school did not make AYP for an additional year it was placed in the “restructuring” category, when the district’s technical assistance was deemed insufficient and a plan for “fundamental reforms” was required. “The intent of Restructuring under
NCLB is to significantly alter school governance and/or structures to ensure that student learning and performance results are sufficiently improved” (MA DESE, 2009, p. 10). In order to satisfy these requirements, the school was to be “reconstituted” by: terminating staff, including the principal, if they were deemed responsible for the school’s failure to meet its targets; hire an organization, such as a “private management company” to take over the school’s operation; give the school over to the state; change the school’s structure to that of a charter school; or implement any other significant restructuring of the school’s staffing and governance that was likely to assist the school to make AYP (MA DESE, 2009, p. 10).

The intent of NCLB was to hold schools accountable to provide students with the type of education that would ensure that every student, whether average, gifted, English Language Learner, low-income or learning disabled would reach grade level proficiency in reading/language arts and mathematics, on the state selected standards-based assessment no later than 2014. It became clear that many schools were failing to meet their AYP goals because one or more subgroups—most often the special education and low-income groups were struggling to pass the standardized assessment. George W. Bush (2010), admitted that,

over the years, No Child Left Behind prompted plenty of controversy. We modified bureaucratic restrictions and increased flexibility for states. But we would not dilute the accountability measures. The purpose of the law was to reveal the truth, even when it was unpleasant (p. 275).

What was the revealed truth? What did NCLB truly show the American public about their schools? By the time ESEA was to be reauthorized in 2007, the controversy over the thousands of failing schools caused Congress to set aside making a decision because a solution to the problems was not easily found. NCLB continued despite the lack of
reauthorization until a new, Democratic administration proposed a temporary fix.

*Race to the Top: Choosing Competition Instead of Need*

The *Race to the Top* initiative was launched by newly elected President Barack Obama in January 2009. In essence, RTTT was a competition among states to gain access to over 4 billion dollars, culled from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The competition required states to provide plans for adopting rigorous standards and assessments complying with a national set of Common Core Standards, tying teacher and principal evaluation to student achievement, lifting charter school caps and turning around low performing schools. Qualifying states would receive waivers from NCLB’s punitive consequences. RTTT is led and monitored directly by the US Education Department under Education Secretary Arne Duncan. The initiative was strongly supported by powerful groups, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation who provided funding for charters and other educational initiatives (Ravitch, 2013).

How did RTTT differ from NCLB? According to the US Department of education, the purpose of the initiative was to:

- encourage and reward States that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform; achieving significant improvement in student outcomes, including making substantial gains in student achievement, closing achievement gaps, improving high school graduation rates, and ensuring student preparation for success in college and careers; and implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas—
  - (a) Adopting internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace;
  - (b) Building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve their practices;
  - (c) Increasing teacher and principal effectiveness and achieving equity in their distribution; and
(d) Turning around our lowest-achieving schools (CFR, 2009, p.59688).

Thus the purposes, although more specifically stated, were very similar to those found in NCLB. However, the key differences are to be found in some key details. While federal funding of NCLB was limited to Title I funding, RTTT’s funds were to be disbursed to qualifying states to address the four core education reform requirements, not limited to Title I programs. Under NCLB, states were to design and implement standards and aligned assessments. RTTT’s requirements included the adoption of state standards aligned with national Common Core Standards and a commitment to participate in newly designed national tests based on the Common Core. NCLB and RTT both required accountability measures that included the desegregation of data by subgroups, but NCLB’s requirement that all students be proficient by 2014, was modified by RTTT, requiring instead that the achievement gap would be reduced by half by 2016. RTTT specifically required that state data systems be able to connect student achievement scores directly to teacher evaluation, a concept that was vaguely alluded to in NCLB. On a more positive vein, NCLB required states to demand restructuring of schools not meeting AYP for several years, while RTTT promoted innovative programs, and left it up to states to deal with schools in chronic failure by establishing “turnaround” protocols.

Figure 5 parallels and expands upon the information provided through the chart in Figure 4 at the beginning of this chapter. Figure 5 is focused on the growth of mandates for standards, assessment and accountability. The chart’s first column places this information within a timeline from the 1980s through 2013-- from A Nation at Risk, to Goals 2000, to NCLB and RTTT. The second column highlights the progress of state
standards from voluntary to required and ultimately, the addition of national standards. In alignment with the move to required standards, the third column reveals the movement from voluntary participation in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to required participation in both the national test and state developed standardized assessments. In addition to high stakes state tests, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was instituted to determine student achievement in reading, mathematics, science and social studies at grades 4, 8, and 12, and was eventually used as a way to determine the strength of state standards. In states like Massachusetts, where students consistently tested well on NAEP, standards were considered rigorous. Under NCLB and RTTT, NAEP is required for all states. In

*Fig. 5. Federal Standards And Accountability Progression NAR To RTTT*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOCUMENT</th>
<th>CURRICULUM STANDARDS</th>
<th>HIGH STAKES TESTING</th>
<th>REDUCING ACHIEVEMENT GAP</th>
<th>ACCOUNTABILITY PENALTIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980s NAR</td>
<td>VOLUNTARY</td>
<td>NAEP: VOLUNTARY BENCHMARK ASSESSMENT</td>
<td>NOT REQUIRED</td>
<td>NO PENALTIES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s GOALS 2000</td>
<td>REQUIRED FOR TITLE STUDENTS PROPOSED FOR ALL STUDENTS</td>
<td>NAEP REQUIRED STATE TESTS-- 3 TESTS GR 3-12</td>
<td>SUGGESTED, PROPOSED DEADLINE--10 YRS</td>
<td>SUGGESTED PENALTIES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCLB</td>
<td>STATE STANDARDS MANDATED FOR ALL STUDENTS</td>
<td>NAEP REQUIRED STATE TESTS--ANNUAL FOR GR 3-8 ONE GR 10-12</td>
<td>REQUIRED ALL STUDENTS MUST BE PROFICIENT BY 2014</td>
<td>PENALTIES—3 STAGES: IMPROVEMENT, CORRECTIVE ACTION, RESTRUCTURING REPORTED TO PUBLIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTTT</td>
<td>STATE STANDARDS REQUIRED MUST ADOPT NATIONAL STANDARDS</td>
<td>NAEP REQUIRED STATE TESTS--ANNUAL FOR GR 3-11 MUST ADOPT NATIONAL TEST BASED ON CCSS</td>
<td>REQUIRED, MUST REDUCE ACHIEVEMENT GAP BY HALF BY 2016</td>
<td>PENALTIES RECOMMENDED, CREATION OF TURNAROUND SCHOOLS, SANCTIONS TIED TO EDUCATOR EVALUATION REPORTED TO PUBLIC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

addition, under RTTT, qualifying states must agree to participate in an annual test based on the Common Core Standards—essentially establishing a federally controlled
curriculum and assessment system-- an online version of which is being developed by the Gates Foundation in collaboration with Pearson Publications (Ravitch, 2013, p. 23).

The quest to reduce the achievement gap between general education middle class white students and those who have special needs, speak English as a second language, qualify as low-income or are part of several racial and ethnic minorities is illustrated in column 4. The column shows that during the NCLB era, achievement gap reduction was reflected in the requirement to have all students be proficient (at grade level) in reading and mathematics by 2014. RTTT “softened” the requirement, expecting the achievement gap of every school to be reduced by half by 2016.

The fifth column shows that failure to reach required targets earned sanctions during the NCLB and RTTT eras. Under NCLB, as described above, schools not meeting AYP could eventually be restructured, staff dismissed and the whole process reported to the public. To reduce the penalty effect, RTTT recommended that chronically failing schools be replaced by charters, or dismiss administrators and institute “turnaround” programs. Under NCLB, sanctions for poor test scores, over time lead to the termination of school staff. With RTTT, a more specific way to dismiss staff is required. Instead of delineating a graduated system of improvement, corrective action or restructuring, RTTT required that states develop a new teacher evaluation system directly connected to state testing results. Ball (1998), who analyzed similar developments in the UK, defines this type of evaluation system as playing “a particular role in reorientating education, educational institutions and students to the competitive needs of the economy” (p.3). He notes that,

In all this management, the market, quality, self-surveillance and self-evaluation are tightly tied. As Willmott (1993: 522) suggests, “employees are simultaneously

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required, individually and collectively, to recognise and take responsibility for the relationship between the security of their employment and their contribution to the competitiveness of the goods and services they produce’. And the restlessness and relentlessness indicated here reflect and incorporate the uncertainties and instabilities (social, political and financial) in which many schools now operate. (Ball, 1998, p.7)

By tightening the connection between high stakes testing and teacher (and principal) evaluation, it seems clear that RTTT has further strengthened the federal hold on what happens in every public school on a daily basis. This latest intrusion into the school and classroom is particularly concerning to educators who understand the complexity of teaching. Ravitch (2013) warns that because of imprecise value-added measurements, “year to year variation in students and conditions, very few teachers manage to be ‘top’ teacher for three, four or five consecutive years” (p.107). Could the long arm of federal policy negatively affect good teachers, good schools?

Kantor and Lowe (2013) argue that “[f]or half a century, ever since Lyndon Johnson prioritized education over…create[ing] a robust welfare state, educational reform has been the federal government’s favored solution to problems of poverty, inequality, and economic insecurity” (p.25). Given the unsettling statistics indicating a growing gap between rich and poor, continued issues of segregation, and growing numbers of students with disabilities and English Language Learners, it would be reasonable to deduce that the favored solution has not yet worked to the government’s liking. If education was to be the “best” solution, then educational reform was indicated.

As former President Bush stated, there has been much controversy surrounding NCLB and there seems to be growing unrest over RTTT and its requirements. As Ravitch
(2013) states, the nation seems to think that public education is at risk, but is it? While it is not in the scope of this study to answer the question for the entire nation, it is well within its scope to analyze the effects of NCLB and RTTT on one school—a school ranked by the state of Massachusetts as high performing for the past decade. The following chapters will focus on what educational policy looks like in practice. Chapter 5 presents data related to Southeastern’s AYP and RTTT status, the school’s response to federal and state mandates and my analysis of positive and negative effects effected as a result. In Chapter 6, additional data from teacher and parent interviews and from my own practitioner journal is utilized to assist in the critique and analysis of NCLB’s and RTTT’s influence on special education and low income students, their teachers and school culture in general. To analyze the effects of NCLB and RTTT on Southeastern Middle School, I will continue to utilize Ball’s policy cycle, focusing on the context of practice. I will also weave in the concept of inquiry as stance, pertinent to my work as a practitioner researcher.
Chapter 5

The Context of Practice: Generating the AYP Rollercoaster

Journal entry for August 2010:
I just received the preliminary AYP report for the spring 2010 MCAS. At the top of the report, under performance rating, it shows that our school is in Improvement Year 2 for ELA, but the next column says our performance rating in this subject area is “Very High” Math is another matter, we continue to be in restructuring, but our performance rating is “High” What a rollercoaster! How can we be rated very high and high and yet need to restructure our whole school! Then, as usual, the report goes into detail about participation, performance, improvement and attendance targets. Yes, we met all participation requirements—nothing lower than 98%. We also met the attendance requirements—whew! I don’t ever want to go through what we did in 2007! ELA’s targets were met with room to spare for the aggregate, but both Special Ed and low income students did not make their targets. And for Math, we are on the cusp for the aggregate—the target was 84.3 and we were at 85. Never mind Special Ed and low income kids—54.6 and 71.1 is where they are! And the reports for parents will show yet one more measure—a Student Growth Percentile—possible preparation for value added measures? And there are workshops in preparation for the Common Core Standards—will they be easier or harder than the Massachusetts standards? Thank goodness that all the controversy about NCLB has made the media back off from featuring school failure on MCAS! All the same, we can’t let up on our efforts to gain ground on the tests because the next target is 95.1 for ELA and 92.2 for math—no exceptions! We are going to have to work on keeping up our morale despite the pressure and disappointment.

Reflection January 2014:
This journal entry first mentioned the feeling of being on a rollercoaster—knowing that we were rated as a high performing school but were nonetheless “in trouble” and needed to continue to make major programmatic changes and were expected to terminate staff responsible for low scores. This paradoxical status was due to the struggle of students with learning disabilities and some students of low income households to reach increasingly higher AYP targets in mathematics. We had added and changed services for both subgroups every year and while Special Education students had grown from an original Composite Performance Index (CPI) of 41.1 (AYP, 2004a) in 2004 to 54.6 (AYP, 2010a) in Mathematics, and from a CPI of 71.2 (AYP, 2004a) to 74.5 (AYP, 2010a) in ELA the growth was not sufficient for the state. Happily, the aggregate student population was still meeting targets, but the next step towards 100% proficiency for all students was nearly 5 points higher in ELA and nearly 8 points higher for mathematics!
We could congratulate ourselves about a 13 point increase in Mathematics, but it simply was not enough and higher requirements were in the horizon!

As noted in Chapter 3, the purpose of this study is to explore what happened at Southeastern from 2003 through 2013, as a result of changes enacted in response to NCLB and RTTT mandates. In this chapter, I address how NCLB and RTTT directly influenced curricular, programmatic and instructional reforms, and how these reforms affected special education and low income students and the school culture in general. Here, I provide the description and analysis of data collected from Southeastern Middle School’s AYP history and school reform efforts. AYP history data encompass state, district and school communication and reports. Data regarding our efforts at school reform data are comprised of information about programmatic and structural changes as well as professional development records that are directly related to those changes.

Throughout this chapter, I will refer directly to federal law, (e.g. NCLB, RTTT protocols), and ensuing state regulations,(e.g. AYP Status guidelines, MCAS procedures). All documents referring to NCLB or AYP are cited under their year of publication (e.g. AYP, 2003; AYP, 2012 and are listed in Appendix A). These documents are examples of what Ball (1994, 2004) describes as part of the cycle of text production – text produced as a result of educational policy writ large, translated into protocol, action and consequences at the state and district level. Ball (2000) highlights policy terms, such as accountability, competition, and value-added, as evidence of a new language to denote how the focus and future of education is determined by the influence of market forces that are effectively controlling key aspects of educational decision-making. The language of NCLB includes many terms that point at the focus of education as increasingly
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determined by the federal government. Through its assessment and accountability system, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts also underlines what is expected of schools, administrators and teachers as they make decisions about the education of the public school students assigned to them.

As reported in Chapter 4, educational policy generated at the federal level reflects the views and interests of the government and representatives of influential member of the business world and powerful organizations (Ball, 2004; Ravitch, 2013; Kantor & Lowe, 2013). Policy is eventually interpreted and converted into text: laws, initiatives, regulations and directives. Once these texts reach the school level, they are yet again “translated” in what Ball designates as the context of practice: “the arena of practice to which policy refers, to which it is addressed” (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992, p. 21). The translation of policy text into practice is not simple. Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) note that

[p]ractitioners do not confront policy texts as naïve readers, they come with histories, with experience, with values and purposes of their own, they have vested interests in the meaning of policy. Policies will be interpreted differently as the histories, experiences, values, purposes and interests which make up any arena differ (p. 22).

Part of the process of analyzing how NCLB and RTTT affected special education and low income students, their teachers and school culture at Southeastern was to discover how we as faculty, administrators and parents responded (or reacted) to the texts that represented US and state education policy.

To carry out this analysis, I worked from an inquiry stance that provided a framework for the discovery of assumptions and the development of questions to analyze how the mission and vision of NCLB and RTTT translated into school practice. Inquiry as stance was the foundation that guided this practitioner research study in the systematic
collection and analysis of a variety of data. Conducting practitioner research allowed me to theorize, from a practitioner’s perspective, about the complex effects of federal and state mandates at Southeastern. I believe that practitioner research is a genuine, realistic way to study the complexities of teaching and learning from the inside. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) point out that practitioner research is unified by certain fundamental assumptions about research, teaching, and teacher learning, all of which emphasize teacher agency and knowledge generation in the interest of social change and social justice.

As a practitioner researcher, I chose to study my own school during a key period in the history of American public education. It was my intent to generate knowledge about the effects of NCLB and RTTT on a high performing school—typical of many good schools throughout our nation. Why is it important to have an insider’s view of what happened to one school under NCLB and RTTT? The vast majority of studies about NCLB are focused on schools that are already struggling and needing major reform prior to the law—urban schools suffering from many factors beyond curriculum and instruction difficulties. The research literature on NCLB does not include longitudinal studies of high performing public schools. I believe that what happened at Southeastern is very likely related to what has happened in “good” suburban and small town K-12 schools in the US. Studying the effects of federal mandates on a “good” school is essential to understand fully how and whether NCLB and RTTT are achieving their goals and having positive effects on schools.

One of my major arguments here is that NCLB and RTTT continuously placed Southeastern on a rollercoaster, providing a paradoxical view of its status and performance. Annually, the state’s School Report Card validated Southeastern’s high
performance in mathematics and very high performance in English language arts, yet, at the same time and in the same document, placed the school on a continuum from “needing improvement” to requiring significant “correction” and ultimately needing total “restructuring,” in keeping with federal requirements (AYP, 2008a). Later, under RTTT and a different numerical formula for determining student achievement on MCAS, the state determined that our school had made mathematics progress above expectations, but this was accompanied by lower than expected English language arts scores. This was the reverse of what NCLB had reported annually for the 8 previous years (AYP, 2012a).

RTTT’s goal was to reduce the achievement gap by half by 2016. That meant that half of the Southeastern special education students had to be on target to reach the aggregate score of 94.4 CPI by 2016. RTTT’s requirements seemed to penalize the school for having high ELA scores!

In this chapter I also argue that NCLB created an atmosphere of fear about the school’s survival and brought heavy pressure on us to focus solely on the improvement of test scores. As former Assistant Secretary of Education—turned arch-opponent of neoliberal education reform—Diane Ravitch (2013) pointed out, the government’s insistence on a single focus-- annual standardized test scores—“created a sense of crisis, lending credibility to claims that American public education is failing and in decline” (p.6). This sense of crisis pervaded Southeastern throughout the 10 years of this study, despite the fact that our school was also rated as high performing overall and was highly regarded in our region.

Analysis of testing and school reform data at our school also suggested that NCLB established unrealistic, unfair and unreasonable mandates. The law required major
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school reform without providing funding resources unless the school was declared a Title I school. (Borman et al, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2010). It also required 100% proficiency even for students with learning disabilities and low-income students exhibiting considerable learning gaps. Proficiency targets were raised biannually—students were always reaching for higher test scores with much higher expectations for the last two years of the law. Again, Diane Ravitch (2013) makes an important point here:

Many schools “failed” year after year, and as 2014 approached, the majority of public schools in the nation had been declared failures, including some excellent, highly regarded schools (typically, the group that was not making sufficient progress toward 100 percent proficiency was students with disabilities…) In Massachusetts, for example, the state with the nation’s highest performing students as judged by federal tests, 80 percent of the state’s public schools were “failing” by NCLB standards in 2012 (p. 57-58).

Until 2011, Massachusetts’ interpretation of the law’s requirement to determine a school’s proficiency record was to compare the test results of different groups of students, year to year. For example, the MCAS results for sixth grade students for 2011-2012 were compared to the MCAS results for the sixth graders of the previous year. If the intent of the law was to ensure that every student was proficient, the measurement should be on individual annual growth. It was clear to me that comparing one year to the next year’s results was intended to judge programs rather than determine whether each student was on the pathway to proficiency. The mandate required test score improvements within a two year school reform cycle. Requiring that schools change programs to produce positive results in such a short period of time contrasted with research (and our own school’s) findings that any school reform initiative requires three to five years of consistent effort to prove successful or unsuccessful. Attempting to hurry the school
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reform process discourages reflective, student-centered school change, encouraging instead, a trial-and-error approach I judge to be unacceptable when working with children.

NCLB also interfered with my beliefs about how to conduct my own work as a school principal by requiring me to utilize top-down management techniques considered counterproductive by educational researchers (Darling-Hammond, 2011). The law compelled me to hire only teachers who fit the state’s designation of “highly qualified” (AYP, 2007b), yet, by requiring a limited palette of quick-turnaround reform options, it reduced teachers’ professional authority to make well thought-out, curricular and instructional changes. By placing focus on reading and mathematics, NCLB put unmitigated pressure on students, staff, parents and administration to focus largely on tested subjects. In “Achievement Gaps Arise from Opportunity Gaps”, Welner & Carter (2013) warn that

[a] narrow focus on the achievement gap predictably leads to policies grounded in high-stakes testing, which in turn leads to narrow thinking about groups of students, their teachers and their schools. While these assessments attempt to determine where students are, they ignore how they may have gotten there and what alternative pathways might be available for future students.

The limited focus on tested subjects forced me to choose scheduling and staffing strategies that reduced enrichment activities in order to provide additional time for test preparation. To reduce the risk of poor school evaluations and possible termination of me or my staff, I also instituted monitoring of lesson plans and curricular alignment to ensure that every math, English and Science teacher had similar positive MCAS results. Were these NCLB-generated responses actually changing not just my practices, but my beliefs and values as well? I believed it was important for every child to receive an equitable
education, but I did not believe for instance, that every 8th grade English teacher should be forced to provide the exact same lesson at the same time, and yet my actions seemed to contradict my stated beliefs.

In short, as shown here and in the next chapter, at my school (and elsewhere, I suspect), NCLB and later RTTT, in many ways, changed our school’s culture, often interfering with the establishment and maintenance of a positive, respectful school environment. It even affected our relationship to parents. Compulsory public reports and media interpretation of such reports fed distrust and hostility within the parent community, to the extent that one disgruntled parent called for my termination in accordance with NCLB rules (AYP 2006c); (Lindsay to Superintendent, October 20, 2006). Focus on the required tested subjects: mathematics and English language arts, diminished the status of other subject area teachers, such as the Social Studies department, which was a “non-MCAS-tested” subject. Southeastern students displayed increased anxiety levels likely related directly to testing and/or the increased rigor and pace in most classrooms (Sandoval to V. Ekk, March 13, 2012; Dion Interview, 2012, p.4). It was difficult to keep staff morale high, a quality I had always considered an essential element of a great school. The changes at Southeastern were not simply structural and programmatic, they included subtle and not so subtle influences on the way I, and my staff thought and carried out our daily work.

The following sections present data about Southeastern’s experience with NCLB and RTTT. The first section, “NCLB and AYP 2003-2008— The ‘Needs Improvement’ to ‘Corrective Action’ Years,” examines the academic years from 2003-2004 to 2007-2008 beginning with my first year as Southeastern’s principal. The second section,
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“NCLB and AYP 2008-2011—The ‘Restructuring Years’,” draws on data from 2008-2011, the years when Southeastern and many other Massachusetts middle schools, were placed by federal law in the “restructuring” category. The third section, “RTTT 2011-2013— New Mandate, Same Rollercoaster,” provides a look at the data from the years under the RTTT initiative.

NCLB and AYP 2003-2008: The ‘Needs Improvement’ to ‘Corrective Action’ Years

Parent Communication-- October, 2004
Dear Mrs. Ekk,
I wanted to write this note to tell you I am sorry that my son Ricky’s bad test scores made it so the school is getting a bad reputation. I know Southeastern is a good school. He just has a hard time with tests and he can’t help it. I wish I could change what happened. I’m sorry about the newspapers. I just wanted you to know he said he would try harder this year. Wanda R (Rousseau to V.Ekk, October 22, 2004).

Reflection November 2013: I received this note the day after the local newspaper featured a story about Southeastern's placement in the “Needs Improvement” category. Southeastern Middle School is part of a small suburban school district that held an excellent academic reputation, attracting homeowners to move into town because of the schools’ reputation. NCLB’s intent was to ensure that no student was left behind, especially those who normally struggle. How were these students helped by having their school publicly shamed! This parent should not have had to apologize for her child’s struggle to score well on a rigorous test despite his learning disabilities!

In Massachusetts, the key to a school’s accountability status from 2002 through the advent of the Race to the Top waiver in February 2012, was where the school stood in accordance with the required Adequate Yearly Progress targets. AYP was defined by NCLB as a state-chosen plan to ensure that

all public elementary school and secondary school students… meet the State’s student academic achievement standards, while working toward the goal of narrowing the achievement gaps in the State, local educational agencies, and schools (PL 107-110, 2002, p. 1447).
For the state of Massachusetts, Adequate Yearly Progress was measured through four elements, a Composite Performance Index (CPI), (an algebraic formula based on average scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)); test participation of no less than 95% of the school’s student population; adequate test score improvement for all subgroups; and 92% or higher school attendance rates (AYP2007b). The MCAS assessed ELA and mathematics for grades 3-8, and 10, science for grades 5, 8, and 9th or 10th graders in a choice of science strands. MCAS was based on the Massachusetts state standards until 2010, but began to include the national Common Core State Standards (CCSS) beginning in 2011 and was scheduled to be replaced by a national CCSS-based test in 2014-2015. The MCAS included several sessions of multiple choice, short answer and open response questions and provided some accommodations for students who were unable to access the test without considerable assistance. There was an alternative portfolio-style assessment for students with severe disabilities, however, districts were required to adhere to a 1% cap to ensure that few students were exempted from the regular MCAS (AYP 2010b).

According to NCLB, the term “aggregate” means all assessed students, while “all subgroups” refers to any subgroup of students selected by the state in accordance with NCLB’s demands to disaggregate data to focus on the testing achievement of high risk students: those with disabilities, ethnic and racial minorities, and English Language Learners (ELL). In Massachusetts, under NCLB, this meant that a subgroup’s scores counted when there were at least 40 students to represent it. For Southeastern, the subgroups that “counted” before 2012 were students with disabilities and those identified
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as residing within a low income household. Either or both groups’ failure to meet AYP for two years in a row contributed to the school’s AYP status in a subject area.

Figure 6 presents Southeastern’s AYP status from 2003 through the 2007-2008 school year. A “Yes” under either the English Language Arts or Mathematics column means that the indicated student population, the aggregate or the special education and low income subgroups, met the AYP targets set for that year. “No” indicates that the particular student population did not meet their AYP goal. The different AYP status stages designate the consequences to be meted out when a school did not meet state-set target scores. The AYP status stages are: “Needs Improvement”, “Corrective Action” and “Restructuring”. Schools not making AYP were required to address any areas of concern for both the aggregate and subgroup populations. Schools at the “Corrective Action” or “Restructuring” labels were required to provide annual action plans that included detailed descriptions of measures taken to raise student achievement on annual assessments. At the “Restructuring” level, as under “Corrective Action” schools were required to notify parents of their annual accountability standing. The school district was responsible to provide technical assistance and had to oversee the school’s implementation of major reforms. The difference was that under “Restructuring”, the AYP regulations required the district to: reconstitute the school by replacing all or most of the school staff who are relevant to the school’s inability to make adequate progress (this may include the principal); enter into a contract with an entity, such as a private management company, with a demonstrated record of effectiveness, to operate the school as a public school; turn the operation of the school over to the State, if the State agrees; Re-open the school as a charter school (in Massachusetts, Horace Mann or Commonwealth); or Implement any
other major restructuring of the school’s governance arrangement that makes fundamental reforms, such as significant changes in the school’s staffing and governance…

Fig. 6. Southeastern’s AYP Status History 2003-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>ELA</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>AYP Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>Aggregate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>Aggregate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Needs Improvement- Math subgroup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>Aggregate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Needs Improvement- Math subgroup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>Aggregate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Corrective Action- Math subgroup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>Aggregate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Corrective Action- Math subgroup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once NCLB’s first AYP Status report was received, it was clear to me and to Southeastern’s staff that we would have to work towards improving student test scores so that the school could avoid reaching the feared “restructuring” category. A school could not shed the negative category labels unless all AYP goals were met for two consecutive years.

As can be surmised from the AYP status history for this period, the aggregate student population, (which included all student subgroups) met all targets. That means that, the aggregate had reached or surpassed the expected MCAS scores, at least 95% of students took the test and, school attendance rates were 92% or higher. While special education students did not meet their targets in mathematics for 2003-2004 and 2004-
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2005, the goal was met for 2005-2006, but low income students missed the mark that year and the following, ensuring that Southeastern continued in the continuum of sanctions. For the year 2007-2008, all targets were met, but the school remained in corrective action because the regulations required two consecutive years of meeting all targets to earn a “No status” label.

Figure 7 depicts the Composite Performance Index (CPI) targets for all students in Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the entire NCLB period from 2002 through 2014. In Massachusetts, the CPI from 2002 through 2012 was arrived at through an algebraic formula that calculated student test score averages in reading and mathematics test scores. Increasingly higher CPI averages were required in order for all students to reach the NCLB-required 100% proficiency target by 2014. Thus, in 2002, a school whose students averaged at or above a CPI of 70.7 in English Language Arts (ELA) and 53.0 in Mathematics (the average CPI for all Massachusetts students at that time) was considered to be on target to make AYP by 2014. As Figure 6 indicates, in 2004, a growth factor of approximately 4.9 CPI in ELA and 7.8 CPI in math for every two-year cycle was considered appropriate to eventually reach the final goal.

For Southeastern, both test participation and attendance averages were in accordance with requirements, the main concern at Southeastern was always the MCAS test scores and reaching the CPI and improvement targets. Figures 8 and 9 display Southeastern’s CPI scores for the aggregate, special education and low income student populations against the AYP CPI goals towards 100% proficiency. Figure 8 focuses on ELA while Figure 9 shows mathematics CPI progress. It is evident that the aggregate
student population was able to maintain ELA CPI scores above 90, higher than NCLB requirements through the 2003-2010 period. While low income and special education students met or exceeded ELA targets until 2008, by the following school year, they did not meet the higher goals. Mathematics was more challenging. Even the aggregate population struggled to reach the higher goals, but aggregate improvement targets were met through 2010 so that the focus remained on subgroup failure to meet AYP in mathematics.

Fig 7. Massachusetts NCLB Composite Performance Index Targets for ELA and Mathematics 2002-2014 (DESE, 2004)

The point I want to emphasize here is that despite showing growth, low income and special needs students continued to show a test score gap in comparison to the aggregate school population. Why did the gaps between the aggregate student population and the special education and low income student subgroups continue even as the overall scores
rose? Students with disabilities and low income students made progress, but they needed to advance faster than the aggregate in order to catch up.

As Southeastern’s principal I worried about the “dips” in test score achievement in 2006, 2010 and 2011, which occurred despite ongoing programmatic reform efforts. During each year’s whole staff MCAS data analysis sessions, we discussed the possibility that variations in CPI gains were dependent on the particular characteristics of student populations. At staff meetings, I sometimes heard teachers ask, “How realistic is it to expect every student to reach 100% proficiency on the MCAS?” (Senate Notes 2010a). I myself doubted that it was fair to impose these testing requirements on special education students with documented learning disabilities. By ensuring that accountability targets were beyond reach, was NCLB’s mandate negating its stated purpose to ensure an
equitable education for every child? Was the hidden intent to destroy public belief in even “good” schools like Southeastern (Ravitch 2013)?

*Fig. 9 Southeastern Math AYP History 2002-2012*

As noted by Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) translating federal and state texts—in this case AYP reports, communications related to NCLB and RTTT and school “report cards”—into school and classroom practice is a complex, non-linear process. In the following section, utilizing narration, a traditional practitioner research tool, I describe programmatic and structural changes enacted at Southeastern in response to NCLB requirements and relate how these reforms affected the school environment, staff, parents and students.

In late August 2003, as a newly hired principal, and before having a chance to meet my staff and ‘learn the ropes’ at Southeastern, I was informed that the school was
‘in trouble’ because of poor state assessment results. Two district-level curriculum coordinators presented me with a copy of the state report on Southeastern’s results on the MCAS for the previous spring’s English language arts and mathematics tests. The results indicated that special education students had not reached the required growth targets in mathematics according to the state’s calculations for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). For the 2003-2004 school year, one year after the official enactment of NCLB, the results meant that Southeastern had one year to avoid being placed on the Massachusetts “Needs Improvement” list. The curriculum coordinators told me that the label was to be avoided as it would reflect poorly on the school’s local and state-wide reputation. This unhappy information was to be presented to the staff at the year’s initial staff meeting, the day before school opening day. I was told to introduce the news, and then the curriculum coordinators would lead a whole staff professional development workshop to conduct a detailed analysis of the assessment data. This all happened as expected, on my first day as principal of Southeastern Middle School.

Of course, at this time, the curriculum coordinators and I did not know that we were in good company and that, by 2011, more than 80 percent of Massachusetts schools would be failing! In 2003, however, we felt alone, under scrutiny by the district and the media and afraid that the school’s reputation would be irreparably marred. It was clear that we needed to take strong action to correct the issue. As a veteran principal about to head my third middle school, I was not a supporter of high stakes testing as a measure of school or teacher viability. I believed that building a great middle school included a democratic school governance structure, where all staff members and parents are stakeholders, but I also understood that to address this immediate crisis, I would have to
be very directive and test-focused. I remember being very concerned about beginning my first year at Southeastern in a pressure-laden atmosphere, in many ways, working against my beliefs and values as a professional. I was concerned that my first actions as a principal would create the impression that I was in agreement with NCLB’s judgment about Southeastern before I had a chance to get to know my new school.

This type of scenario repeated itself in slightly different forms throughout the next 9 school years. During the last week of August of each year, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts informed every school district about the preliminary state assessment results for the previous spring, how the results reflected on every school’s AYP status and related that AYP status to accompanying consequences. For me, and eventually for my staff, receiving the information was just like receiving a telegram. I felt a sense of urgency along with a reluctance to look at the information for fear that the news was not good. The information always affected how I would orient staff the following week as we met to set the stage for the new school year’s goals. As principal, a major portion of my responsibilities was to lead improvement in the development of appropriate curriculum and excellent instruction. The information in AYP reports, although directly pertinent of English Language Arts (ELA), mathematics and science, was the most influential data for the development of my own leadership agenda for each school year. My challenge was to turn difficult AYP news into a motivational presentation that reflected hope and belief in our staff.

The annual opening day presentation is key to setting the tone for a new school year. Normally, in my two prior positions as head administrator, I prepared carefully to begin the year with a presentation to inspire staff members I wanted staff to leave the first
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day presentation with a feeling of eagerness and confidence that could be transmitted to our students as they entered their classrooms. Creating that exhilarating and hopeful atmosphere was daunting at Southeastern, because I first had to present news that contradicted nearly everything positive I wanted to say to my staff!

Table 2 summarizes many of the structural and programmatic changes made at Southeastern from 2003-2008 in response to NCLB requirements. School years are noted in column 1, AYP status in column 2, NCLB required actions are in column 3, specific changes—or continuation of previous interventions—are in column 4 and column 5 shows what I and my staff consider to be positive (+) or negative (-) effects of the listed changes. The column shows that several changes had both positive and negative effects. Changes are described in greater detail in the following section.

In August of 2003, immediately upon learning that the school’s special education subgroup’s MCAS scores were well below the CPI target of 75.6, I worked alongside the district curriculum coordinators and the Special Education Director to analyze the test results for signs of programmatic needs. To begin the process of changing things in order to measure up for NCLB, I addressed the school’s “improvement” status in a presentation to the entire staff. As the first change enacted to change our AYP status, the curriculum coordinator for mathematics asked special education teachers to “join the math department if you have any “math responsibilities” whatsoever” (Professional Development, 2003a). The intent was to have the two groups work closely as often as possible, a practice that continued until 2011. Looking back at the pairing of special education and math teachers, I note that the pressure of “fixing” our AYP status required a type of forced collaboration that was very much against my belief that teachers, as
professionals should be recruited rather than mandated to work together. A positive result did ensue from this initial collaboration, however, because it became the model for collegial collaboration teams implemented in 2005. This unexpected result—a directive that was eventually adapted and expanded into a beneficial process—was to be repeated a number of times throughout the ten years as teachers adjusted to school changes and worked to make the best out of each reform.

MCAS soon permeated every aspect of our school life. MCAS-related elements were the focus of all three district-provided professional development days (Professional Development, 2003b). Professional development documents revealed a focus on standards, assessment and mastery (Professional Development, 2003 a, b, c, d), I was concerned that we were too focused on MCAS and MCAS preparation, so, to fight back the focus on testing, I encouraged special events and field trips and supported keeping related arts classes which were being reduced through district budget cuts. I believed it was very important to provide our students with a variety of experiences that would assist them to find their strengths and interests. However, decreasing funds and a need to add staff to our math department to address the needs of students who failed MCAS, required that I choose an AYP remediation class over keeping our home economics program.

In addition to the professional development workshops, the mathematics curriculum coordinator led math and special education teacher meetings every six to eight weeks from 2003 through 2007), providing the teachers time to collaborate on solutions to Special Education students’ needs in mathematics. Collaborative time provided more detailed analyses on MCAS results and allowed teachers to design a number of MCAS-like practice assessments and math centers to work with students on specific skills. At
my suggestion, we created “small group opportunity” (SGO) mathematics classes in all three grades for the following year. SGO classes were to include more students within the “warning/failing” and “low improvement” score bands and provide their mathematics teacher with the assistance of one or two Special Education paraprofessionals or teachers, working with smaller groups of students so that individual needs could be met.

While I was troubled about the emphasis on MCAS remediation in mathematics, it seemed to me that some of the changes we were making were valuable. Providing time for teachers to collaborate and learn from each other was appropriate for a middle school that needed to build a stronger sense of teaming. The SGO classroom structures provided students who struggled in mathematics with more adults to assist them to understand concepts and gain confidence. The structure worked so well that we eventually decided to expand the program, creating an Alternate Group Opportunity (AGO) class with lower student numbers to assist students who were at least two grade levels below in mathematics. The classes had mixed results in raising MCAS scores, but they provided students with much needed support, so they remained in our program.

At this time, our concern was to make sure that every special needs student had appropriate and expert teaching in mathematics. Special education teachers are not usually math experts, so they became co-teachers in the SGO classes. Middle school math curriculum introduces students to demanding concepts even though a good number of students have not yet developed abstract thinking skills. While I still believed that many special needs children needed more time to master middle school math concepts, I intended to provide them with every opportunity we could muster.
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An additional response to the AYP challenge included the school committee’s acceptance of my proposal to require that middle school students have at least a passing grade in both English/reading and mathematics in addition to two of their three remaining core classes in order to be promoted to the next grade. My second proposal, establishing a summer remediation school to provide an opportunity for students with low grades to receive additional time in instruction was also approved and implemented in July 2004. My intent in raising student requirements was to ensure that part of the accountability load was passed onto our students, who up to that year, were only required to pass their English classes to be promoted to the next grade. Making these whole school changes showed my belief that accountability encompasses far more than a test score; that it includes everything a school does to provide a rigorous, quality education. By focusing only on mathematics and ELA, NCLB was endangering the concept of a well-rounded education. How could we make major changes to our structure for the sake of one test and disregard the changes necessary to ensure equity in all subject areas?

Table 2. The Positive or Negative Effects of Changes Made in Response to NCLB Requirements at Southeastern 2003-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Southeastern’s AYP Status</th>
<th>Required Actions by Southeastern</th>
<th>Changes Implemented By Southeastern</th>
<th>Suggested Positive/ Negative Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>Improvement Math- (Special Ed. Subgroup)</td>
<td>Develop Improvement Plan District provides tech. assistance</td>
<td>Whole school MCAS result analyses Pairing special ed. and math teachers for additional math staff development Differentiated Instruction workshop 3 prof. dev. days focused on improving MCAS results Design and pilot math classes with small group structures (SGO)</td>
<td>+Collaborative problem solving involves whole staff + Math teacher expertise paired to SPED expertise on accommodations and services + Review of appropriate SPED strategies - Total focus on MCAS raises pressure on staff and students + SGO classes provide struggling students with more individual assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Action Plan</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2004-2005 | Improve Math: (Special Ed. Subgroup) | - Require passing math in addition to English for middle school promotion  
- Establish summer remediation classes  
- Requirement passes accountability stress to students; raises student motivation to succeed in math  
+ Summer school extends learning time for needy students  |
| 2005-2006 | Corrective Action: (Special Ed. Subgroup) | - Qualify school for Title I funds  
- School Choice parent notification  
- AYP Action Plan presented to School Committee  
- Media attention on AYP target failure  
- EQA visit and report  
- Partnership with Bridgewater State U. for Math improvement plan  
+/- Title I provides additional funding for prof. dev. and resources  
- Choice notification, media emphasis on AYP label and televised Action Plan presentation reflect negatively on school’s standing  
- EQA focused only on AYP failure  
+/- Access to research-based strategies; not enough contact time  
+/- Mid year assessments intended to increase knowledge about what students need to know prior to MCAS; but it’s yet one more set of tests for students  
+/- Horizontal alignment improves; more top-down decisions and monitoring  |
| 2006-2007 | Corrective Action: (Low Income Subgroup) | - Title I funds continue-- School Choice and SES parent notification  
- Media attention on AYP target failure continues  
- Implement collegial collaboration groups for subject areas  
- Implement Standards-based Mid-year Assessments  
- Add passing grade in science as promotion requirement  
- Loss of nearly half the Title I funding to be held for possible transportation and tutoring costs  
- Loss of funding for BSU partnership  
- Continued pressure from media demoralized the school  
+ Increased collaboration for problem solving during after school, and senate meetings  
+/- One more test to take, score and analyze! It did give us an idea of where students needed additional work  
+ More emphasis on a subject other than reading or mathematics  |

Note: AYP = Adequate Yearly Progress, EQA = Educational Quality Act, BSU = Bridgewater State University, MCAS = Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, SES = Socio-Economic Status.
Each year, in response to the publication of our AYP status, and in order to meet an NCLB requirement to notify parents about the school’s progress in raising academic achievement, I wrote a letter to all Southeastern parents. Below are some key excerpts of a letter written in the fall of 2004 that reflect some of the most concerning effects of the NCLB mandate:

Dear Parents,

Our school district is dedicated to ensuring that all of our students succeed. While we have always held high expectations for our students, the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has set new standards that all students must meet. The ultimate goal of NCLB is that all United States students will be performing at the ‘proficient’ level in their academic efforts by the year 2014.

Under NCLB, certain specific sub groups of children are receiving great attention. Those include children with special needs, low income children, non-English speaking children and racial and ethnic minority children. When the progress of a school is evaluated, it is the performance of those student sub groups on the state MCAS that determines if the school has made AYP. AYP is an all or nothing proposition for a school. If only one of the targeted student sub groups does not make AYP for two consecutive years, the school is then ‘identified for improvement’.

On September 7, 2004, I received a letter from Commissioner… Driscoll… notifying Southeastern Middle School about our status under NCLB. Southeastern met and surpassed all requirements in English Language Arts for the general school population and for all the subgroups. In mathematics, the school...
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As a whole met its goals; one of our subgroups showed improvement but not enough to meet the AYP goals. Because this same subgroup, (a little over 100 out of our 1200 student population), did not meet AYP goals … Southeastern has been identified for improvement.

Our staff has been concerned about the needs of all our students in the area of mathematics. Throughout 2003-2004, teachers, paraprofessionals, administration and the Math/Science Curriculum Coordinator met to diagnose specific needs and design a program that would give each of the students in the at-risk group more time and additional instruction in mathematics…. Additional staff was hired to ensure that the program would be fully instituted for 2004-2005. We are ready for the challenge… We are confident that these steps will address the expectations of the federal government.

Meanwhile, the school will continue its excellent program in service of the whole student population. Southeastern still ranks among the top middle schools in the state, and will continue to do so.

NCLB mandates that all parents of children enrolled in a school identified for improvement, not just the parents of the at-risk group, must be allowed to transfer their child to another school in the district. A transfer to another school in our town is not possible, as we have only one middle school. In cases like [this]… the district must, to the extent practicable, attempt to establish a cooperative agreement for transfers with another school district in the area if any parents request a transfer. … If you are interested in this option, please call… no later than September 21, 2004. … (AYP, 2004 b)

To funnel much needed additional funding for professional development and programs, I agreed to have the Assistant Superintendent identify Southeastern Middle School as a Title I school for the years 2004-2005 and 2005-2006. Under No Child Left Behind, Title I Schools had to immediately notify all parents of their failure to make AYP and their right to transfer to a ‘better’ school (AYP, 05c). While no parent requested a transfer out of our school to one in a neighboring school district, there were calls requesting more information about the specific subgroup in question, a question which was answered only when the school’s “report card” was published in late fall. At that time, a member of our school’s PTA wrote a letter requesting the restructuring of our
mathematics program to allow for full leveling because “the more-able students are often left to wait and certainly could move through the material at a faster pace. …Gifted students are being cheated…” (Monroe to V.Ekk, November 12, 2004). I had already arranged for SGO classes to assist students with low MCAS scores, but it was against my professional values to transform our middle school into a junior high school model that allowed the tracking of students and eliminated academic teams. I found that it was increasingly difficult to lead the school in a manner consistent with my beliefs and values. I was obligated to concentrate most budgetary and staffing resources to address AYP needs instead of focusing on expanding the school’s ability to provide students with experiences and programs that allowed them to explore different ideas, careers and activities that would be useful in later learning and adult life. How could I build a positive, democratic and well balanced school under these limiting circumstances?

In addition to sending the parent notification letter, each year, I submitted an AYP Action Plan that was presented to the school committee at a locally televised meeting. The action plan specified the number of points of AYP growth that had to be achieved by the end of the following year and listed the steps being taken to reach the AYP goal. Presenting the AYP Action Plan on camera was a nerve racking experience the first few years. It was all the more frustrating because I believed that Southeastern was an excellent school that did not deserve a negative label. The support of the Superintendent was evident, as he explained his belief that the school was doing an excellent job of meeting student needs.

In looking back, it is evident that the mathematics challenge for a little over 100 out of our nearly 1200 students had become the most important concern. At that time,
Southeastern was the only school in our district big enough to have subgroups—only two elementary schools were to eventually have AYP subgroups larger than 40 students, and our large high school only tested one grade, avoiding subgroups as well. That meant that our school’s AYP scores were the only ones drawing attention. It was as if we were being punished for having the largest number of special education and low income students in the district.

In September 2005, for our first professional development workshop, I included an NCLB video presentation, and a review of AYP that included information on the ‘roots’ of the accountability movement in *A Nation at Risk*. My intent was to ensure that staff understood the law and the assumptions behind it so they could have a more balanced view of what was happening in education. I had a deep and unwavering belief in teachers as professionals, and professionals need to know everything that affects their career.

Along with the NCLB information, I provided the staff with news about an upcoming Educational Quality and Accountability audit. Separate from DESE, the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability, was authorized by the Massachusetts legislature to conduct accountability audits for every district in the Commonwealth. In preparation for the audit, I presented data showing how Southeastern compared to other Massachusetts middle schools. The presentation showed that we were in plentiful and good company in our struggles with AYP. At that time, 76 out of 201 middle level public schools were labeled as in need of improvement. (*Professional Development 2004b*).

Why were so many Massachusetts middle schools were struggling to make AYP targets in mathematics? Was the Math MCAS too difficult for some middle school
students? Was the middle school concept—schools dedicated to academic, social and emotional progress in an exploratory, team oriented structure—failing Massachusetts’s students? Or maybe it was because of something we learned from a DESE presentation several years later, in the fall of 2011, that the Math MCAS was designed to introduce many new, difficult concepts in grades 4 and 7 so that students would be exposed to them several times before the 10\textsuperscript{th} grade MCAS which was required to graduate from high school (AYP, 2011c). How unfair was it to hide that information from educators and parents who worried needlessly when they looked at their students’ MCAS scores and wondered if there was something wrong with the school, or the child?

The added pressure of eventually facing a ‘corrective action label’ if Southeastern continued to miss AYP goals, caused the curriculum coordinators to provide Southeastern with technical assistance to introduce focused work on aligning curriculum vertically and horizontally. Curriculum alignment meant that every child would be learning the same concepts as every other child in his or her grade level at about the same time. While that concept seems to reduce teacher authority over what to teach and when to teach it, as a principal, I believed that alignment would help to ensure that Southeastern’s students would master the same standards no matter where they were placed in terms of teachers or teams—something that was not yet true in 2005. To support this effort, I informed teachers that their lesson plan books were to be collected once per month to log the standards taught and map whether horizontal curriculum alignment was happening at every grade level in every subject area. In order to mitigate this top-down measure, I urged teachers working in collaborative groups to decide what standards to teach and select a pacing timeline. By 2007, curriculum alignment was part of the Southeastern
way and lesson plan book monitoring log records were provided to the collaborative
groups to assist in their alignment work.

Following NCLB guidelines in 2005, the school district hired a Bridgewater State
University consultant to provide coaching assistance to redesign SGO classes and
develop a Mathematics Improvement Plan. Despite my dislike of high stakes testing I
scheduled practice MCAS tests in November and February, hoping that students would
become familiar with the test format and content and be less anxious for the “real” test.

Because special education students continued to struggle with the mathematics
curriculum, beginning January 2005, I notified parents of Special Education students that
their children were to receive additional mathematics instruction during their study
period. While this gave students more time to work with difficult math concepts, the
period could no longer be used to work on social studies or science homework at school.
This was a form of curriculum narrowing, as these students needed assistance in more
than just reading and math. This change was not popular and I was uncomfortable
making it, but could not find any other time to assist the subgroup. I had to show
evidence of additional time on learning mathematics or risk losing my job or staff.

In December 2005, contradicting conclusions highlighted the rollercoaster nature
of our school’s self-concept. As we have done every other year since 2005, Southeastern
participated in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) commonly
known as “the nation’s report card.” The school received high marks when results were
reported the following spring. NAEP is widely regarded as the most legitimate measure
of educational achievement, so we were proud to participate and do well. This should
have been a time for celebration, however, one week after taking the NAEP, the district
was audited by an Educational Quality and Accountability team. At the end of the audit, all the district’s principals gathered at the Superintendent’s office for an audit summary meeting. The audit team’s report was generally positive, but at the end of the meeting, the audit chairperson pointed out that the only issue marring the district’s high performing record was the middle school’s math scores. “You have to do something about the middle school,” he said. (AYP 2005c) This type of public shaming only intensified my anxiety about AYP. What else could we do to solve this problem that was definitely affecting the school’s reputation? While I knew the district Superintendent supported me, I believed that incidents like this one and negative media attention could not be good for our school.

Reflecting the daunting challenges of decreasing the achievement gap in mathematics for Special Education students, a math teacher complained to me about having students with poor work ethic in addition to missing skills. She did not mind helping struggling students, but did not want misbehaving students (Newman to V. Ekk, September 23, 2006) Teachers asked me for additional accountability for students, resulting in my adding a Saturday Detention program for students with chronic homework problems and implementing academic contracts for students who needed additional assistance to produce quality work. The intent was to push students to try harder, as many teachers said, “Do their part” (Interview Group A, p. 8). While these strategies did not make a difference in our AYP status, they helped to reduce the number of end of year failures from an average of 25 per year to 10 at the end of 2006 (Professional Development, 2006c) and 0 by 2009 (Professional Development, 2009c). I suggest that while there were some benefits from the strategies, the strategies themselves
indicated that the anxiety caused by NCLB was changing our beliefs how to work with challenging students.

MCAS results for the 2005 assessment showed improvement in mathematics for both tested grades—6 and 8, a larger number of students advanced to the proficient level and, for grade 6, a marked decrease in the number of warning/failing and needs improvement scores. Grade 8, however, showed an equal increase in the number of needs improvement scores and, over all, special education students did not reach the AYP target, resulting in the school’s advancement to the corrective action level, indicating what the state called “a persistent inability to make adequate progress toward all students becoming proficient in reading [and/or] mathematics” (AYP 2005 a). The school’s status continued to be noticed in the media, (“Southeastern students continue to fail to meet their NCLB goals”(Sun Chronicle, 2005), causing parents and staff members considerable consternation.

Being included at the Corrective Action (CA) level and having been identified as a Title I school required that Southeastern Middle School notify parents of their right to school choice and the school’s responsibility to provide Supplemental Educational Services (SES) (AYP 2005a,) Being in “Corrective Action” also required that we adopt “a new curriculum, grounded in scientifically-based research…[and] provide for all staff…appropriate, scientifically-based professional development” (AYP 2005a). We also had to consider extending our school time or replacing staff that were judged responsible for poor scores. The language of correction could have deflated our belief in Southeastern, but we knew that most of our students, even many who were not proficient on the MCAS were successful in our school. Student success was reflected in the fact
that more than half of the student population earned honor roll status each term, less than one percent of the students earned disciplinary referrals, and suspensions were rare. I made sure to point out these facts to staff and parents during meetings and through our weekly newsletter.

To arrange for SES, I contacted parents of low income students, giving them full descriptions of state-approved tutoring services that indicated they would provide services in our area. Only two out of the 67 qualifying families responded to the SES notification (AYP, 2005d). One responding parent completed the lengthy process of selecting and interviewing a provider, but decided not to enroll her child in the services because of limited time and location choices for after school help. The tutoring companies were out to make a profit and all the programs we looked at were not individualized. This was an example of the reality of NCLB’s effects in comparison to its original intentions! Despite the fact that no student received Supplementary School Services—no tutoring company would contract with us for such a small number of students-- and no parent opted for transferring their child to an out of district middle school, Southeastern had to set aside $57,000 out of the $107,000 available for Title I services to ensure that these options were available for the entire school year. Unused funds were then rolled back to the state! The reserved funds considerably reduced professional development funding and within school services for all students, causing the cancellation of our partnership with Bridgewater State University for 2005-2006.

To comply with the “corrective action” requirements, teachers created standards-based mid year assessments similar to the MCAS in structure and content. These Standards Mastery Assessments (SMA) were to be implemented in every core subject
area at every grade level. SMAs were to be given at the end of the school’s second quarter and, promoting student accountability, would count for a major portion of second quarter grades. The usual focus on MCAS during our professional development days limited what could be presented to support teachers in areas other than testing skills. I was frustrated that we could not use staff workshops to promote innovative ways to assist our students to explore their world and discover who they were as learners—two essential tasks at the middle school level (NASSP, 2008).

To increase the staff’s stake in our school, I began to include discussions to increase the decision-making power of teachers in most major school-wide decisions. This effort was strongest at the Faculty Senate, turning an informational meeting into an advisory group. The first staff-approved change involved a change in lunch structure that carried the middle school team concept into the cafetorium and changed student traffic patterns to and from lunch (Faculty Senate notes, October 2005). By reworking the lunch schedule, we also increased supervised study time, adding opportunities for math and reading remediation. While teachers and administration were supportive of the changes, many parents echoed this parent’s complaint:

it means there is NO time in the school day when friends can socialize if they are on different teams. I don’t think that is fair to the kids. The school is so large, friends can be an emotional safety net for each other.” (Hansen, email communication, 9/8/2005)

Again, the pressure of being in “AYP trouble” produced changes in our school culture. While having a team rather than grade level lunch schedule helped to reduce student discipline issues at lunch, continued focus on remediation made it seem to me and staff members like “Math, math, math is all that mattered!” (Interview Group C, p.8). Being
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obligated to pour so much attention on one subject area made me uncomfortable and yet, I was afraid to do any less.

Staff input also generated the establishment of a Peer Mentoring Program—staffed by high school student volunteers during the enhanced supervised study time in the middle of the day. Noticing a “slip” in MCAS ELA scores for special needs students, teachers suggested restructuring schedules to provide additional reading instruction time. I granted their request, but this meant that, for some students, the reading intervention reduced their access to related arts classes. Later in the year, working with the Special Education Department, I approved the expansion of our substantially separate programs so that local students attending out of district facilities were brought back to Southeastern—saving a substantial amount of money that could then go towards needed services. The only negative of this change, was that our special education population grew from 15 to 17 percent of the student population. Were our “new” students going to add to our AYP challenge? The concern was always there, having more special education students would mean stretching our scanty resources. Were the pressures of NCLB changing the way we thought and felt about students who learn differently? I felt that anxiety over AYP contributed to the temptation to “blame the victim” rather than the unfair system.

MCAS administration began in March in 2006, with a pilot ELA test for grades 6 and 8 since all grades were to be tested in both reading and mathematics beginning 2006-2007. Before the official MCAS, the staff was trained in new security measures for proctoring the state test and motivational posters were distributed throughout the school to remind students and staff that “Every Point Counts!” In many ways, the obsession with
MCAS scores was all encompassing, but the Faculty Senate assisted me in finding ways to support other initiatives. For instance, we worked through the Teacher Support Team to discuss how to reduce student retention and failures, by adopting an attitude of doing “whatever it takes” to assist students to succeed. (Faculty Senate Notes, September 2006). We continued to invite over 50 community members to conduct a all-day career fair—Heritage Day—that provided our students with ideas for their own future.

Community service spirit was endorsed by holding a fundraiser for the American Heart Association that involved 900 of our 1200 students. It seemed very unfair to all of us that our hard work to ensure the academic, social and emotional success of every student was not being reflected in the accountability process! But the school’s status continued to be noticed in the media, (“Southeastern students continue to fail to meet their NCLB goals”(Sun Chronicle, 2005), causing parents and staff members considerable consternation. Keeping staff morale positive was a constant challenge, met by planning fun events like a costume contest at Halloween and participating in teachers versus students competitions.

The 2006-2007 school year began with yet more disappointing news as the school continued in the “corrective action” category for mathematics despite the fact that the Special Needs subgroup met their AYP goals. MCAS analysis revealed that another subgroup, low income students had only reached a CPI of 60.3 instead of the required rise to 68.7. It was especially challenging to find ways to provide mathematics interventions for low income students because they could not be placed in separate programs. To ensure confidentiality, I held meetings with each academic team to identify
low income students with low MCAS scores and plan for additional assistance that did not single them out or violate their civil rights.

Parent concerns rose with the continued “corrective action” label. One disgruntled parent even contacted the Superintendent and the district’s School Committee to request my termination in accordance with NCLB suggestions. The Superintendent’s emailed answer included his judgment about NCLB work at Southeastern under my leadership:

…Please be advised that plans that Mrs. Ekk and her staff have implemented in response to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements have been successful. The school was identified for improvement when for two consecutive years children with special needs did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in mathematics. Mrs. Ekk revised instructional practices, hired additional staff and established small group math experiences for those children. In the following year, and again this year, that student sub group (193 children tested) did make AYP, confirmation that Mrs. Ekk has been successful…[T]his year, another student subgroup, low income children (117 children tested), did not make adequate yearly progress in math. Efforts are going to address that circumstance, but it is a different challenge, as low income children are not often grouped together in the same classes… Mrs. Ekk is taking appropriate steps to identify those children who need assistance and delivering it. NCLB requires that schools be identified for corrective action if any subgroup does not make AYP in one subject for four years, so that status has been given to the middle school. Mrs. Ekk’s response to that circumstance will include an investigation into curricular practices in mathematics…

Presently 319 MA schools have been identified for improvement, corrective action or restructuring, this related to progress of student subgroups. That number will grow dramatically each year, as the percentage of children who must be proficient increases every year (it’s comparable to climbing a mountain that gets steeper at the top.) No Child Left Behind will be reauthorized in 2008 and I suspect it will be different in its revised version.

Presently, we must work with the law as it exists. Our Principals, staff and students are working very hard to meet the expectations of our government. The same is true across our state, but you may note that our neighboring towns are facing the same challenges and consequences. I am confident that our Principals, including Mrs. Ekk, are doing the correct things, and I greatly appreciate their efforts. (Lindsay Communication, October 20, 2006, Superintendent reply).
While I felt vindicated by the Superintendent’s response, it was clear that some parents, who were supposed to be part of our educational team, did not necessarily believe that Southeastern was as high performing as the first part of our annual state report indicated. Did NCLB intend to feed parent distrust and hostility? Was this disgruntled parent merely reflecting a growing belief in the failure of our school system?

As part of the corrective actions for 2006-2007, I let parents know that I would investigate ways for “additional time and instruction in the areas of mathematics and English Language Arts for the targeted groups” (AYP, 2006b). I would also seek to make standards-based curricular changes that included new textbooks and resources, and ensure that all professional development for the year was focused on improving the instruction and assessment needs of every student. To balance the high stakes pressure, I also continued furthering Southeastern’s collaborative and decision-making work. With the help of staff members, we scheduled time for students to access peer tutoring and remedial reading instruction services during the lunch/study period. In our collegial collaboration teams, teachers worked to refine SMAs and to select new standards-based textbooks. However, while we were addressing AYP needs, I was concerned that student time for socialization and related arts was noticeably reduced, and that, in order to be ready for MCAS, we had introduced yet another major test, the SMA, to interrupt instructional time.

Due to the district’s reduced budget, curriculum coordinator positions were reduced, requiring principals to take on curriculum work. Under my leadership, the Southeastern staff worked in collaborative groups to share useful practices and utilize data from regular and SMA tests to guide instruction. At my urging, teachers volunteered
to form a Professional Development Committee, assisting me in the planning of all three staff development days, as well as the content of after school faculty meetings. As usual, Southeastern’s staff adapted to the changes imposed by the lack of district assistance. We found that an advantage of not having curriculum coordinators was that the staff and I had to create our own local knowledge bank. Was there a kind of relief in undertaking the tasks of analyzing student achievement and planning on our own? We seemed to find strength in working together and the focus on MCAS did not seem to be so obsessive under this new “on our own” arrangement.

The Special Education teachers did not stop to celebrate their students’ success at meeting AYP targets. To make sure that they became well versed in standards and strategies that assist students at learning more abstract mathematics I provided them with time to continue working with the mathematics department. Because I believed that teachers should have a voice in deciding what standards are reasonable for their work, they collaborated to design the lesson plan monitoring forms.

A strong commitment to the middle school teaming concept and whole school collaboration was present at every professional development workshop, and at all faculty, Senate and Professional Development Committee meetings. One discovery of our collaborative analysis of MCAS results was that students consistently showed difficulty in answering “Open Response” questions. These short answers required the students to explain in writing how they had solved a problem or followed a specific process. It was clear to me and to the Professional Development Committee, that improving student work on Open Response questions needed to be a new focus for MCAS-related staff development. Under my guidance, teachers collaborated during after school sessions to
develop a set of rubrics for Open Response questions. These rubrics were then used to score several whole school practice open response assessments using sample MCAS questions. The collaborative work was helping to build staff confidence in their power to solve problems, supporting them as professionals who were instructional experts in their chosen subject area.

Through collaborative work, we also revised the SMAs to reflect standards that needed to be strengthened and the staff decided on including the scores in third term grades to allow for more time to analyze results. Professional development discussions included the expansion of this common assessment concept for the following year. In addition to our own assessments and MCAS, the school was selected by the Commonwealth to participate in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. As was true with NAEP, the testing results were included within Massachusetts’ scores which were reported the following fall as among the top in the nation.

The 2007 MCAS was the first to have every grade level tested in both ELA and math. The testing time was split, scheduling ELA in March while math, 7th grade social studies and 8th grade science were tested in May. Reacting to the growing number of middle schools not making AYP required levels in mathematics, the Massachusetts DESE published a teaching document to provide schools with the “Characteristics of a Standards-Based Mathematics Classroom” (AYP, 2006c). While the staff’s assiduous preparation for open response questions provided plentiful practice, the pressure on special needs students was great enough that for the first time, one was caught trying to use a crib sheet during the math test! The incident was reported and the test was invalidated, but the trauma for the student and her teacher was demoralizing to the entire
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staff. Was putting more pressure on students with disabilities and those of low income families an acceptable way to assist them to become confident and competent learners? My belief was that the unreasonable pressure generated by high stakes testing was harming the very children NCLB intended to help. Children would not be tempted to cheat if testing was merely a way to know how much has been mastered and there were no negative consequences for those who had not yet reached mastery.

What was the effect of NCLB on special education and low income students during the first four years of AYP accountability? If the assumption is that high stakes testing is the only viable way to assess student achievement, the effect of NCLB on Southeastern subgroups was mixed. There was clear growth indicated by rising scores reflected on CPI growth from a baseline CPI of 36.8 in 2002 to 55.6 in 2006 for special education students and from 52.1 in 2002 to 60.3 CPI in 2006 for those in the low income category. But the growth was not considered sufficient, and the pressure on staff and students was growing. Positive programmatic changes were often overshadowed by negative media attention and we reduced teaching time as more practice tests interrupted the whole school’s schedule. Time for socialization and even related arts was reduced in favor of additional time in math and ELA. Accountability was clearly a focus for Southeastern teachers, administrators and students from 2003 through the spring of 2007. While I still believed that ours was generally a positive and academically strong school, I was very concerned that MCAS preparation and the actual testing days were curtailing the time we had to provide our with opportunities to develop their critical thinking skills.

The 2007-2008 year began, as all did, with news about the results of the previous spring’s MCAS scores. The all staff presentation introduced 7 new members of our staff
of 105, five of them replacements for retiring teachers. Notes on the second slide of the school opening’s Powerpoint presentation announced: “MCAS-AYP News! Good news—made our math targets! Made our SPED ELA target. Bad news—did not make school attendance requirement…91.9 % daily attendance—we are fighting!”

(Professional Development, 2007a). As described earlier in this chapter, the formula for determining whether a school met its AYP target includes the overall student attendance rates for the testing year. For the 2007 MCAS, the aggregate and all subgroup student populations had finally scored well enough, showed enough improvement and had perfect participation attendance. However, the low income students’ attendance rate for the year was 91.9, a tenth of a percent under the 92% required. That tenth of a percent difference caused our wish to celebrate the success of everyone’s efforts to be toned down considerably, since, after two years in “corrective action” we had been moved up to the “restructuring” category. Determined to fight for the school’s right to be proud of its achievement, I sought the help of district office personnel and discovered that an attendance monitoring policy that disregarded school collaboration with hospital and other out of district student services was responsible for the “missing” student numbers. Once the faulty policy was corrected, I explained the process to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and formally appealed to the Commissioner of Education. Eventually, the AYP formula was reworked to show Southeastern as having met all targets. That November, a letter from DESE indicated that AYP had been met and that, if met for a second year, would remove Southeastern from the failure rolls (AYP, 2007a).
The mood of celebration was palpable throughout the building all year long. Staff morale was high despite some district-required changes to our collaborative process. In the summer of 2007, under district sponsorship, the Southeastern administration team attended a Professional Learning Community (PLC) (Dufour et al, 2006) training. Beginning that fall, our informal collaborative subject area groups that achieved many of the changes that proved productive in meeting our academic challenges had to be formalized into PLCs reflecting a more restrictive model (Dufour et al, 2006). What had been informal, yet productive curriculum and instruction focused meetings now included the setting of “SMART—specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely—goals” (O’Neill & Conzemius, 2006, p. 296). I appreciated some of the teaching strategies learned at the conference, but I did not think that Southeastern’s staff, who was used to collaborating for a variety of purposes, needed to limit their work to analysis of assessments and student work. I left the conference conflicted, afraid that I would be required to institute a model I considered less useful because it seemed to treat teachers as objects to be molded into sameness.

All established reforms were continued, but for the first time, our Professional Development Committee, composed of teachers from every team and subject area, recommended and planned for workshops in areas the teachers themselves wanted (Professional Development, 2008 a, b). For instance, responding to staff requests, much of that year’s staff development was focused on refreshing teachers’ understanding of differentiated instruction. In addition, we utilized a portion of the last professional development day to showcase teachers’ own best practices. In response to new state and district requirements to reduce the number of special education referrals, I transformed
our Teacher Support Team meetings into Response to Intervention meetings. The total focus on MCAS, which had held us prisoners on a long rollercoaster ride, seemed to be lifted from us. We were sure that a second year of success on AYP was on the way.

**NCLB and AYP 2008-2011—The ‘Restructuring’ Years**

As Figure 11 shows, the AYP status celebration lasted only one year. By the end of August 2008, I had received the preliminary results that showed that special education students had once more fallen below their AYP targets in Mathematics and that low income students had failed to meet their ELA target for a second year. While our school was in “good company”—only 24% of Massachusetts’ middle school special needs subgroups made AYP in mathematics that year (AYP 2008g)—according to NCLB rules, Southeastern was placed in the “restructuring” category. The most stringent requirements under “restructuring” were the need to change school structure by “replacing all or most of the school staff who are relevant to the school’s inability to make adequate progress (this may include the principal)” (AYP 2008a). There was the option to invite a management company to take over the school, turn it into a charter school or turn its operation over to the Commonwealth (AYP 2008a). I and my entire staff were devastated to receive the bad news! It was a depressing way to start a new school year.

In response to the state’s requirements under restructuring, the Superintendent assured me, and Southeastern’s staff, that the school would not be changed, disbanded or its governance reformed. Instead, I was encouraged to work with the Director of Special Education to plan to change the school’s special education program, turning it into a full inclusion model. Full inclusion was a structural change requiring that all but the most severely disabled students were placed in general education classrooms (AYP 2008e).
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This structural change benefited special education students by receiving direct instruction in the core subjects from teachers who were experts in their subject area, reserving the special education teachers to provide assistance for difficult work as needed. While some special education students were already placed in general education classrooms, many often received instruction in the core content in a substantially separate class. Including all special education students in the regular classrooms meant that general education teachers would be responsible to teach students with a greater variety of cognitive levels. It was clear that the staff needed preparation to ensure successful implementation of the new structure.

Fig. 11. Southeastern’s AYP Status History 2008-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>ELA</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>AYP Status</th>
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<td>Aggregate</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Restructuring- Math subgroup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>Aggregate</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Restructuring- Math subgroup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>Aggregate</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Restructuring- Math subgroup</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special Education</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Needs Improvement- ELA subgroup</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While I believed in the concept of full inclusion, I was very uncomfortable implementing such a major change without first allowing the Southeastern staff to have a voice in the decision. Through the years, the Southeastern Faculty Senate and the School Council that included parents and teachers had become advisory groups that assisted me in making major decisions for the building. I believed this opportunity to give teachers and parents a voice in matters affecting the entire school was an important part of building a strong and positive school culture. Making a top-down directive that would
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affect every teacher and student in the building, without a great deal of preparation, was against what I considered as best administrative practice.

Before bringing the news to my staff, I worked with my Assistant Principal to figure out what was needed to begin this major change. We believed that teachers would need additional staff development on working with special education students, especially in understanding the types of accommodations typically needed to allow learning disabled students to access the curriculum. While the staff had been trained in differentiated instruction, they still struggled to present students with assignment and assessment options.

Under my direct leadership, the Professional Development Committee planned and implemented workshops essential to the upcoming changes. One of the teachers’ concerns had been the impossibility of finding enough time to teach and ensure that every student mastered all the state standards for their subject area during one school year. The curriculum was “wide”—too many standards—rather than “deep”—fewer standards taught for mastery and understanding. In response to this concern, I sent several teachers to a conference on “power standards,” those deemed essential for student success in the MCAS. Other teachers attended a conference on common assessments, a third group went to a conference on formative assessments, and two teachers attended a conference on how to improve Open Response question results (Professional Development 2008 a). The teachers who attended conferences understood they would return to provide workshops to the whole staff. Each of the three annual staff development days included presentations by one or more conference teams. In April of 2009, the Director of Special Education and I presented the staff with the news that we were going to fully include all
but a handful of special education students into the general education classrooms. The news was, received as well as could be expected. There were some concerns about students bringing down the achievement of general education classrooms, but the teachers were aware that NCLB restructuring rules required some major change to the school. I could sense anxiety and unease from the teaching ranks, but everyone understood the decision was not open to discussion, under the circumstances.

To allow staff more time to plan together for this major change, with the help of scheduling experts in the staff, I established a complex PLC schedule (AYP, 2008e) utilizing the lunch/study time for collaborative work. With the added time to meet, professional learning communities began to be part of the professional development of all teachers. In addition to the SMAs, which had been implemented in 2005, PLCs worked on developing, implementing and analyzing quarterly assessments. Yet again, much of our work had to do with assessments and preparation. News of much dissent about NCLB and rumors about changes to be brought about by a new Democratic administration fueled our hope that we would sometime be freed from our AYP prison.

The new school year, 2009-2010 brought no different news about AYP. As Figures 7, 8 and 10 show, special education students continued to struggle in mathematics and our restructuring status did not change. Each year that we concentrated on having the entire school analyze test results, we were going directly against my own vision of how to start a new school year. A whole staff analysis made the math department seem like the black sheep of the family and felt like a type of shaming. From 2010 on, we limited the analysis to the appropriate departments so that they would not have to answer to the whole staff and would have less anxiety in the process. Starting the
year in such an anxiety-ridden manner took away creating a positive school climate. I was always concerned that teachers would begin the year weighed down by MCAS news. How could they walk into their classrooms with a smile on their faces and hope in their hearts if they had already had their dreams deflated by negative news? This was especially clear in the fall of 2007 when we knew we had met all targets except for attendance. Having met all targets meant that we could celebrate, feel lighter and more ready to tackle a new year. Even the challenge of fixing the attendance issue was minor in comparison to having met all academic goals. If the goal of NCLB was to ensure that every child had the best possible education, how could that education happen in an atmosphere of fear and anxiety? How could we make students fall in love with learning when we were starting the year obsessed with how to make them answer Open Response questions or get just one more multiple choice answer right?

Full inclusion of special education students was now in its first full year. General education teachers indicated a need for additional training in working with special education students. With the help of the Assistant Superintendent, several teachers from the school district were sent to Florida to learn more about Differentiated Instruction. Two teachers from Southeastern were in the Florida team and their presentations during all three professional development days that year, were very well received by the staff (Professional Development 2009 a, b, c). Many teachers also expressed a need to learn more about learning disabilities, so the Director of Special Education and an outside staff development group, Teachers 21, became part of our professional development on special education inclusion that year. Everyone understood that “restructuring” required major change, so it seemed that, as had happened with previous NCLB-related changes, the
staff seemed to adapt quickly, choosing to work within the new conditions. I personally believed that full inclusion was appropriate and beneficial to the school and I was glad that teachers were embracing the change. Would we have made the decision to implement full inclusion without the pressure of restructuring? Perhaps, in time we would have, but it is a fact that we instituted this change to offset having to terminate staff or change the entire structure of our school and that staff eventually saw the change as having benefited the entire school (Interview Group B, p. 9).

PLCs continued to provide useful opportunities for collaborative work. Southeastern’s version of professional learning communities continued the practices we had established in previous collegial collaborative work and had more of an “organic” structure than the formal version we had been trained on. In an effort to find more time for collaboration, I worked with staff to expand our three-lunch/study session schedule to four sessions by moving the end of day Sustained Silent Reading “mini period” to the middle of the day. The added time provided teachers with 40 to 60 minutes of collaborative time every 6 days. The PLC schedule provided teachers with time to work on aligning their curriculum, ensuring that the educational program was equalized throughout the school. Academic Teams also had PLC time to discuss the academic progress of their assigned students and to plan interdisciplinary units.

MCAS preparation continued to guide nearly every curriculum and instruction decision as we faced rising CPI targets. As a staff, we were grateful to our Superintendent for supporting Southeastern’s governance, and strong teaming spirit. During Senate and PLC meetings, teachers made comments about the limitations and artificiality of focusing on “the test.” Teachers wanted freedom to help their students
enjoy learning mathematics, reading and writing. I wondered how much of student failure to score well on the test was due to the anxiety that seemed to take over the entire school at testing time.

A sort of “backlash” to the dourness surrounding MCAS testing arose during the year. Math teachers suggested, and with my agreement held a “Math Bootcamp” a few days before testing. The bootcamp, complete with costumes and school spirit colors, included setting up “fun” math stations in every classroom, integrating math and science, social studies, reading and art. Finding time to integrate learning across curricular areas, two teams requested permission to use Project Based Learning to involve their students in large community service projects. I gave permission for the projects to move forward in order to restore some of the middle school exploratory spirit. One project resulted in producing a highly praised vegetable garden for the local food pantry (Sun Chronicle, February 2010). The second project, a recycling program ended up involving the whole school. A third team requested to lead a project focused on reaching out to the troops in Afghanistan, collecting needed items and writing letters. A group of teachers volunteered to lead an Odyssey of the Mind after school program that combined problem solving and performance. I supported these and some smaller initiatives in order to involve students and staff in exciting cross-curricular work that encouraged leadership and critical thinking. None of these initiatives were found in any of NCLB’s regulations, but interdisciplinary projects were typical of a great middle school, something we truly believed in and that fueled our optimism and energy.

During the third restructuring school year, 2010-2011, we continued our efforts to support project based learning initiatives in an effort to resist the MCAS only mentality.
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In addition to the projects instituted the previous year, students and teachers created a schoolwide anti-bullying program, the Friends of Rachel Task Force. Student efforts in Friends of Rachel positively affected school culture. I launched an initiative to provide students and staff with opportunities to develop leadership qualities. We participated in the Massachusetts Governor’s Project 351 and in the states Stand Up initiative to promote a positive school environment. At the suggestion of a new Assistant Principal, I implemented a Principal’s Leadership Field Trip, taking students who had been nominated by their teachers as using leadership skills to help peers, staff and the school to venues where they could learn more about what being a leader is all about.

These initiatives were a type of fight against the “test only” school climate we had been subjected to since 2003. I wholeheartedly supported any idea that brought teachers and students a sense of agency and hope. This, in my mind, was what helped all students succeed! It was freeing for me to be able to foster the kind of teaching and collaboration that helped staff and students believe in their power and ability to lead, to learn and to grow in many different ways. While we had only been able to do some of these activities prior to 2009, a second year under “restructuring” found us not just surviving, but freeing ourselves from NCLB prison and making up for lost time.

Part of our ability to expand our vision beyond meeting AYP targets was related to changes that were happening in the world of education at large. A new administration had pledged to set aside the more punitive parts of NCLB and focus instead on student growth and the revamping of teacher evaluation systems. President Obama offered states the opportunity to earn a waiver from NCLB by qualifying for a competitive grant called “Race To The Top.” By then, in Massachusetts, the nation’s top scoring state for the
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NAEP, 82% of all public school districts were failing! NCLB was clearly “in trouble”. At Southeastern, we followed the news, wondering if and when Massachusetts would qualify so that we would be out of the “restructuring” frying pan. Returning to school from a monthly conference, one of my Assistant Principals brought an interesting bit of news. The Massachusetts DESE had released a “Raw to Scaled Score Conversion” chart showing how many questions a student had to answer correctly to be “proficient” on the MCAS. The chart revealed that for ELA, grades 3-8 and grade 10 were required to answer from 62 to 66 percent of the test questions correctly to reach 240—the scaled score indicating proficiency. The mathematics chart was different, however. For grades 3-8 students had to answer 70 percent of the questions correctly to reach the proficient scale score of 240. The grade 10 MCAS formula was different, however. Tenth graders only needed to answer 50 percent of the answers correctly to earn 240! Why were elementary and middle school students subjected to greater requirements for proficiency? This was one more example of what seemed to be a pre-set course for failure, especially for middle school where all three grades were tested and subgroups were more likely to be large enough to be counted. The difference in requirements angered me. I recalled the many times Southeastern had felt the shame of public derision over our failure to reduce the achievement gap for subgroups. The state had, one more time, shown that it could not be trusted to have our best interests in mind.

In January, 2011, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts announced that the state had joined the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). PARCC would be developing an assessment, to replace MCAS, based on a new set of frameworks, the Common Core State Standards. This was to be the beginning
of developing national standards and a national testing program—all states and all public schools following the same guidelines. I accompanied the Assistant Superintendent to a state-wide informational meeting, and a few weeks later, I sent a team of Southeastern’s teachers to gather information from a second meeting. Was this the sunrise in the horizon? Would this new system bring reasonable and reachable goals? Was this to be a new, positive perspective on teaching and learning?

During the corrective action and restructuring years, I had decided to increase class time by reducing passing time between classes. I also replaced foreign language with ELA and math-focused “advanced study” periods for our Special Education students, and I had changed the lunch/study structure to give more time for assisting students in through peer and adult tutoring. All these changes cut socialization time putting the focus on a more academically oriented outlook throughout the day. We also added more mathematics staff for remedial classes but had to reduce the number of related arts courses because the budget would not accommodate both. Looking for other opportunities to have more uninterrupted instructional time, I changed the Honors Breakfast, a one hour event celebrating students who earned high grades into shorter assemblies that disappeared altogether by 2012. The result was that students lost both social and hands-on task time. While the changes seemed to raise the academic tone of the school, what happened to students who needed more time to explore their world, build peer relationships and find some time to enjoy self-selected tasks? My perspective is that middle school brains need time to build, explore, discuss and enjoy learning. By curtailing these activities I went against my own belief that many of the hands-on courses were exemplary opportunities for applied literacy and mathematics and that time for
socialization is also part of the mission of a great middle school. Is there such a thing as wasted time when it comes to allowing students to celebrate their accomplishments?

**RTTT 2011-2013— New Mandate, Same Rollercoaster**

In February of 2012, Massachusetts announced that the state’s application for RTTT had been accepted and that we had earned an NCLB waiver. The Commonwealth described the reason why it had applied for a waiver:

> At one time NCLB provided useful feedback on district and school performance—particularly through its focus on disaggregating data for student groups. However the rising number of districts and school judged inadequate under NCLB, both in Massachusetts and across the nation, led the US Department of Education (ED) in September 2011 to invite states to seek flexibility from specific requirements of NCLB. In exchange for this flexibility, states must propose 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 (RTTT 2012a).

To qualify for the competitive RTTT grant and the waiver from NCLB, Massachusetts agreed to transition to the Common Core State Standards and the aligned PARCC assessments, establish a new educator evaluation system, ensure that all students in grades 3-8 and high school grades 9, 10 and 11 were tested in ELA, mathematics and science with the results publicly reported and promote programs for extended school day or school year.

Some accountability changes as a result of the transfer to RTTT included schools reducing the proficiency gap of subgroups by half by 2016. That meant that half of our special needs students needed to reach the same CPI as the aggregate group. Subgroups would remain, but there would be a new “high needs” subgroup comprised of all subgroup categories so that there would not be any students who would not be “counted.”
For instance, under NCLB, Southeastern did not have enough ELLs to make a subgroup, but under RTTT, our few ELLs fit under the “High Needs” category. The number of students required to make a subgroup was lowered from 40 under NCLB to 30 under RTTT. Instead of “needs improvement”, “corrective action” and “restructuring”, districts were to be labeled across 5 levels. Level 1 was the label for schools on target to reduce proficiency gaps, while Level 5 was the label for schools being considered for state takeover (RTTT, 2012a). The computations to determine these levels included a measure of student growth, which in Massachusetts is not a true individual growth measure since it “compares changes in a student’s MCAS scores to changes in MCAS scores of other students with similar achievement profiles” (RTTT, 2012a). The fact that we were still not measuring individual growth but comparing how a student grew in comparison to others is reflective of the competitive model, which permeates RTTT.

Under RTTT the state changed the algebraic formula to determine whether a school was making sufficient progress. A Progress and Performance Index (PPI) replaced the CPI used under NCLB. According to the Massachusetts DESE, the RTTT waiver allowed the state to “implement an honest accountability and support system that requires real change in the lowest performing schools, allows for locally-tailored solutions based on school needs, and recognizes schools for success” (RTTT 2012a).

Under the RTTT accountability system’s new PPI formula, Southeastern’s school report card for 2011-2012 indicated that the school was a Level 2—“Not meeting gap narrowing goals”(RTTT 2011a). While the aggregate population was “on target” for ELA at a CPI of 94.4, earning a Performance and Progress Index of 75, the special education subgroup’s CPI had declined from 78.6 to 75.6 and had a PPI of 0. In
mathematics, however, all groups were termed “above target.” Although students with
special needs had earned a 77.4 CPI while the aggregate was at 88.2, the subgroup
showed adequate growth, earning a PPI of 100. It was clear that while ELA had
previously enjoyed the reputation of being close to 100 CPI and considered “very high
performing,” the expectation was now that the gap between the aggregate and subgroups
was not being reduced fast enough (RTTT 2012a). Mathematics, however, was now our
new “golden subject” because enough high needs students were moving towards
proficiency! We were not off the rollercoaster, we had simply turned a corner and were
now going down a different section of the same course.

In addition to the new accountability system, the staff was introduced to a new
evaluation system that required teachers to collect evidence about meeting four standards
related to curriculum and instruction, student engagement, parent and community
involvement and professional culture. Each of the standards had a myriad of sub-
elements for which teachers and administrators were to collect evidence. Multiple
unannounced observations and a goal-setting structure were also added to the new
program of evaluation. The system made the termination of poor teachers less
cumbersome, but it also required that evaluation include rating the teacher’s ability to
raise student achievement through state or district selected assessments. Parents were to
have input in teacher evaluations through surveys and other evidence.

Gradually, it became clear that RTTT’s reliance on accountability through
assessment was not any less than NCLB’s, it was likely to be even more onerous! While
the punitive elements of NCLB were focused on the entire school, RTTT was aiming
directly at individual educators. The amount of pressure on educators rose exponentially.
Teachers and administrators were still responsible to reduce the achievement gap, no matter what factors may be in a student’s way. But we were now also responsible for collecting evidence of meeting standards and goals, must prove numerically that we added value to each student’s learning, and that parents and students believed we do our jobs well. This clearly shows, as Ball indicates, “the restructuring and re-valuing (or ethical retooling) of the public sector [through] the discourses of excellence, effectiveness and quality and the logics and culture of new managerialism in which they are embedded” (p. 10). Education is being forced into becoming just another business and RTTT is clearly the next step to transformation.

The fall of 2013-2014 brought similar news about our status under RTTT. We continued to be a Level 2 school, and ELA was the weak area. As we planned for the transition to the new Common Core State Standards, PARCC, the new and very complex educator evaluation system, and a new set of assessments called District Determined Measures, we wondered if we had truly been “saved” from NCLB. RTTT’s “saving” of Massachusetts’ schools from the negative effects of NCLB came at a price: the strengthening of the accountability system and the notion of education reflecting market values.

Southeastern’s journey from NCLB through RTTT illustrates what is happening to American public education. While the market force effects of federal mandates are nearly explosive and well documented for urban schools, the changes enacted at Southeastern and most likely other “good” schools are more subtle, but perhaps equally strong. The high performing middle school in this study changed programs and structures to meet the requirements of NCLB. But far more than schedules and courses
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changed at Southeastern. Despite our efforts, our school culture suffered through periods of high anxiety, despair over the seeming callousness of a testing system that did not take student differences and needs into account, and unrecognized changes in our own perceptions about our needier students and our work.

In the next chapter, the voices of Southeastern’s stakeholders: teachers and other staff members, parents and the principal, speak about their views of what happened at Southeastern under NCLB and RTTT. The important voices of our “good” educators need to be heard. The voices often confirm many of the arguments in this chapter. They tell us how the changes made in response to government requirements affected the teachers, students, their parents and the administrators of a typical American public school. While much of this chapter and the next reflect on the more negative outcomes of the high stakes testing environment, there are also voices of hope and resistance that need to be heard as well.

Writing about the UK, but referring as well to the nature of education in other western nations, Ball (2004) warned:

In general terms there is an increase in the technical elements of teachers’ work and a reduction in the professional… [T]he establishment of measurements, hierarchy and regulation … begins with the testing of students, but raises the possibility of monitoring the performance of teachers and schools and making comparisons between them. There is also the possibility of linking these comparisons to appraisal and to performance-related pay awards… what Lyotard (1984) calls the “legitimation of education through performativity” (p. 49-50)

RTTT’s guidance seems to treat teachers as if they are merely workers in a 21st century company that is not earning enough profit. Teachers at Southeastern are aware that the waiver did not end our ride on the rollercoaster and they have voiced concerns and anxiety about what is coming next. But the journey we undertook through the past decade
and the lessons learned through this study have not gone unheeded. Apple (2003) explains the importance of our new knowledge: “If our task is understanding both how domination works and the possibilities of interrupting it, then one of the things we can do is learn from each other, to combine our critical efforts (p. 24).”
Chapter 6

The Context of Practice: Providing Multiple Perspectives

Journal, November 2011

I am seeking parents for the interviews and it’s not easy to find parents who have the time or inclination to be interviewed, even though so many have spoken to me about NCLB. None of the parents want to meet together and talk about this in a group, which is a very interesting point. They would rather be interviewed singly. Last week I had parents sit down in my office and ask, “What are you going to do to help my child pass MCAS?” He’s a Special Ed child and he’s been doing very poorly on the test. The parents looked angry and tense and I thought to myself, how am I going to deal with this? I ended up asking them a lot of questions about what they thought was going on with their child. It all came down to their fear that he wasn’t going to graduate. They are just afraid and they don’t know that the game changes when you get to high school. I explained what we’re doing to help special education students and then showed them how the requirement of how many questions you have to pass to get to the proficient mark goes down when they take the test as sophomores. I showed them the chart and the schedule of test retakes and MCAS remediation classes at the high school. They looked less anxious, but the mother said, “I am not going to tell him that stuff about the lower requirements. That would not be good. I’ll tell him I expect him to try harder.” From hostility to understanding! These parents simply don’t know enough about the system, just what they read in the media and the school report card. Ignorance is certainly not bliss here, it’s plain anxiety!

Reflection—December 2013

This journal entry reflects the type of anxiety that became more and more evident as the years under NCLB brought the school under closer scrutiny. These parents were understandably worried about their children’s ability to pass the MCAS in order to graduate. For this eighth grade student, the high school MCAS requiring a “pass” in order to be able to walk across the stage with a diploma loomed close, just two years away! His parents knew that although he had been taking the test since third grade, he had not yet reached the proficient level. Somehow, they thought it was their duty to bring some pressure to bear upon the school. We must DO something! I found that much of their anxiety was due to their inability to understand how the system worked. Explaining what could be done was not difficult, but getting them to the point where they could listen was difficult!
Teachers, their schools and the administrators who lead those schools have been the center of radical reforms in public education over the last decade. One might think that teachers and administrators would be consulted about these changes and that their perceptions would inform proposed improvements of the system, but as I have shown in the previous chapters, federal education policy has been a top-down, directive process in which teachers and principals have had no voice. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) reminded us that

NCLB makes it clear that teachers are expected to play the primary role in improving student achievement. NCLB’s assumptions about the nature of teacher’s work and its significance are tied directly to testing, accountability and scientifically based research as the key to improving the quality of what teachers do… NCLB constructs an image of teachers that links their verbal and cognitive abilities directly to student outcomes (p. 69).

However, even though changes at the federal and state level assume that educators are essential to the improvement of student achievement, teachers’ and administrators’ power to influence how achievement is defined and measured has been reduced greatly over the past decade. As Ball (1994) noted about the U.K. context, the “changing matrix of power within which schools are set…has [had] far-reaching implications for the redefinition of teachers’ work” (p. 51). In a practitioner research study of the effects of state mandates on a teacher education program, Kornfeld et al (2007) warned that “no one should assume he or she is immune to the effects of top-down standardization” (p. 1903). Did top-down standardization as brought about by NCLB and RTTT affect the beliefs of Southeastern’s stakeholders, not just the school’s programs?

Chapter 5 focused on programmatic and structural changes carried out at Southeastern in response to federal and state mandates. This chapter looks closely at the direct effects of these changes on teachers, parents, students and myself as the school’s
principal. How did the changes instituted by powerful federal and state mandates affect Southeastern’s teachers, parents, and administration? How did mandated changes affect teacher and administrator perspectives about education and the teaching profession? Did these changes affect only what we did to comply with NCLB and RTTT requirements, or did they also change who we are as educators, our beliefs and values, and how we think about what is good education? Did we simply do what was needed to comply with regulations, or did we ourselves change in the process? Did teachers, parents and I have similar or different views about how these federal mandates affected the school?

In this chapter, I include the voices and perspectives of teachers and parents accessed through a series of interviews I conducted during 2012. I also draw on my practitioner’s journal begun in 2009 and continued until 2013 and notes from a variety of school meetings from 2003 through 2013. I believe these perspectives and voices are essential to flesh out the many changes experienced at Southeastern from 2003 through 2013. It is important to emphasize here how important these voices are. These are the voices of stakeholders in a high performing school that struggled to respond to NCLB and RTTT over the period of an entire decade. These insider voices have seldom been heard in the research literature about federal education policy.

The interviews I conducted were semi-structured, beginning with questions about what had happened over time to special education and low income students and to their teachers at Southeastern from 2003 through 2013, as a result of changes enacted in response to mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Race To the Top initiative. As is typical of semi-structured interviews, participants were invited to expand their answers and pose additional questions related to the study’s focus. To minimize anxiety
and discomfort, teachers and parents had a choice to be interviewed individually or in a group. A total of 26 staff members and 10 parents participated in one or two hour-long interviews, held outside of school hours. Interestingly, almost all of the teachers chose group interviews, while all parents chose to be interviewed individually. It made sense that teachers chose to continue working in a collaborative group similar to their PLCs, but parents may have been uncomfortable working in a group with people they did not necessarily know well. Teacher group interviews were held between February and May 2012, while individual interviews with staff and parents were conducted between May and July 2012.

By definition, group interviews provide participants with an opportunity to exchange opinions and ideas and to build on one another’s ideas. In this chapter, I use some rather lengthy interview excerpts to provide a vivid sense of teachers’ experiences and viewpoints. I present excerpts from these interviews in a format that is similar to that of a play script style for clarity and to preserve the conversational tone. A list of the interview dates and number of participants and their pseudonyms is included in Appendix B.

To highlight for interviewees the changes that had been enacted at Southeastern over a ten year period, I created a poster showing the school’s AYP status from 2003 until 2012 and a chronological chart indicating the changes that had taken place at Southeastern during the same time period. Interview participants reviewed the chart at the beginning of the interviews, and then we referred to the chart throughout the interview sessions. Interviews were reviewed and coded immediately after each session was professionally transcribed, which assisted in the discovery of themes and often led to
additional questions to use in subsequent interview sessions in order to confirm or refute alternative arguments and explanations.

This chapter continues my analysis of the context of practice (Ball 1990b), which I began in the previous chapter. The emphasis here is on the experiences and perceptions of teachers, parents, students and myself as the school principal. Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) argue that “[f]or many practitioners their response to texts will be conducted on the basis of ‘interpretations of interpretations’ (p.23). They add,

[t]he policy process is one of complexity, it is one of policy-making and remaking. It is often difficult, if not impossible to control or predict the effects of policy, or indeed be clear about what those effects are, what they mean when they happen. Clearly however, interpretations are not infinite, clearly also… different material consequences derive from different interpretations in action (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992, p. 23).

With these interviews, I wanted to try to get at how the Southeastern staff interpreted the changes imposed on our school by federal and state mandates as well as the changes we constructed in order to comply with the mandates. I wanted to understand the nature of the effects of these changes on staff, parents, their children and the school culture. Did NCLB and RTTT bring about positive or negative effects as perceived by the school staff, parents and myself as the head administrator?

One indisputable overall finding from my analysis of the data included in Chapters 5 and 6 is that the effects of NCLB and RTTT were complex and far reaching. No aspect of the school was left untouched by the mandates. Ball (2004) suggested that

The general effects of policies become evident when specific aspects of change and specific sets of responses (within practice) are related together…[T]he general effects of ensembles of policies of different kinds may be of considerable significance in terms of their effects for social justice. I would suggest that in the UK at least (probably also the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) the cumulative and general effects of several years of multiple thrusts of educational reform on teachers’ work have been profound…encompass[ing] a variety of
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separate reforms related to curriculum, assessment, performativity, organization, pay and conditions… (p. 50)

The programmatic changes described in the previous chapter included changes in curriculum, assessment, and teacher performance requirements. In this chapter, interviewees’ responses revealed their perceptions as stakeholders of what happened to Southeastern as a result of the mandates. Overall, teachers, parents and my own views indicated that no aspect of the school was left untouched by the mandates. Clearly, there were many negative effects on the school’s structure and culture, and although some positive changes were made, they were not necessarily a direct result of the mandates. Rather they were attempts to counteract the law’s impact on our school culture.

Three major themes that arose from a detailed analysis of the interviews, my practitioner journal, and field notes are reflected in three chapter subdivisions. First, teacher, parent and I, as principal perceived many aspects of NCLB and RTTT as unrealistic, unfair or unreasonable. Teachers and parents pointed out that a variety of non-school related factors were involved in student success in the tests, but these factors were not considered by the generators of educational policy. Stakeholders also pointed out that NCLB caused a type of narrowing of the curriculum exemplified by a limited budget that provided for additional mathematics teachers, but not for the maintenance or reinstatement of related arts classes that provided opportunities for hands-on learning, and by the replacement of foreign language classes with additional time on mathematics and ELA for special education students. Along these lines, teachers also complained about the loss of status for non-MCAS tested subjects. A second theme revolved around signs of a “test-oriented” school culture, which generated an overall sense of anxiety for parents who worried about their children’s scores and future graduation from high school.
Teachers were also anxious about test scores, new standards and the new evaluation system. The third theme in the interviews had to do with changes that staff, teachers and support personnel, perceived as positive for students and the school, such as the Alternate Group and Small Group Opportunity mathematics classes (described in Chapter 5), benefits to teachers who gained opportunities for collaboration and the hope that the school could concentrate more on critical thinking skills as a result of the Common Core State Standards.

**Perceived Negative Effects: Unrealistic, Unfair and Unreasonable**

A major theme of the interview sessions with both teachers and parents was that the NCLB mandates were considered unrealistic and unfair and that demands for reform were unreasonable for our school population. Interviews began with all participants spending a few minutes reviewing the AYP data and timeline chart, depicting the changes made at Southeastern for the period of the study.

In general, teachers agreed that having standards as a framework for grade level learning was a good way to guide their work, but there was universal concern about MCAS and its constantly changing standards. One staff member, Dion, echoed her colleagues when she said, “I think expecting, let’s have high goals, high standards, that’s wonderful, but expecting the amount of achievement, and for it to be increasing every year, I don’t think that’s realistic, it’s not realistic. It’s never going to happen! (Dion Interview, p. 8). Another teacher also argued that the very high requirements were impossible to reach: “The problem is like, I have a friend who teaches in Lawton. They’re trying to make a 60% goal and failing. We’re at like 90% of our goal, something like that…. I feel like the 10% of students who struggle in the general education
environment … just cannot understand whatever it is you’re teaching. So part of it is, is it even a realistic goal and have you reached the top edge of what is possible?” (Group Interview A, p.5) At another group interview a teacher remarked,

First of all, you cannot get a hundred percent of people to agree on anything. There’s always going to be a couple of stragglers. To have one hundred percent of the kids be proficient in something, right off the get go I think is unrealistic. They set right off the bat unrealistic goals. I think George Bush probably had every good intention because there had to be some horrible, horrible schools in this country that were so bad that something needed to be done. So I think he had good intentions, but you know what they say, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions (King, Interview Group B, p. 7).

Another teacher voiced her concern: “I just read an article this week and it said, in what other profession do you have to be perfect by a certain year? … There are no expectations for everybody else to be perfect. Why do they do this? “ (Kunn, Group Interview A p. 6)

Adler, an active parent at Southeastern remarked,

That’s not really doable. … One hundred percent to me is asking for perfection. Of course you strive for perfection but you never know what you are going to get with children. Children, they’re all so different. You never know what you are going to get every year, but you can put plans in place to help that. I just don’t see that 100 percent being really true to a plan because you are dealing with so many different children all the time. You’re juggling different behaviors and different needs and all those areas for ELA and … math. The only thing to do is keep on improving and look back to see what happened there that year. Maybe change a tactic to figure out how to bring it up (Adler Interview, p. 2).

As these excerpts indicate, it was clear that teachers and parents considered the requirement to have every child reach grade level proficiency by a specific date to be unrealistic and unreasonable. NCLB’S directive to meet an unreachable goal caused stakeholders, including myself, to doubt the law’s research base and to wonder about its true intent. Was the law really intending to assist schools to improve? My suspicion was that these mandates were a false front to a darker purpose, the destruction of the public school system.
Parents and teachers voiced particular concerns about the effects of high stakes testing on special education, low income and language minority students. For example, parents, Mr. and Mrs. Stern made an appointment in April of 2012, to let me know they were not MCAS supporters and had told their special education child that the MCAS scores did not matter. The mother was concerned about an annual all-day math review event, which we called “Math Bootcamp.” Mrs. Stern let me know that she did not want her child to be anxious about the math MCAS, and requested that I cancel the event for the following year. Despite its somewhat intimidating label, Math Bootcamp had been created by our math department in 2010 as a way for the students to have fun and play at math stations connected to real life experience and every subject area. On that day, many students and teachers dressed up in school spirit colors or costumes with the intent to make math exploration enjoyable rather than a typical “drill and kill” mathematics review. I explained to Mr. and Mrs. Stern the purpose, structure and spirit of the event, created by our teachers specifically to combat test anxiety, and I was able to calm their fears. The Sterns left my office knowing that their child would have a choice not to participate if he felt uneasy. I didn’t blame parents for their concern about their son who did not seem to be ready to tackle pre-algebra.

In another parent interview, another parent of a student with special needs voiced his concern about the inability of having adequate test accommodations, and that his child would have to spend several mornings immersed in a paper and pencil activity, a nearly impossible task for children with Attention Deficit Disorder (Dernier Interview, June 2012). During one of the group interview sessions, teachers shared similar thoughts about the effects of MCAS on their special education students.
White: Right. We have kids we do everything we can to help them on a daily basis in Special Ed. We give them all the accommodations, so they can make it and be successful and then the MCAS comes and it drives me crazy. We see it. They aren't going to get it. If they could use the accommodations we give them every single day, they could do it. If we could read to them, explain it to them, show them the correct way. We can't talk to them, we can't read to them unless they can't read “A Cat Sat on a Mat”. Most kids can read simple things, but they can't understand the directions. You can read some but you can't explain it so they can understand it. You can't let them do things and act it out. If I said, “Here's a block on that picture, build that and tell me about it,” they could do that. We have no manipulatives they can use for the test. We can't use any of the accommodations we teach them to use to be successful. The ones they'll actually need in the real world. So we're saying here's how we're going to teach you all year and then when you take this one test, it's done. All bets are off.”

Clark: It has gotten worse. … They used to give you accommodations, but they've taken those away too.

White: I know a poor girl right now that’s going to take MCAS and I have to read everything to her and I can't read the (MCAS) reading instructions to her. I can't read her anything.…

Clark: Because they think you’re cheating.

Babcock: But with the English Language Learners you can’t read the directions either.

Glynn: I know. We have a student that can actually do all the math, only if I interpret the question for him, though and he’s an A+ math student. … He cannot use any ELL accommodations …He’s amazing. He could pass the test if someone would just translate the test.

Babcock: And yet the same federal government passed laws that you have to accommodate, because it’s not cheating, it’s leveling the playing field. But now it has said, “Except on this test.” (Interview Group A p.7-8).

In another group interview, a teacher commented on the unfairness of the constantly rising targets “It’s hard for me as an educator who cares about my kids to watch them be
told they are not making yearly progress when they really are compared to the previous year’s group of kids” (Interview Group B p. 6).

This interchange reflected a common theme in many of the interviews: teachers worried about students who think and learn differently being forced to take a test without the accommodations ensured by their Individual Education Plans or, in the case of an English Language Learner, their civil rights. These educators advocate for their students, judging that NCLB’s demands placed them at a disadvantage, ignoring their immediate individual needs and their particular stage of educational development.

State regulations and directives were singled out as unfair to the school, the teachers and the students. Teachers’ remarks and my own reflections highlighted what seemed to be the government’s distrust of educators. For instance, an aura of secrecy surrounded MCAS. We never knew which standards would be assessed each year, since the test changed annually. Speaking about the inability of teachers to have a voice in what the test contained or how the questions were formed, Jones complained that,

Teachers never had an input in what went into MCAS. Teachers did have an input into what went into the MEPA (the Massachusetts English-language Proficiency Assessment). Loved that for setting standards for MEPA … [but] MCAS nothing, never, ever. They just make the test… The subgroups are so important that they pass, but yet no one has ever asked from the educators of these subgroups for their input on how to put the test together. The PARCC coming up too, isn’t it supposed to be secret? Those teachers that were invited to look at it can’t speak to anyone about it! (Jones Interview, pg. 8).

Another staff member proposed,

I think the concept of No Child Left Behind is wonderful. I think if an educator had put this plan together, it would have looked very different from the start… The concept of testing and checking our kids’ progress to see where we are, and people are … learning appropriately… isn’t an odd concept…. But I think, if feels to me like it’s almost more. We are on the lookout to see what is not happening and what is not being done versus what is being achieved and what you are being successful in. It feels so much more of “We’re going to look for the bad and even
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if it’s that tiny, tiny percentage of not making it, you’re going to be penalized for that.” Why aren’t we focusing on the significant number of kids that are doing well and are making it? I feel … it’s looking for the negative and it feels so much more punitive than rewarding. At least from my perspective, that’s what I see” (Dion Interview, p. 8).

One teacher wondered, “It just baffles me that our state isn’t protecting us as educators for them, and our students also, and reevaluating the system. (Interview Session B, p. 12).

It was obvious to me that teachers were disconcerted by the secrecy and by demands that seemed to focus only on the negative. It seemed that Southeastern’s staff believed that the state was setting public education up as a target rather than supporting it. I often worried about this: How can education professionals who are treated in a hostile and condescending manner, maintain a positive attitude and focus? How can a system that is continuously exposed to punitive measures rise up to save our nation’s global competitiveness?

Disconcerting information about elements of the Commonwealth’s AYP status formula began to surface in 2010. Up to this time, I assumed that the same expectations applied to all CPI calculations, earning a passing score on the MCAS ELA and mathematics test. The truth was revealed at an administrators’ meeting. In my journal entry of March 2010, I showed my amazement at the different proficiency score formulas for the high school level.

Here’s the story. There’s this little chart that tells us that to get proficient—a raw score of 240—takes getting 70% of your questions right at middle school, but it only requires that high school students get 50% of the questions right! That bit of information was just brought out at a meeting of principals in Farrington. A middle school principal pointed it out, probably because middle school results are so poor throughout the state that there is talk about moving to K-8 schools. Middle school principals all over Massachusetts are fried! Most middle schools have not made AYP in forever! So why us? What are we not doing right? Then it came out that there’s a different formula for deciding what’s proficient in middle school from high school. Well, we can all
figure out why that is! They don’t want to have hundreds of thousands of kids not graduate from high school, so that makes sense. Years ago, our math curriculum coordinator, told us that the seventh and eighth grade tests were much harder in comparison to the tenth grade test. That there wasn’t a great deal of difference between an 8th grade math MCAS and a 10th grade math MCAS. So basically, what you’re doing is you’re prepping the kids at middle school for that tenth grade test and so by the time they get to it, the vast majority of kids are fine. We’ve done enough drill and kill and everything else we do to get them there. And then the high school even has an MCAS remediation class and kids can retake the test over and over until they pass it. The key is that the public is not aware of how the system works. All they see is that some kids at the middle school aren’t making it and that the school is labeled in restructuring! (Journal, March 2010)

It is possible that the “Raw Score To Standard Scale” chart this journal entry is describing had been previously published, but it certainly had not been brought to our attention at the annual MCAS preparation meetings principals were required to attend. I had suspected all along that there was more to the story of middle school students who had not passed the math MCAS since third grade, miraculously becoming proficient in 10th grade. The chart made the success of nearly every student at the high school level much more understandable, and reinforced my belief that Southeastern was working at maximum capacity to meet an impossible goal. It made me angry that our school had had to withstand the derision of our high school colleagues, who believed that they were able to “redeem” students who had previously “failed” the high stakes test. It made me even angrier that some parents and the media assumed that our school was not working hard enough to get our subgroups to proficiency. And all of this for testing requirements that I didn’t believe in in the first place.

Another “unfair” element of the NCLB was the fact that federal monies to fund reforms were basically nonexistent for our school and school district. During one of the
group interviews, teachers addressed our “bare bones” budget challenges, pointing out how the lack or reduction of funding made it difficult to serve the needs of students:

Brent: There are a lot of components here. *No Child Left Behind* should give us what we need to succeed and they haven’t come through as far as I can tell. Every year they take things away.

Frick: I think SGO is a nice concept, but our classes are too large. They are not getting the one on one time. We don’t have the support. Every year they take support away from us. So it becomes a very tedious job to have 20 students in front of you with all kinds of needs.

Smith: Next year there might be three algebras. You can’t tell until you have the kids in front of you. I think with budget cuts, the SGO program is probably not as good as it used to be because we’re tighter on the paraprofessional and special education help and the intent was to have extra adults to help the kids, and they’re just not able to be there. We used to have a regular teacher, a special education teacher and a para. All three of us in every single class.

Banon: It’s true, they don’t give us the money and want us to do miracles but don’t give us anything to do it with.

Chalmers: 2006 is when *Alternate Group Opportunity* started. That is when the budget was higher, and look at what we did. We actually made it that year! You could say it was a direct relationship.

Banon: Not just the budget for teachers, we had curriculum directors here. There were other people here that were supporting and keeping everything connected at that point.

Bead: The Title I money to help the low income kids was not worth what they said it was. The only thing it helped us do, I think, is that we hired our second AGO teacher on that, and then the district went ahead and kept on paying that person until budget cuts made us lose the position. (Interview Group A pp.3-4,11).

We created the Alternate Group Opportunity mathematics classes in 2006 as an additional remediation program for students with the lowest MCAS scores. Over two thirds of the AGO students were on an Individual Education Plan. To provide AGO, I hired two additional mathematics teachers, two paraprofessionals and scheduled at least
one special education professional to assist each class of up to 15 students. The teachers were supportive of the program, but they were aware that imminent budget cuts made the AGO positions vulnerable, as they had the least seniority in the building.

Always looking for additional funding, I was hoping that RTTT, which was a grant funded initiative, would assist Southeastern’s budget so that we could address individual student needs with some extended time programs. In my journal entry for February 2013 I noted what actually happened:

In Massachusetts there are now 5 different RTTT levels. Levels 4 and 5 are ready for state take over. Level 3 gets some state help because they’re on the cusp of being in serious trouble. Level 2 schools have some groups that are progressing but not to the degree the state wants them to progress. Level 1 schools are on target to reduce their proficiency gaps by half. We’re a level 2 school and they leave us alone. The vast majority of schools in Massachusetts are at level 2 because of Special Ed or what they now call “High Needs” students—a mix of ELLs, Special Needs, low income whatever is more than one category. We don’t get any financial help to fix the problem. We’re on our own to figure it out and fund the remediation. We don’t get any resources. You have to be in a “Gateway” city—where there are a lot of immigrants to get funding. So I have to figure it out on our present budget, which is always in danger of cuts! I could lose 11 teachers for next year! How am I supposed to do this!

What we did receive as an RTTT district was some funding for professional development, nothing for programmatic support! This was typical of what we saw as an “unfunded mandate”. The government was willing to provide money for staff development, as if educators had no other needs than to be trained to produce better students, rather than to provide schools with the wherewithal to provide more individualized student assistance. This type of tactic reflects what Ball (2004) calls “unreflexive, ‘blame-based’ tactics of policy-makers wherein policies are always solutions and never part of the problem. The problem is ‘in’ the school or ‘in’ the teacher but never ‘in’ policies (p. 16).
Characteristic of the optimistic bent of our staff, teachers discussed the positive side of budget cuts:

Chandler: But you know, in a sense the budget problems will make the district go more to local knowledge because there is no money to hire an (educational consultant) Alan November anymore and so you have to tap into the local knowledge if you want to grow.

Clark: (Smiling) I think part of the data should be also how well the kids are doing versus the budget situation… If I worked in a private business and I demonstrated that we’re maintaining sales having half the sales force, I’d be manager of the year! … We’re doing more with less every year!” (Interview Group C, p. 19)

This interchange is an example of the staff’s “never say die” attitude towards any challenge. It was not unusual for us to complain about the injustice of having to do without all the resources needed, but then move on to work together to address the inequities the best way possible. I attribute part of this to the advantage of being a team-oriented middle school, where collaboration was “the way we do things around here,” problem solving together. Collaboration provided us with a way out of despair. As Ball (2004) states, “… despair need not be the end of things, indeed it may be a necessary stage towards something else, something beyond despair, something that is not just redemptive but properly radical… a version of Gramsci’s ‘pessimism of the intellect/optimism of the will’” (p.5).

At our annual MCAS analysis meetings, the Southeastern staff often labored over the fact that 7th grade students’ scores seemed to be consistently lower than their 6th grade results. Were we missing some key curricular element or teaching strategy? We were worried about our students losing heart as they saw their achievement drop. Were the expectations for grade 7 unreasonable? The answer to that often asked question was
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given at a Massachusetts DESE meeting explaining upcoming changes in the standards to be tested by MCAS.

Journal August 2011: Today I attended a DESE meeting in preparation for MCAS changes to the CCSS. Towards the beginning of the meeting, a high ranking member of the Measurement Department showed a graph about the ELA and math scores across the state for the past 8 years. He pointed out the “dips” at 4th, 7th and 8th grade math and said, “This is normal because we introduce a lot of new concepts in the tests and many students are not ready for them (my emphasis). They are getting exposed to the information so they will be ready by tenth grade when they have to take the test and pass it.” The DESE representative actually apologized that Massachusetts schools had had to go through such difficult times over the test. He said, “That was not our intention. That was NCLB.” This was the first time that anyone at DESE admitted that the MCAS was not necessarily in sync with students’ developmental stages. I took that precious PowerPoint handout back with a smile on my face. I am going to make sure my staff gets to see this when we have our opening presentation!

The fact that I had confirmation from DESE that the test went beyond what students could actually accomplish made it clear that the assessment was unfair and unreasonable. What does one do with an unfair policy? Ball (2004) suggests,

Policies do not normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which the range or options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed or particular goals or outcomes are set. A response must still be put together, constructed in context, offset against or balanced by other expectations. All of this involves creative social action of some kind. This is what Bagguley calls ‘the agency of the insubordinates’ (p. 21).

The new information, and the apology from DESE, went a long way in helping me become more determined to allow the staff more freedom to make professional decisions on curriculum and instruction beyond an MCAS focus. I encouraged teachers to suggest innovative ways to have students apply learning, to connect it with their everyday life and integrate it across subject areas. Later in this chapter and in Chapter 7 I provide lists of teacher-led initiatives that were successful in easing the test-obsessed focus.
The Longest Rollercoaster Ride

One interview group focused on the ever-present negative labeling of the school based on MCAS results for high needs students. Participants discussed the information on the AYP results poster addressing the school labeling:

Winston: If you look at the data and look at the subgroups, those are the ones that are killing us, obviously. So you have to wonder why would they label a school, which the majority of our school is not a subgroup, it’s just a small minority that actually are not making it, so the whole school gets a label, because of such a small minority.

King: Those scores for the special needs and low income students are often just one or two points away.” (Interview Group B, p. 3)

This was one of several interchanges where teachers were pointing at the school’s being penalized for having enough students to make the special education and low income subgroups “counted” by the state. They found this unfair and I found it disturbing that their upset sounded like a complaint about having these students among us. While the teachers never verbalized not wanting these students in their classrooms (and in fact, the opposite was actually stated several times), it was obvious that teachers resented the school’s loss of status by being labeled as “in need of restructuring” because of a small percentage of our school population. Was the connection between needy children and a poor school reputation affecting how we saw these students? This is the danger of having student groups disaggregated, we can start to blame the victim instead of the circumstance.

Teachers were aware that the Massachusetts MCAS was considered the most rigorous test in the nation.

King: I feel like compared to the other states, we have the bar extremely high. That’s hard on our kids, and if they made a more realistic bar, I would have no problem with No Child Left Behind. You can’t keep making our tests harder and harder every year. So inferential for the sixth grade ELA! Every question last year for the
most part was inferential. The kids who are two grade levels behind are too literal. We try very hard!”

Sands: I think [MCAS] is a little unrealistic. I don’t mind it if they made our tests more reasonable. (Interview Group B, p. 6)

I myself was conflicted by the rigor of MCAS. I do believe that a rigorous education is a benefit to students. Having been a principal in two states, first in California and later in Massachusetts, I admired the Commonwealth’s ambitious standards. I did agree, however, that some of our students were not yet ready to master grade level standards. I thought it unfair that students who were not “at grade level” were not allowed the time to develop their skills before being tested for mastery. Unrealistic expectations set the children up to fail and be anxious about abilities not yet acquired. Would these children stop trying out of anxiety and despair?

Reminiscent of the feeling of being on a rollercoaster, which I described in detail in the previous chapter, interviewees remembered the circumstance surrounding the ELA department’s success in reaching a Cumulative Proficiency Index of 95.1 out of 100—the AYP requirement for 2010. They remembered how elated they were when they saw the school’s AYP report card, but how they were also concerned because the math department had not reached their target of 92.2. The following interchange reveals the anxiety generated by positive results that should simply have been celebrated.

Sands: The 2011 year for ELA just amazes me. That’s incredible!

Tanner: We really did not expect to reach 95.1, but we did.

Sands: Does that mean we have a higher number to reach next year? Does it keep going up?

Glynn: I think for math, which was a heartache for us, math had a target of 92.2 and we had done 84.9 the year before. So we already knew at
the end of the year that stretching to 92.2 was going to be really difficult.

Gray: (Looking at the state’s NAEP results) We’re number one. Yeah, in our nation we’re number one.

Hart: We’re number one but we’re under restructuring. Why don’t we feel like number one?" (Interview Group B pp. 3, 4,13)

This discussion exposed the difficulty of bolstering staff morale. In 2010, the ELA test results for previous years were already close to their 95.1 target, while children struggled to reach higher targets in mathematics. The contrast in results was painful to the teachers and myself. I struggled with knowing how much to celebrate one side’s success without hurting the feelings of the struggling side, because in the end, 100 percent was not a reasonable goal in the first place.

Teachers believed that the government’s failure to weigh in other factors that affected the test results for some students was unreasonable. One staff member pointed out, “I think we have kids that come in with such major issues, not just learning but family issues and social issues and we expect them so frequently to put it to the side, and learn, and deal, and do whatever it is you have to do regardless … not taking the whole child into consideration, that isn’t done… (Dion Interview, p. 8). Another teacher made a similar point, “The kids are coming in needier too. Socially, emotionally.” (Group Interview A, p. 4). At another group interview, a teacher voiced a concern about student motivation to do well, “[T]he kids need to be working for something. They need to have a goal for something. Especially this year, the kids that we have on our team, I’ve never seen a group that has such a lack of motivation. [If] they don’t get something out of it right away—like instant gratification— they’re done! (Interview Group C p.10)

The fact that teachers were concerned about the social and emotional state of their students points
at a change in our thinking about what it means to be a middle school teacher. One of our school’s missions is to assist students in their social and emotional growth, major elements of the life of middle school students. The pressures of meeting NCLB goals set the need to meet MCAS targets above all else. Where was the time and the energy to focus on other student needs? How were we changing, not only what we considered to be our work, but how we thought about our work and the children we served? Ball (2004) warned that the requirements of what he calls “performativity”—the emphasis on “producing” educated children—“renders many professionals unrecognizable to themselves” (p. 12). Was our anxiety about troubled children reflective of our caring for their struggles, or was there a fear in the back of our minds that these children were a problem for us rather than simply needy children?

Some teachers also noted that middle school students vary greatly as to what stage of development they reach by the time they move on to high school. They pointed out that individual characteristics could be interfering with how well students did on the MCAS. One teacher commented, “I’m noticing from last year to this year is definitely an improvement. That could change year to year based on the kids” (Interview Group A, p. 4). Another staff member noted, “[W]e are at a disadvantage at this age, because the kids’ minds are too literal and they have not even gone to that semi-abstract stage (Interview Group C, p. 3). A veteran teacher related a personal experience,

I have a niece who, in middle school was “needs improvement”, “needs improvement”, “needs improvement”. She’s a senior this year and got advanced on both tests and got the Abigail Adams scholarship, but at this age she couldn’t do it. That’s not her fault. She to me is the epitome of that’s what maturity does, and she did wonderful!” (Interview Group B p.11)
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A parent complained, “They are not considering brain development at that point of the MCAS” (Adler Interview p. 6). A teacher in the fourth interview group, summarized many teachers’ concerns,

What I also think is that this is not quantitative completely. We’re talking about children. …[Y]ou know there are some measurements of IQ and other ways to measure intelligence and comprehension, but it’s still not just a quantitative thing…. I just think there are so many things to enter into that equation that it is very hard to measure… So you say, well, all sixth graders in Massachusetts are at that same biological stage, or developmental stage… but it … makes it hard to have a number be what represents who they are and what they can do (Interview Group D p.4).

Children are not only individuals in different developmental stages, they live in a constantly changing world, and their world doesn’t always change for the good. In my journal of March 2011 I wrote,

The demographic data this month tells us that 21% of our students are considered low income. When I came to Southeastern, we were at close to 10% ! The economic downturn has really affected our community. Lots of foreclosures. Three of our families are homeless and will be moving to Trenton. That’s a very different town and our kids will have a hard time fitting in. None of these issues are considered when the state collects test data. Educating children is a complex process. It cannot be judged by one test, no more than there is one solution to all of our nation’s problems.

A staff member, speaking about children’s lives outside of school said,

Well, I think we have plenty of kids who have terrible home lives—trauma, abuse, neglect and we don’t know because they have never said anything and they never displayed any type of need. I think there are some … kids… who have a level of resiliency that others just don’t have. Some of us are able to get up every day and live our lives and some aren’t. Some people really don’t have that capacity. I hate that when they say, “Oh, you’re excusing it.” But by saying you’re low income or transient, it’s not really an excuse. It’s the reality that these kids have. If you’re worried about what you’re going to eat for dinner, do you think you really… care about coming to school? (Dion Interview p. 9).

Teachers recognized that teaching children is not simply about test scores, but it is about working with a young human being who is sometimes appropriately distracted by real life
challenges. When NCLB or RTTT ignores the out of school needs of children, it treats them as if they were all the same, almost cartoon-like figures.

Teachers often expressed feelings of being burdened with total responsibility for their students’ achievement. Looking at the AYP status history, teachers spoke about the year when the school’s test targets were not met until we solved being off by a tenth of a percent in student attendance.

Babcock: One hundred percent of the accountability is on the teacher. Zero percent accountability is on the student. Zero percent is on the parent. Why is a child’s attendance counted into AYP? … The year we almost didn’t make it for attendance we all sat here that summer and said, but we passed! So we got these kids to be successful despite the fact that some weren’t here.

Kunn: They’re not considering the middle school age that we deal with. When you look across the country at this age group, this age group is the target. You always hear we’re underachieving, but is it really that or are we just pushing too hard? We’re pushing because of the demand on us to be accountable … I feel like we are on the front line taking a lot of heat from all sides of the field” (Group Interview A, p.10).

The language used in that interchange was replete with war-like vocabulary reflective of how the staff often felt--embattled and worried about survival. During another interview, a teacher mentioned his disappointment at constantly hearing that American education is deficient. “I find it a little disheartening when [we are] compared to other countries and how other countries are so far ahead of us. They treat education differently. Either you got it or you don’t. So they just basically put all their eggs into the basket that’s got it. They only take the cream at the top of the pitcher. … We are supposed to educate everybody, we don’t have that option” (Group Interview D, p.10). Again, there is a hint of despair when teachers speak about students who are difficult to educate to the expectations of the state. There was a paradox here: At Southeastern, we cared about our
students, but we were burdened by what seemed to be their all consuming needs and the
government’s ever present testing demands. What happens when a one-size-fits-all
(Ravitch, 2013) policy meets real life in the classrooms of a typical, “good” school? Ball
(2004) blamed policies that are “distant in conception from practice” (p. 46). He notes
that such policies take considerable mediation to “confront other realities, other
circumstances, like poverty, disrupted classrooms, lack of materials, multi-lingual
classes” (p.46). How well did we mediate NCLB and RTTT at Southeastern? I suggest
that we attempted to find solutions that fit our reality, but that the solutions themselves
caused some changes in the way we saw our work, our students and ourselves.

**Testing, Anxiety And School Culture**

A troubling theme that arose in most of the group and some of the parent
interviews concerned the emergence of a school culture at Southeastern where the focus
was almost entirely on testing and test results. Teachers and parents pointed to several
changes that created a narrowing of the curriculum at Southeastern. For instance, special
education students who needed additional assistance in mathematics at one point spent all
of their tutorial period on mathematics and ELA, losing time to work on other subjects.
Later, many children in the same subgroup were withdrawn from foreign language
classes in order to have more time for assistance in MCAS tested subject.

The danger of having two subjects, ELA and mathematics, as a focus for high
stakes testing was that the school was likely to emphasize them above all other learning.
The teachers were aware of this danger, pointing out, “The schools that are really in
danger of having the federal government step in and take over we know all the bad things
that can happen, and they’re really starting to target mathematics from a very early age.
They’re having math for half a day, but at what expense?” (Sands, Interview Group B, p.4). When a Southeastern teacher who lives in a neighboring town suggested we imitate what was happening at her child’s middle school—a reduction of time in Social Studies classes in exchange for double math periods-- I replied that I was not in agreement.

However, my journal entry for March 2012 I noted:

The budget problem narrows our curriculum. We had to cut positions, but we could not cut the core subjects. Because of MCAS, we actually had to add to the math and Special Education staff, so what had to go was Related Arts (eliminating woodshop, cooking and sewing classes). All those hands-on subjects the teachers complain about the kids missing so much!

The irony here is that, when faced with a budget crisis, it did not matter what I believed was best for our students all around. I had to take care of what was needed to show evidence of working on our MCAS responsibilities in order to safeguard the future of the students, the staff and the school. This is an excellent example of what Ball (2004) labels as “impression management” (p.12). Adding special education and mathematics teachers would look good in our annual AYP action plan, a necessity, because I was responsible to ensure that our school was recognized as active in finding solutions to our “AYP problem.”

Teachers also commented on the need for the eliminated classes during the first group interview:

Babcock: And you know what is even more important, is we don’t have Home Economics anymore. We don’t have other things that we can do hands on things. We don’t do a lot of hands on. It’s a little scary that we’re going back to more open your books, sit in your chair. We don’t have active things any more. They take the active things out of the day and these kids.

Brent: You …have to bring back Home Economics. You have to bring back Shop where kids are practicing hands on learning.

Chalmers: The kids want to learn because it’s fun for them. They see what they’re getting. I don’t know how many times the kids say, “Why
are we doing this? I’m not ever going to use this. Tell me when I’m ever going to use this… and I’ll learn it.” They don’t see the point of it so they’re not even going to try to do it. If they saw it in a skill, they’d say okay I have to do this… for building a bridge or building something.” (Interview Group A pp. 5, 6).

By eliminating what are termed as “non core” courses, I had removed opportunities for practical learning—a strategy that research tells us is essential for the retention and mastery of complex standards (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Along different but related lines, some teachers perceive themselves as relegated to an academic back seat because their subject is not part of the MCAS testing:

Babcock: Sometimes we get put in as second class citizens, our mission, if we choose to accept it in the History Department, is to support all the goals of mathematics and English….There’s a point when we get told you aren’t important.

Glynn: I’m not sure anyone is telling you that. I’m sure that’s how you’re feeling.

Babcock: Actually, we’ve heard it directly from actual math teachers in this building and secondly, at the elementary level, we’ve done a kind of polling for the past few years, and kids only get history at Minton and Creek Elementary schools and a little bit at Kennedy. The other schools don’t and the kids don’t have a clue when they come here…. It is all about math.

Mann: I don’t feel that way because I feel like my class (a foreign language) is their chance to breathe and relax. So I feel they need that break…of not having to worry about an MCAS test in my subject. Not having to worry about their scores. So I feel like I serve a really valid purpose because they would be totally stressed if they had only math, English, science and … history. …”

Babcock: It still goes to the point because it’s the chance to breathe despite MCAS. MCAS drives everything. In our class they’re not getting that chance to breathe because history was one of the four core subjects they used to have to worry about and now for some reason they’ve been told it’s not important so when they come to my class it’s “Why do I need to be here?”
Clark: You know what is interesting, coming from an elementary point of view, I know as a fourth grade teacher, as MCAS became more and more important… we got little directives “You need to be doing 75 to 90 minutes of math everyday. You need to be doing an hour and a half of reading everyday. So what happened? I didn’t teach science today. It got past me. You know and that happened more than once and it became math and reading, math and reading and there were time when an entire week would go by and I realize I only did science once this whole week! Next week I have to do less social studies, so I can do more science and that has to impact them (the students) when they show up here in sixth grade… I’m sure the sixth grade (science and social studies) teachers must see great gaps in the kids.

Babcock: So, my frustration is that I feel like what is done is to divide up education into MCAS and non-MCAS. Secondly, I feel what it has done is, the message to every single thing we do in school is MCAS related” (Interview Group A pp. 5, 6, 12).

This interchange pointed at a major theme throughout the interviews: our school culture had become MCAS-obsessed. Babcock’s complaint that MCAS was driving everything was appropriate. Changes in budget, staffing, resources, scheduling, and even what students were required to do during their study period were based on putting ELA and math forward for first consideration. Rereading the transcript of this group interview made me question the changes in my own leadership style. Am I part of what Wright calls a “‘bastard leadership’—leadership which is animated by the changing policy concerns of government, and the vicissitudes of the educational marketplace, rather than any commitment to substantive and situated values or principles? ” (Wright in Ball 2004, p. 13). And yet, I am not able to ignore MCAS as I must answer to district and state expectations for the sake of our school’s survival. This was a catch-22 for me and, I suspect, for many principals and teachers.
MCAS-tested subject area teachers voiced concerns about feeling pressured to teach to the test. An ELA teacher, who is one of the most caring and professional in our building vented her frustration:

It came to a point last year… where I just felt all I was doing was teaching them how to take a test and that was causing a real problem for me, ethically as a teacher. That’s not why I became a teacher! I did not become a teacher to teach them how to answer “multiple choice”. That is not what they are going to be doing in their life. That bothered me that it was taking up so much of my focus and time. Then at the beginning of the year we watched that video about this is the world they are living in right now. There are more people on Facebook right now than there were in the entire world population in medieval times. What do I have to teach them, for them to live their lives? I don’t want to teach to a test. … After looking at the Common Core Standards, they affirm that I need to teach them to be critical readers, critical thinkers and writers because we live in the information age right now. They need to be able to interpret the information that they are getting now. They might need to know how to break down what they are reading on the Internet with this technology. I think that’s why there is much more emphasis on informational text because that is just a bigger chunk of what we are getting now through the Internet and through these different mediums. So my focus this year has really become…[to] make it relevant for them, for their lives. I ask them, why do you think we are doing this? They say because it’s going to be on the MCAS next week and I say yes, but then I’m very quick to say but what are you going to do with this in your life?” (Venn, Interview Group D, p. 9).

Venn’s comment reminded me of her visit to my office the previous school year. At that point, she was ready to stop teaching because, she, like most teachers, had joined the profession out of a calling to service through teaching rather than a wish to produce better test scores. A long conversation about freedom to teach and my belief in her contributions to her students, assisted her in making a decision to stay.

Teachers are concerned that there are simply too many tests. One teacher asked:

Do you have any data or experience with kids as far as taking standardized tests? At some point, if you keep on giving all these tests, do they reach a test overload and they just say, oh, another one? My wife is a schoolteacher in Rhode Island. They do the NECAP. They do the NEALL… and they do all this other stuff. At some point, man, they seem to be taking an awful lot of tests to gather all of this data. At some point, don’t the kids just turn off? (Interview Group D p. 5).
Another staff member objects to the need for standardized tests to prove that children are learning:

The kids pass classes all along... they do the work, and it made me think, if they don’t pass the MCAS, it’s like almost nothing else mattered... It just made me think a portfolio approach would seem much more useful and would teach actual skills and still have kids meeting national or state standards, but by really displaying work, not by passing or not passing a test” (Dion Interview, p.10).

The obsession with testing did not stop at MCAS. As a staff, we put in place mid-year and eventually quarterly assessments to diagnose how well students were being prepared for MCAS. These were part of that Ball (2004) calls the first order effects of a policy—“changes in practice or structure”(p. 51), but they were also second order effects in that they impacted “patterns of social access and opportunity and social justice” (p. 51).

Adding the expansion of MCAS-like assessments to the reduction of non-core classes and the lowered status of non-MCAS subjects reduced instructional time to explore other learning opportunities, a key indication of a good school (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Tienken and Zhao, 2013). Middle school students deserve the opportunity to experience a balanced education that includes practical application of concepts. The loss of class time to more testing was an additional loss of opportunity for hands-on learning. Like Bannon stated, “There is no time to do the fun projects any more!” (Interview Group A, p.5).

Teachers, parents and my own journal indicate that there is a kind of generalized anxiety surrounding testing, NCLB, and certain aspects of RTTT. Interview participants verbalized considerable apprehension about the effects of high stakes testing on middle school students. A guidance counselor explained,

The only time teachers seek me out is when they’re concerned about a student—if a student looks distressed during or after the test, or if the student is not... taking it. Those are typically the times the teachers would reach out to me during testing
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time. [These are] very typical kids. Kids we look at and say B average, achieving at grade level or above standard… What’s interesting regarding kids, is I think kids are stressed by it. I think they hear so much about it. There’s a huge build up for it, so they definitely are stressed by it… We definitely have some strong anxiety responses to MCAS from kids… Psychosomatic headaches, stomachaches, just not feeling well the day leading up to the test and even after… It’s been a surprise, especially this year…. I’d say 50 percent of the kids that had strong emotional responses to the MCAS were kids that had never been frequent with me, ever. (Dion Interview, p. 4-6)

Tienken and Zhao (2013) remind us that “[c]hildren’s self-confidence may be severely damaged by being told that they are not good at anything that counts, and they may become alienated from learning” (p.118). Even successful students expressed their anxiety about MCAS, mid-year and quarterly assessments added to the everyday stressors or a young teen’s life. Parents indicated that their children worried about tests and would even come to school when ill rather than miss a test day (Pierce Interview p. 4, Adler Interview p. 11). A parent who sometimes serve as a substitute teacher in special education classrooms stated:

I’ve always had strong feelings about the MCAS linked with special education because those kids are… on IEPs or 504s, there will always be modification in their work from the day they start …. On every test they get… it is always modified- separate testing room for them… scribing… word bank, whatever. When you come to the actual test itself, all that kind of falls away. They have been trained their whole life in modification and then the MCAS does not modify for anybody. Across the board—the stars are not aligning with that with the special education (students)… They don’t get their word banks… It isn’t lining up!... Because their whole life, this could be sixth, seventh, even eighth grade students are still looking for their accommodations in their MCAS. That’s how they grew up with it. That’s the way they learned… It’s like giving a first grader the Bar Exam. That’s how they feel. I can see it in their eyes. They’re almost a little panicky about it… (Adler 2a-3)

Special education students are not the only ones who worry about MCAS scores. In my journal of August 2010, I noted:

Hailey L’s parents came in looking upset, not wanting to shake my hand. They want their daughter in Algebra I. I explained the requirements and showed her
records. She met two out of four categories. Did not pass the placement test and had low MCAS scores in grade 6. MCAS for last spring are preliminary, no Open Response scores yet, so a final decision cannot be made until the final scores arrive within the week. They went home less frustrated since I told them good MCAS scores would do the trick. Yet another way for NCLB to intrude in a child’s life—good or bad. And this is not even a special education child!

Requiring advanced MCAS scores to qualify for the advanced mathematics class was a decision arrived at by the Faculty Senate. I endorsed the idea in order to ensure that MCAS was taken seriously, especially by students who could do well on the test. We believed this would change the attitude of some students who expressed that MCAS did not matter until grade 10. While we believed that the school policy allowed students to have a stake in the test, it was clear that by making this policy, we were also complicit in making MCAS a high stakes test for those who wanted to qualify for Algebra I, a high school course in grade 8. This local change reflected a change in values that went beyond doing what needed to be done to comply with the law and its consequences. We did not need to add the MCAS as a requirement, but it made us feel less anxious because students were now more invested in doing well on the test. We were now applying MCAS pressure on students too!

Anxiety was not limited to students and teachers, it was also present in parents who often shared their concerns with guidance counselors. A counselor talked about parents being stressed about testing:

We hear a lot of anxiety from parents regarding the test is coming up. Are they prepared? Have they been in the right class to be successful on the test? Parents reference high school MCAS a lot too, when kids are just in six, seventh, and eighth grade. They’re already thinking ahead and worrying about what’s to come. I’ve had many questions: How many times can they take it in high school? What’s the protocol? There is a lot of awareness and concern. I mean 504, regular ed, special ed, I see it across the board…. It’s honestly, we will be talking about a specific issue and an MCAS question will come out. The issue could be regarding they missed a week of school because they were sick, [or] we’re going
on a vacation and they will link something totally unrelated to MCAS. … Then when we have students that come in from other school districts, there are lots of questions about it. If they are from out of state, even kids that come in from private schools where they have never taken it before, lots of questions about it. (Dion Interview, p. 3-4)

The counselor related how she helped parents have a more balanced view about standardized testing,

I talk a lot about how their teachers have prepared them throughout the years, especially this year. I try to make it turn to a positive spin regarding they should be prepared. At this point, there really is no “go home and study. Establish good sleeping habits. Eating something good in the morning. Being awake when you come into the building…. Probably, I would say anywhere from 25 to 50 parents [had MCAS concerns]. (Dion Interview, p. 5)

This comment was confirmed by parent interviews (Pierce Interview, p. 1, Johnston Interview, p.3-4) that indicated that MCAS was a major topic of conversation in their homes. It is my belief that the anxiety over MCAS grew over the years of this study, especially for parents of students in grade 8, who were closer to the 10th grade test.

Some parents seemed to be at ease with MCAS, but worried about the upcoming transitions to the PARCC test and to high school.

I think the school did all the right things for No Child Left Behind. My girls had a good education here and they’re doing fine in high school. I don’t remember their MCAS scores, but my son is here and he’s OK on the MCAS. Besides, school is not just the test, right? I mean, they’ve done a lot of different things in middle school. But I hear the new test is going to be harder, different. Do you know about it? How is it different? Will the regular kids do all right on it? (Halverson Interview, p. 1-2).

Mrs. Lemieux had some questions about how average and accelerated students were being addressed,

I think all the things that are on the chart are good. But it seems to me they’re all good for the special ed kids. What about the regular kids? Did the school do something for them for MCAS? I guess you must have because the whole school together did well. What about the high kids? Besides Algebra I, what else is being done for them? I’m more concerned that the other kids, the ones who do
OK on the test are not getting anything special. Well, you must be pretty busy with the kids that aren’t making it (Lemieux Interview, p. 2).

Like most of the interviewees, these parents were mainly concerned about their own children’s relationship to the MCAS and the upcoming PARCC test. Their concern about other children had more to do with their perception of the school’s focus on special education and low income children to the possible neglect of what they termed the “regular” students. In reviewing their comments as well as teacher comments about subgroups affecting the school’s reputation, I realized that NCLB and RTTT’s constant pressure and focus on reducing the achievement gap seemed to have pitted one group of students against another in a somber competition for the school’s attention. Ball (2004) warned that “there is a basic and apparently irredeemable tension at the heart of education policy research. A tension between the concerns of efficiency and those of social justice” (p.22) which seems to apply here. Is there a danger that any student who is not successful on a high stakes test may be placed on the “other” list in people’s heads and thus be treated as somehow “less than” students who test well? If so, the federal mandates have caused the opposite of their intended results.

Teacher anxiety advanced beyond curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test. There was some consternation over how students failing MCAS would continue to affect the school. During one group interview, a teacher spoke about the pressure she felt, “I was so focused on teaching to the test, I think because I got hired here, [I worried] I’m going to lose my job. I guess this is what I’m supposed to do… I thought I was supposed to deliver numbers” (Interview Group D, p. 11). Another teacher also voiced her anxiety, “That is the scary part. We have to get through our curriculum. In math the kids
[ask]… ‘what about those fun projects last year?’ I [tell them] [a]fter MCAS, because I haven’t got time” (Interview Group B, p. 13).

When teachers discussed the school’s move to full inclusion, some voiced their approval. Dion, however, revealed that some teachers had concerns, “I think there were definitely… teacher concerns (about inclusion). How can these [included] kids succeed in our classes? … [A]nd then I think the attitude and the movement has changed so much to accommodate and modify as needed (Dion Interview, p. 7) On the other hand, there is a sense of fear about how special education students’ performance on the MCAS and the upcoming PARCC might continue to affect the school’s standing. Dion shared her reflections,

We don’t have a very transient student population but we had… seven seventh graders join us right before MCAS and all came from different schools. A lot of them came to us with IEPs, some without, some very low students came to us and I think it’s—you never want to say “Oh great! Another low student!” but that tends to be the kind of mentality is we have one more, now the state is going to look at us and say what didn’t you do? (Dion Interview, p. 9).

These comments about the anxiety teachers felt when the school was restructured to a full inclusion model and the counselor’s own reaction when more special education students registered right before MCAS, illustrate one of my concerns about the federal mandates. Under RTTT there continued to be high expectations about the reduction of the achievement gap between the “successful” student population and students with “high needs.” In 2014, each teacher’s evaluation will be partially dependent on student scores on at least two district-selected assessments. Will the concerns about special education and other struggling students change in an even more negative reaction? Will the added pressure affect our perceptions of children who learn differently?
Although one of my main tasks as school principal is to model a positive attitude and remain calm handling all circumstances, the stress of dealing with expectations that were virtually impossible to meet was expressed in several journal entries. In July 2010, for example, I described how our new Superintendent viewed the state’s labeling of NCLB status:

At the MELLC (English Language Learner Directors) conference—yet one more place to hear how to bring up scores. What happened to how to teach students to think critically or how to connect learning to life? In any case, got to learn it all to stay out of further trouble…. Talking to the Superintendent re: levels of trouble. We’ve been labeled a level 3 school but he thinks we’re going to level 2 because only one subgroup is in trouble. We’ll see if that happens and what it means. He’s very optimistic and said for me not to worry because he doesn’t worry about it. I don’t see the same look on the new Assistant Superintendent. She looked dubious… She says we’re a ‘hot spot.’ That makes my anxiety rise.

In February 2012, I wrote about my reactions to one of the study’s interview sessions:

After the last interview group left, I could tell some of the teachers were disturbed by the discussion and looked a bit depressed. We did not get into education to be running a test race! I know most of us absolutely love teaching and our kids. Period. That’s something that needs to be safeguarded. I am sure parents want us to love teaching and love working with their children. I don’t think that accountability is going to go away and I agree with some of the teachers that it’s good to be accountable. It’s how we are accountable that makes the difference. The good things that are happening at Southeastern may or may not have happened because of the MCAS race. We would have built our collaborative teams—that was my intent from day one. We would have aligned our curriculum to make the education at every grade level equal for every team—that was a goal from day one! But even with all the great reforms, our Special Education kids are still lagging behind in this very hard test! And with time, it’s easy to get down because we are fighting against our knowledge of adolescent development and the challenges of learning disabilities. We’re even fighting against a rise in low income population (from 10% in 2003 to 21% this year!) And we do it all on a shoestring budget! I don’t think any companies would survive such circumstances! But we have to keep going and we have to do it with a smile on our faces and hope in our hearts, because the kids depend on us and we can’t afford to be depressed!

Our hope that RTTT would truly save us from the stress brought about by the NCLB expectations was curtailed by what we were to learn about the new initiative’s
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requirements. We first learned that the waiver did not give us a fresh start, but merely a reworked algebraic formula that indicated we remained as a level 2 school because our special education and “high needs” students were not on target to reduce their achievement gap by half in ELA! Our ELA scores had always been very high—before the RTTT waiver, our aggregate population had reached 95.1 percent in the Composite Performance Index. Reducing the gap towards that high number for students with learning disabilities was a daunting goal. We were above target in mathematics however, because the CPI was 84.9; it was an easier number for more students to reach. In December 2013, I wrote:

Looking back at what we were talking about back in the winter of 2012, when we didn’t know what RTTT was going to bring in the way of relief from NCLB, I find myself even more anxious. In a way, after we went into restructuring but we were in good company with most other Massachusetts schools, we were able to break out of the fear somewhat and establish some programs that brought back some normalcy into our middle school life—starting a student leadership program, taking time to build staff morale. But now we are in the middle of our second year of the new evaluation system and I will have a hard time getting a myriad of requirements done in time because everyday crises still happen and interrupt the best laid plans! There is no way to do it all and do it well!!!! And how are the teachers going to design multiple and appropriate measures of student growth that can be numerically tied to their value for each student! The task is gigantic yet we have until June to get it done and rate teachers accordingly! And next year, parents will be included in the evaluation through surveys. My fear is that only the parents who are dissatisfied with a teacher, or me, will participate. Most surveys have a small number of participants out of those invited. I am not at all sure that RTTT is helping. It seems to be adding to the anxiety. Teachers are compiling binders full of “evidence” of what they do on a daily basis to satisfy 4 standards, a myriad of “indicators” and at least two major annual or biannual goals. I will have to judge 72 binders in comparison to my own observations and evidence. If I had a small school, the task would be doable. With a large school, it is nearly impossible!

Despite the more positive language used in the RTTT initiative, the expectations were, in my opinion, equally intimidating. We still had targets to meet that would require continued “teaching to the test” and the test was an unknown quantity, based on new
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standards that required students to improve inference and critical thinking skills—different skills from those we focused on for MCAS. In addition, we had one year to design multiple assessments for every subject area so that teachers could be judged as to what value they added to students’ learning. RTTT advanced the process to change “[t]eaching and learning… to processes of production and provision that must meet market goals of transfer efficiency and quality control (Boyles, in Ball 2004, p. 12). One step closer to becoming a learning factory!

Another source of insecurity was voiced when looking at the data from RTTT. A staff member was concerned about the new teacher evaluation system that rates teachers according to their students’ growth. “They’ve got to go back to each student individually. …I’m looking at the kids I have, and [what] I try to get them to do… If their scores represent what I do without being able to back up what I’ve done, that scares me” (Lindt, Interview Group C, p. 14). Another added, “There are some that are scarier than others too. It really depends on who is in front of you… You can’t look at one test score, you can’t and that bothers me. That has always bothered me. You have to look at the whole thing and MCAS is a scary thing because they look at one thing” (Chandler, Interview Group C, p.14).

There is always some anxiety about the unknown, and RTTT was new to all of us.

In my February, 2012 journal I wrote:

Teachers are concerned about the connection of student achievement to their evaluation. Some say we should go back to leveling the kids so we could take better care of their needs. I keep talking about what the research says, that separating children, focusing on remediation is not as successful as including them in the regular classroom so they can have peer role models and opportunities for accelerated learning. I understand that there is anxiety about what the new evaluation system will bring. I believe that good teachers are good teachers no matter what evaluation system is used. We will need to do a great job of the
multiple assessment regulation. Anything to go beyond one test making the
decision as to what kind of a school we are.

Teachers had concerns about the PARCC test because we knew very little about it and
how it would affect different groups of students. At one of the group interviews, Lindt, a
special education teacher familiar with the alternative version of the MCAS for special
education students expressed her worries about the new test.

Lindt: When we do jump on board (start taking the PARCC test), I feel
like it will be a huge jump you know. But it also bothers me that we’ve been a leader in the country in the Alt[ernative MCAS]. We
have taken this and other states have followed along… and now we’re just kind of waiting” (Interview Group D, p. 8)

Venn: There’s a whole other stretch that we need to be ready for”
(Interview Group D, p. 9)

The PARCC test is supposed to be based on the new Common Core State Standards
(CCSS), focusing on higher order thinking skills and critical thinking. Teachers were
concerned that some middle school students would not be ready to test well in these
skills. Gannon worried,

We already know one subgroup [children on the autism spectrum] that… do not
have critical thinking. They just get so upset when I try to get them to think out
of the box… they just shut down on me. … They have a lot of strengths, academic
strengths, but critically analyzing something is not one of them. Seeing someone
else’s perspective? Forget it. I have some kids on the spectrum now who scored
240’s, 250’s on their ELA and in math MCAS. I don’t think those will be their
scores anymore” (Interview Group D, p. 13)

A colleague expressed conflicting thoughts: “I like the changes for overall education. I
think it’s such a better way to approach things, but I look at some of my kids and I think
they will have a lot more difficult time trying to pass this [CCSS] (Interview Group D,
p.13). Gale, a special education teacher added,

To bring what you guys kind of say about the parents and what you said about the
inferential reasoning piece. I sit with the parents all the time who say my child’s
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MCAS scores keep going down year to year. It’s so hard to tell them yes, they are still making progress from where they are, but it’s not going to show on an MCAS test because every year they get more and more abstract and there is so much inferential reasoning. My guys with spectrum disorders don’t understand that type of thinking. (Interview Group B, p. 8)

The teachers’ were concerned about how their students’ scores would reflect in their evaluation, especially since disabilities or the child’s developmental stage placed them at a disadvantage when tested in higher order thinking or inferential skills. While the educator evaluation system is based on student growth, it was reasonable for these teachers to be worried about their ratings as long as they are assigned students whose disabilities or stage of cognitive development preclude them from doing well on the PARCC.

Staff discussed another aspect of the new teacher evaluation under RTTT, a parent and student survey to be added to the teacher’s rating. A guidance counselor connected the discussion to a recent incident.

One interesting thing along those lines—the survey. The eighth graders fill out a survey for the state. Typically in the past, the survey has asked what science class are you taking this year and there would be multiple choice. What math class are you in? How many hours do you study? Questions about them and their educational experience. This year, the survey was completely different. I had some comments from teachers. It asked about do you feel your teacher answers your questions appropriately? Do you feel your teachers are meeting the needs of different learners in the classroom? I had one teacher in particular say, ‘I cannot believe they are asking eighth graders to, in essence, judge the effectiveness of their teachers!’ (Dion Interview, p.11)

Among the signs of distress there were some indications that teachers were pushed to their limits by the constant efforts to reach higher targets and expectations. There were many retirements and some transfers out of our school within the 10 years of this study. Some retirees indicated that they were leaving ahead of their original plans. I noted one of the transfers in my July 2010 journal:
Linda Dell came in to tell me she’s transferring out to Ames Elementary. She [was] nervous. Her face was a little bit twitchy. She didn’t want to tell me why. Then she said, ‘I just have to look out for myself. I can’t keep up the pace and I’ve been having trouble with parents. I just can’t do it any more. It’s too much. It’ll be easier down there.’ I hugged her because we’ve been working together for six years, and I appreciate how hard she works for her assigned special education students! She’s a 12 year veteran who is well loved and trusted by her team and the administration. She’s a worrier. She’s the one who tells me when Todd S. is too anxious to be evaluated, and the one who makes sure every one of her students has all their work organized and ready. She’ll be greatly missed! What do I do when the best are leaving—burning out! I will end up replacing her with a ‘baby’ teacher and we’ll have a couple of years of worrying about follow through…

Southeastern’s teachers are known for their dedication and willingness to go beyond their required duties. As explained above, the school often deals with budget cuts and insufficient resources, but we always manage to provide the best education possible—doing more with less is one of our mottos. One teacher explained how many of her colleagues feel,

It’s not just the bull’s eye on the student, it’s also the demand on the teacher. We jump for these kids. …[W]e want everything for these kids. You want to do it for them, you want to get there. We’re pushing and we’re pulling. It’s like our job has become no longer fun because we’re always in demand, always trying to stay on target. I hear my friends that are teachers, not just in this building, saying they’re exhausted. It’s no longer fun. It’s just push, push, push, to get more and more. That bar keeps on getting higher as we have seen and they’re not ready. They’re not age appropriate tasks. You can’t make them ready”(Interview Group B, p. 7).

Glynn, a master teacher and member of the mathematics department, described the journey through NCLB and the waiting to see what RTTT would bring,

I think back to that comment in ‘06 about taking on the ‘whatever it takes’ attitude. I feel like back then we were all pushing so hard! We probably would have done it, but we pushed ourselves even more back then. I feel personally, I’m tired now. I feel like I have been pushing so long that I’m kind of at a lull. I’m sitting back right now saying we’re in a three year transition. I need to give myself a break because since I joined this school, I have been doing all the pushing and eventually you kind of need to take a breath because it’s just been pushing for so long! You know it’s going to be different. I don’t think you can
compare the test this year to last year or this year to next year, so I feel like I’m trying to take a breather right now to be ready to do whatever it takes again when I feel like it makes sense. …I just feel like it is a different atmosphere because I wonder if other people feel the same way in the building right now. Like we need to take a breather because there is going to be that huge hill potentially, not as bad as it was because we know a lot of things now (Interview Group D, p.7).

I believe that these teachers spoke for the majority of educators in the building. We had been pushing and pulling long enough and hard enough to feel like we needed a break and we were hoping that RTTT would give us that “breather”. But RTTT’s requirements continued to “objectify and commodify” (Ball, 2004, p. 12) teachers’ work. By utilizing the “discourses of accountability, improvement, quality and effectiveness which surround and accompany these objectifications” (Ball, 2004, p.12) the new initiative continued to place educators and schools under pressure.

Changes that Made a Difference at Southeastern

Focusing on the stress, curriculum narrowing and unrealistic expectations brought about at Southeastern by ten years under NCLB and RTTT may lead observers to conclude that the federal and state mandates elicited only negative effects. Southeastern, however, never stopped being a high performing middle school. In the following I consider what the staff considered as structural changes that were beneficial to students and the school.

Staff and parents praised the school staff for its work ethic and positive outlook. A veteran teacher stated, “I think change is good… You have to evolve as a teacher, an educator, otherwise you get stale. You have to be able to embrace that. A lot of people like to do just the same old thing” (Brent, Interview Group DO, p.10), Dion expressed her appreciation for the staff’s dedication to students,
I think what we do for kids, this is an incredible school system. I don’t even live in town, but I see what we do for kids here and it’s huge... We just do it. I think with the MCAS there is only so much we can do and I think it’s been done. Everything is being done. (Dion Interview, p. 9)

Staff members indicated their agreement about having a rigorous test to determine how students were achieving:

**King:** I started with the Terra Nova (a standardized test) in the fifth grade way back before MCAS became permanent and we were heads and tails above every other state with the Terra Nova. They were too easy, I’ll be honest with you. We needed something just a little higher.

**Hart:** That’s why I’m looking forward to the Common Core, it should level the playing field

**Landon:** I know some people think you shouldn’t have national standards,. You should let the state and the districts make up their own mind, but we’re sick and tired of being compared to Mississippi, when they’re taking a test that is way easier than ours. If you’re going to compare us to them, let’s all have the same test.

**Sands:** I think there are positives because I started my career when MCAS was budding. So back in 1993 was when I started and I have seen every single change that has happened with it. It’s really helped fine-tune our teaching,

**King:** I think the schools like this have had some positive things. I actually like full inclusion. I enjoy special ed kids in the class… just because everybody is different and learns differently. I do not mind having special ed kids in my class at all. I like it. I also like the responsibility. I have no problem being held accountable. This is a business. Our product is making educated scholars. Every business is going to be accountable. So I have no problems with tests, bring them on, however, the quality of the tests at some point are getting too difficult for certain kids. It’s like asking someone who has a physical handicap to do something they physically cannot do and they won’t be able to do it. (Interview Group B, pp.6,7,9,13)

Teachers pointed at specific program changes that were positive gains for the students and the school.
Smith: I like AGO and SGO. I think those have been positive changes. The only thing I would add to that, I wouldn’t take those back if at all possible. The only thing I would add is… a high class…. These are the kids that excel with everything. We don’t even have to say it out loud because that causes telephone calls: “Why isn’t my kid in that class?” But you could take those kids out periodically and throw them in a room and have them do an extra project where we push them… They need the core standards… but just at a different level.

Gorman: We don’t push those kids [advanced students in math] enough. I feel like we do support SGO and AGO of course, we would love to have the aide back, but I still like that. It is a positive thing.

Banon also brought up the mathematics program changes, “AGO has been awesome…I do feel that the intent of the program of AGO is amazing because your have kids that have no clue where to start and they give them the starting block which is really nice”

The AGO and SGO classes… [i]nitially parents questioned it. When they hear me explain what the two classes are, they love the idea. They are all for it. They want it. I’ve only had one parent in my eight years here say absolutely not; two actually, “I do not want my child in that class.” It’s very unusual to have that happen. Usually they hear smaller group, more teachers, more support, I’m all for it. These are kids that have typically struggled all along in math… [O]nce kids get in there (AGO or SGO math classes) they like it a lot too. They like being with the two AGO teachers. They get a lot of personal attention. I think for some of these kids, it’s the first time they find success in school with math—which I think is huge for confidence building” (Dion Interview, p. 6-7)

Some teachers spoke about some of the more controversial mathematics changes,

I think the advanced study… is good. I think it goes deeper than we do, but I think the fact that we had kids that didn’t go to foreign language but we had extra math time or extra English time; I think that’s good for them…. I think more exposure to the math and the English in different ways is good for the kids to get the… pre-teaching and all those different skill based things that they wouldn’t necessarily get because they have to be following A, B, C and D. We have a little more flexibility. I think that’s good for the kids and that’s helpful. (Lindt, Interview Group C, p. 9-10)

Smith, also pointed at another math change,
Just look at the math scores. They help us to know who will be taking Algebra I. Before, it was a free for all. Once you tied it to the MCAS scores and the diagnostic test, you use that data and data doesn’t lie … and it’s not just a one day test. It’s not like here, take this (class). It’s not tied to that one day, which is good because when you have the data, if you tie it into three things… the sixth grade MCAS, the mid-year exam and grades, we then have three people telling you that this person is ready or not ready to move on. (Interview Group DO, p. 8-9)

Glynn added,

In math, I would say the whole district changed because they really changed their math program starting from kindergarten on, and actually the kids during 04 and 05 got extra help at the elementary level … [B]ut the whole change in just the curriculum, the kids come up and the elementary teachers are better math teachers because they’re not all math people, so they have been trained for like five years to improve their own math skills. I can see a huge difference in the level that the kids, all of them, are coming into the school with, because they’re starting younger getting to know math better.” (Interview Group A, p.12).

Reflecting on changes brought about under NCLB’s “restructuring” stage, Dion recalled how well the staff adapted to full inclusion of special needs students into the regular classroom. “We have been on this (inclusion), this is year three and at this point it’s just the way we do things. It works… The kids seem to be, just having that exposure, seems to be better for them. I haven’t really heard any concerns from parents or kids about it. (Dion Interview, p. 7). Full inclusion was a change that had been discussed with the Special Education Department prior to 2009, but had been deemed difficult to schedule for a large middle school. In the end, the need to restructure gave us an opportunity to choose a truly constructive change by including special education students into every general education classroom.

One other change made to satisfy an NCLB requirement benefited the school in general. In my journal entry for September 2013, I recalled:

Here’s one of the things why I said there’s some positive and some negative out of this whole law thing. We have been so pressured by this and the one year we almost didn’t make [AYP goals] for attendance, we really paid attention to that.
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Now, we take truants to court immediately. At seven days’ absence we are sending them a letter. At ten days we’re already talking to the truancy officer. Did we do that when I first came here? No. Politically, it’s not a very good thing, because parents get really upset about being taken to court. That’s also an effect of the law because I don’t want to see that 91.9% again.

The difference was that we made a change that addressed our local needs. Utilizing NCLB requirements as a jumping off point, we attended to a deficiency that we had identified in 2005, reducing the number of unexcused absences.

Teachers also brought up the strengthening of the collaborative model. The Professional Learning Community structure was a partial change—in response to the corrective action label—that built on a collegial collaboration model I had first introduced in 2004. Teachers discussed the gains from collaboration:

Bead: One of the things I have noticed… this middle school was a junior high for a long time… You did not have a lot of collaboration going on. I was in elementary school, then I came here and I’ve seen so much collaboration that has been brought about because of MCAS and No Child Left Behind. The working together, the sharing of ideas, it was not done towards the beginning of MCAS.

Chandler: You know, during 09-10, when expanded PLC time began, I think that’s when we really got the community part going for our department… We decided, this is what we are going to try.

Smith: Before (in 2001) we had an intense year of working on… curriculum mapping. We spent so much time on that and it went through a lot of money and it went nowhere… The grade levels didn’t even meet before. … The biggest change for us is when we stopped taking outside help and just reaching into who we have here and pulling from them and saying what’s working for you? The professional days that we’ve had, the ones you guys did your curriculum changes. …, And it didn’t cost a penny!

Clark: I love having our math meetings every “B” day. I love that and everyone dragged their feet in the beginning because logistically, it seemed impossible. It is still difficult splitting up our homerooms and all that stuff, but I feel the benefits way outweigh that, because I feel we have better alignment. We have good math talk. We share more. We can see what other levels are doing, and it’s even
gone beyond us, where you can see what … fifth grade is doing and so forth and I think that we’ll have a more cohesive program. As a new teacher, I would have loved it because you have nothing in your file when you go to look because you’re brand new… but now I feel like we share and we have talks, ‘This works, this didn’t work, try this.’ I feel like we’re working together as a department. I totally love it (Interview Group C, pp. 5,6,7,10)

The fact that teachers appreciated working together was a source of satisfaction for me.

This “change” was typical of what most teachers saw as productive responses to NCLB requirements. We were taking actions that helped our school be an academically strong, nurturing and positive environment for all students and their teachers.

Teachers discussed the importance of generating local knowledge, a concept they learned when curriculum coordinator positions were cut in 2010. While this “change” was not directly related to NCLB, it was a result of our staff’s PLC, Faculty Senate, and Professional Development Committee work—collaborative groups that assisted in determining school needs.

Clark: I think, and this is only my fourth year, but I even noticed a big difference pre D[ifferentiated] I[nstruction] Team and post. Tamara and Michael went and they came back, they had such energy and enthusiasm on tiering and that stuff. That I think is beneficial.

Gorman: I think it went back farther. I want to say… when we started that open-response writing committee, the committee who went to the open response [workshop]. … When they went, has it been one hundred percent success, no, but I think it has improved. …Improved in a way where we need to find out where graphic organizers are important. … We know what we need. So you can say we need this and then you find where you can go get information and then you go get it.

Lindt: Another thing is, we did a survey…what kind of things do you see that we need? [Then] we had a task force to find …a good quality workshop that we can send one or two people to come back and teach the rest of us. It would be what kind of problems do we see
as a whole and then go and find a solution. It’s a different mindset…. (Interview Group C, p. 8-9).

In my journal entry for February 1, 2012, I recalled:

Talking to our Faculty Senate today about how to reduce the gap between our general student population and Special Education and low income students. We were recalling ideas given by our last math curriculum coordinator, who only lasted one year before budget cuts ended the position. I pointed out how we’ve since taken ourselves forward on our own and how creative programs have helped raise our hope and morale. The discussion was important, as we had no idea what RTTT would bring our way, but we knew that requirements for reducing the learning (testing, really) gap would still be there. Local knowledge keeps coming up and I continue to believe that it is really, really important, more so than outside knowledge. When we have outside researchers like Dean in 2009, what they miss is the important details about relationships with people and who the kids really are, because what they see are the numbers and we see the people. We see the needs, the really deep needs including what’s been happening at home. Like how many more families have lost their homes in the past three years!

Venn reflected upon the power of teacher knowledge, “I can see the common thread where the teachers come together where they put out the effort and do the education and expectations, collaboration to make it work for these kids, for our kids” (Interview Group D, p. 10).

As I conclude the writing of this dissertation, there continues to be anxiety over the new evaluation system that is in process. But there remains an optimistic outlook about the future under RTTT. Teachers are focused on developing aspects of the Common Core State Standards that they believe will make a difference for students.

Venn: So I kind of ethically came to a point last year where I was like I don’t like whom I’ve become as a teacher. I don’t know what is going to happen next. I feel this is where we all are as a school. We are just like, this represents something we don’t want to be. We don’t know where it is heading but I feel very confident in the direction we are heading in the Common Core Standards. They really affirmed what I was thinking. I’m feeling very positive about that.
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Gannon: I think critical thinking is part of math now too. It does make it more challenging for the subset of kids who don’t have the skills to apply the critical thinking. I’m anticipating the test will have more critical thinking and multi-steps, which is life… We’re asking everyone to be critically thinking and some kids can’t even do a basic concrete calculation at this point, but it’s exciting” (Interview Group D, pp. 9,10).

By choosing to build on critical thinking teachers have opened the door to creative problem solving in both the academic and non-academic tasks of the school.

To continue building a positive outlook, we have focused on what we can do to go beyond the MCAS focus. A number of teacher-led and student-led initiatives were launched with the express purpose of expanding the learning beyond MCAS and AYP boundaries. In my January 2013 journal I recalled:

I was just thinking about how creative we’ve become to get around MCAS and AYP. A couple of years ago, 2010 I think, we started talking about breaking away and getting creative, recapturing the middle school spirit. We talked about it in Senate and the Professional Development Committee, that we were sill in trouble, no matter what we tried, so we might as well break out of the doldrums and the fear and be creative. We have such an advantage in being middle school rather than being stuck with credits and curriculum coverage and AP classes. We’re not stuck in one classroom teaching everything either. It is important to take advantage of that. So we created the math bootcamp and the garden project and so many community service projects! So we don’t have enough exploratory courses, we have the middle school spirit and that is huge! Now we are working on student leadership opportunities and our kids are showing it. This is a great place to work!

During the interviews, teachers remembered some of the more successful non-MCAS oriented programs. Project-based learning activities include community service initiatives.

Clark: For the garden project, we originally proposed rehabbing the greenhouse with some grant money, and just doing a small planting in there and donating that to the town’s charity kitchen. It sort of exploded out because of a lot of interest. We were getting approached by organizations all across the state, calling, saying, ‘We want to give money!’...We are trying to balance everything
and it’s not easy. The kids are really doing it. What’s been nice is when you talk about an enrichment program, we have some students who are on the grants writing team and I’ll be honest with you… I pulled them aside and said, where are we? … I had to ask them because they’re moving along so far ahead from where I’m at that I didn’t know. They actually had to give me a briefing on where we were. Which was a really nice thing. That’s really what it should be and they met with the Superintendent. They did a great job. They set it up, they did a PowerPoint for it. … So all the kids have a piece. Then for this last one, because it’s part of the curriculum, we … [have] 20 kids [who] are going to be the greenhouse team to get those plantings done. They can do that in science class.

Chandler: So we need more of that. We need more hands on stuff like that. They keep taking away from us the body power that we could use to do these elaborate things.

Clark: But you know what the nice part is, and I think this is part of No Child Left Behind, because there is a big fire behind us that we’re trying to put out, there is a lot of… willingness to be creative. I think ten years ago the administration would have looked at you like you’re crazy just go teach your history class, but now people are thinking outside the box. So I think that is a good thing. Even though we don’t have the personnel for it, I’m doing it. We have the blessing to make it work.

Conrad: As long as you have the skills that you need to teach them. Like you said, they are going to remember that part whereas if you just did a ‘read this, do this,’ they’re not going to do it, but if they are doing that for a reason, they’ll remember that and they will pay more attention to their writing and their work, because it means something to them.

Clark: You know what? It’s doable, I’ll be honest, because the… kids scored the same (on MCAS) as they always did. I felt that was a good thing, because we lost… complete days to work on the garden as a group… But, I can’t believe that five of our kids have written almost $5,000 in grants and that’s a lot! … And that’s another one where the kids lead. I really think that it might be something to take and move with because that even supersedes the darn budget. If the kids themselves see a need, parents will get behind them… The parents are going to listen to their kids more than they will listen to anyone else… We forget how cool our kids are! (Interview Group C, p. 8-9).
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Once teachers and parents focused on the aspects of Southeastern that made it a great place to teach, the atmosphere of an interview changed altogether. Smith spoke for many of the staff,

But for the most part at Southeastern we are lucky. We got great kids for the most part as compared to other areas. I very rarely have a discipline problem. Putting a little bit of effort into it is another story, but having at least the discipline out of our factors for most of us is a pretty big deal. Port City is all discipline, Brentown is all discipline… (Interview Group C, p.16).

Being grateful about working at our school was a common statement at Southeastern. Teachers cared about their students and worked well together. What Ball (2008) called the “service ethic” (p. 145) was alive at Southeastern, and I considered it important to keep that ethic from being “destroy[ed] and replac[ed] with a culture of self interest,” (Ball, 2008, p.145) which is the heart of the marketplace ethic found in NCLB and RTTT. At Southeastern, we kept that service ethic alive in spite of NCLB (and now RTTT), not because of it, and this required enormous effort, collaboration and perserverance.

One of the major findings in this chapter is that NCLB and RTTT caused major changes in our school culture and values. The high stakes testing culture became a major part of our school life. Despite our dislike of the constant focus on testing, we ourselves became complicit in the process by adding mid year and quarterly tests and having them count towards report card grades. In an effort to “share accountability” we included MCAS scores in the qualifications for advanced math classes. As our guidance counselor candidly admitted, it worried us when more special education children transferred into
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our school. Our focus on remediation was nearly frantic and caused a narrowing of the curriculum for our special needs students.

These unwelcome alterations make it essential to fight for the school to be focused on the students rather than on student test scores and teacher ratings. To whom do we owe our allegiance? Is it to “policy and to institutional survival rather than to any abstract value systems or ethical commitments?” (Ball, 2004, p.12). While we believe that our values are far more important than a set of regulations that do not serve our students’ and our school’s needs, it became very clear to all of us that to a great extent, we had allowed MCAS to rule what happens at Southeastern.

This study reveals that despite my own belief that the high stakes testing regime of NCLB and RTTT are unfair, unrealistic, and unreasonable educational policies that should be resisted, I, myself, as a principal, went well beyond mere compliance for the sake of survival—of my staff, my students and myself. For example, I used the law to extend accountability to the students by requiring high MCAS scores to qualify for Algebra I placement and by implementing a tougher attendance policy. Am I adding to the mandates’ power over the school and its stakeholders, or am I doing what is best for all concerned?

Ball(1994) suggests that teachers’ work is “intertwined in a complex process of changes in patterns of control, relationships and values…The meaning of ‘the teacher’ and the nature of teaching as a career are at stake, as is, in general terms, the future of education as a public service” (p. 64). I have seen major changes in the work of educators, in the past ten years. The technical aspects of teaching have increased—testing, gathering evidence of meeting standards, training to teach a greater diversity of
children, more responsibility for documentation—changing what teachers do on a daily basis. With the advent of value-added measurement of teacher worth, we are on the brink of yet another major change for the profession. Will this mean that teachers of the future will be less concerned with teaching as a service to our society and more concerned about how much money they will make for increasing test scores? Venn spoke for many of her colleagues when she expressed her concerns about teaching to the test as unethical, not the type of teaching she had expected and wanted to do. I still see teaching as a worthy profession that should be respected and invested with the authority to decide the best program for students. However, I am very aware that NCLB, RTTT and the high stakes testing culture “fail to take into account that teaching is not fundamentally technical work, but rather what many have regarded as a highly complex, deliberative and adaptive process“ (J. Lytle in Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009, p. 83).

My analysis in this chapter highlights the anxiety and fear created by the atmosphere of pressure created by NCLB and RTTT. Some students were anxious enough to demonstrate physical symptoms. Parents spoke about anxiety over testing, graduation and placement into specific classes. Teachers were anxious about student scores and collecting evidence for evaluations and worried about wading through a variety of standards and assessment changes. Anxiety often blocks learning and is not likely to provide stakeholders with a confident approach towards rigorous challenge. Interviews also uncovered some danger signs of the culture of self-interest making inroads within Southeastern’s faculty. Educators worry about the negative effects of low MCAS scores on the schools and on themselves. Will anxiety and fear grow as evaluations are tied to student scores, even if they are generated through
“multiple measures”? How do teachers view children with disabilities or ELLs? Will these children who learn differently continue to be welcomed into classrooms or will they be unwanted? Will the “notion of ‘service’, the investment of the self within practice and professional judgment related to ‘right’ decisions” (Ball, 2004, p.12) continue to be valued at Southeastern under the constraint of RTTT pressures or will we be more worried about making the right scores for our evaluations?

Tinken and Zhao (2013) remind us that social justice compels educators to fight for an equitable education for all children. They maintain that equity does not mean the same curriculum for all because children have different needs at different times. They would agree with Southeastern teachers that children need to learn an array of skills and have many different opportunities for learning. The same drive for social justice is found when staff members voiced concerns over insufficient accommodations or inappropriate testing levels for children who learn differently. Southeastern’s teachers and parents know that there are many factors affecting how well a child performs on a standardized test, not the least of which is that the tests are created for a non-existent “typical” sixth, seventh or eighth grader.

These interviews clearly indicate that the constant focus on test results and test preparation affected not only what we did to educate children, but also how we understood our work as teachers and leaders and how we felt about our profession. What is more interesting and perhaps poignantly so, is that the staff at Southeastern seemed to be constantly on the lookout for reasons to see the positive and to hope that what was to come would assist them in helping the students be better learners. These teachers and
some parents know that teaching is a complex process and that students are complex human beings who deserve a varied and individually responsive education.

A clear outcome from this portion of the study is the need to act upon a belief that “things are not as inevitable as all that, and that they can be different, although not necessarily in ways that we can easily imagine (Ball, 2004, p. 5). In order to keep the ethic of service alive at Southern, I, as a leader, and the teachers with whom I worked tried to exercise creativity and imagination. We worked to overcome some of the constraints and pressures brought about by educational policies that are supposedly intended to assist the neediest of our students, but instead limit their opportunities for a rich school experience.

Chapter 7 reports on some of the major findings in this study and puts forth some implications for research, policy development and school practice. I summarize some of the more disturbing changes that happened at Southeastern for the past decade under NCLB and RTTT and point at their connections with what is happening in education in our nation. I also reflect upon the staff’s ability to maintain their ethic of service, good humor and a positive attitude despite the pressures of federal and state requirements.

In the final journal entry that was part of the data for this study, I wrote this.

Journal August 2012: My advisor asked me, ‘Don’t you just want to retire?’ I keep saying, ‘No, it makes me mad, so I just want to fight!’ I think we need to take the knowledge that we’re gaining and do something with it.

Reflection: I have a great deal invested at Southeastern. My work and the work of my teacher colleagues is important because it touches the lives of over 1200
students each year. We take our work seriously and we work very hard! There is never a 7 to 2 day, it is more like 5 to whatever it takes to get it all done! We love it here. We enjoy each other’s contributions and we believe in our students and ourselves. No government can mandate that kind of dedication and effort. That comes from skillful minds and caring hearts.
Chapter 7

Is There a Way To End the Rollercoaster Ride?

Conclusions and Implications for Research, Policy and Practice

In this chapter I synthesize the findings as reported in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. In addition, I discuss implications for further research, for the development of future educational policy and for my own and other school leaders’ practice.

Ten Years with NCLB/RTTT: A Perspective from the Inside

This practitioner research study was designed to analyze what happened to the programs, structures and stakeholders of Southeastern Middle School from 2003 to 2013 as a result of NCLB and RTTT mandates. I paid particular attention to the effects of these mandates on special education and low income students, two subgroups of students at Southeastern that the school struggled to help reach the Adequate Yearly Progress goals set by NCLB. I also wanted to know whether and how our school culture was affected by the mandates. The study was guided by Ball’s (1990b) “policy cycle” as a conceptual framework for analyzing educational policy development and implementation and by Cochran-Smith & Lytle’s (1999, 2009) “inquiry as stance” as a methodological framework for understanding and engaging in practitioner research.

In this study, I have offered a vivid insider’s account of ten years in the life of a “good” school undergoing changes required by laws and initiatives created by the federal government with the stated intention of reforming public schools for the good of American children. In Chapter 4, I analyzed the growing federal role in U.S. public education by tracing its historical foundations and development. Chapter 5 presented an
analysis of the effects of structural and programmatic changes enacted at Southeastern in the period between 2003 and 2013. In Chapter 6, I analyzed the effects of federal mandates on the school’s stakeholders by drawing heavily from teacher and parent interviews as well as my own practitioner journal.

Across these chapters, my study confirms what is already well known from the perspective of policy analysis—that the federal government’s control over education is strong and growing stronger. But my study goes beyond external policy studies. It reveals many details about how federal law and initiatives have superseded state and local decision making in public education by directing states to produce specific educational results, which must be publicly announced, and by implementing severe consequences for schools whose students do not meet the stated requirements. As I discussed in Chapter 4, under NCLB, states chose curricular standards and the assessments that determined whether those standards were met. Under RTTT, policy moved public schools toward national standards and assessments. In this study of the effects of federal mandates on one high-performing middle school, I showed that the requirements under NCLB and RTTT were overall unrealistic, unfair and unreasonable.

At Southeastern, federal regulations and requirements led to a number of programmatic and structural changes for the purposes of raising the test scores of two targeted subgroups of students, special education and low income students, who as disaggregated groups, were unable to meet test score requirements in the tested subject areas of English language arts and mathematics. Although these program and structural changes allowed the school to meet its targeted requirements in some years, they also produced a number of negative effects on students, the staff and the school in general.
As my analysis shows, for the greater part of the ten years of this study, preparing for the high stakes testing regime required by NCLB was the focus of nearly every decision and change. Because the NCLB law required that student scores on the state test rise constantly until all students were declared “proficient” by 2014, I as the school’s principal, was forced to prioritize funds, scheduling and staffing to ensure additional test preparation and remediation services in the tested subjects above all other school needs. These actions produced a narrowing of the curriculum for the most vulnerable children, the very children the law said should not be left behind. Further because this resulted in reduced staffing in the non-tested subjects, these actions also limited all students’ options for hands-on and other rich learning experiences not tested. Even after the Commonwealth of Massachusetts obtained a waiver from NCLB in 2012, preparing for testing continued to take up much of our attention, as it was inexorably tied to our survival as educators since the RTTT-required educator evaluation system tied student scores directly to teacher ratings.

Part of what my intensive inquiry into our experiences with NCLB and RTTT over ten years revealed was that federal education policy promoted top-down, directive management that reflected a distrust of teachers at the same time that it required near heroic teacher efforts. Teachers at Southeastern believed that all responsibility was on their shoulders. The stress and pressures brought about by the test-focused environment sowed anxiety in our school and a rising dislike for the type of work teachers were more and more obliged to do. Complying with federal and state regulations caused me to call into question my own actions as a school leader, because they often contradicted my
beliefs about good education for middle school students and what is best for the school staff.

A key finding of my study is that NCLB and RTTT unalterably affected our school culture. I found that even though we did not want it to be so, the discourse and structures of accountability and high stakes testing became a deeply ingrained part of who we were. Programmatic changes, like the highly praised SGO and AGO classes, after school homework sessions, remediation during study periods and even some of the aspects of our PLCs spoke the language of NCLB and RTTT. I myself used the language of data and measurement, standards and testing in my reports to the Superintendent and parents. As Kornfeld et al (2007) pointed out in their self study of how their teacher education faculty responded to new accountability demands, “Our language seems to indicate that the new standards… have become imprinted in our consciousness, like the messages imprinted body and soul, in the criminals of Kafka’s (1995) penal colony” (p. 1925). As King stated in Chapter 6, we have begun to talk and act as if school is a business and “[o]ur product is making educated scholars” (King, Interview Group B, p.7).

Drawing from the analysis I presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, it is clear that our school was following a course set by the mandates of NCLB and RTTT and that we were drawn into a world where a test score is the only reflection that mattered as to who we were as a school, as educators, as students and even as parents. No matter what we did to counterbalance that image, in the end we recognized that we would not survive if we ignored what it took to succeed in the high stakes testing environment created by NCLB and RTTT.
NCLB and RTTT caused a myriad of negative emotions for every stakeholder involved. The staff and I were often angry and frustrated by many aspects of the regulations. We questioned the intent of the law itself, especially when we noted that testing measurements were focused on judging school programs rather than finding out if every student was growing towards proficiency. We questioned the short timelines given to make well-thought out and student-centered school reforms. We questioned the state’s use of shifting formulas for determining proficiency, the secrecy surrounding accountability formulas, and the focus on punishment and public shaming as strategies for change. In short, as my study shows, in many instances NCLB and then RTTT mandates required that we scramble to meet unrealistic goals in order to protect our school, our students, and the staff and also made unfair and unreasonable demands on students, staff and administration.

Another important finding of this study is that federal mandates and state regulations caused a great deal of anxiety. Students and parents exhibited anxiety about the tests themselves and about the influence of the tests on opportunities for taking advanced courses or, more importantly, being on track to graduate from high school. Anxiety was present in teachers’ concerns about the effect of the testing pressures on their students, but it was also evident in their own fears about how special education and low income student test results would reflect on the school and their own evaluations. As leader of the school, I was anxious about the students, the teachers, myself and about the school’s very survival. This generalized anxiety, which fluctuated from low-grade to acute but was always present, hardly makes for a healthy and educative environment for students and teachers.
Another finding of this study was that the intense emphasis on ELA and mathematics severely narrowed the curriculum. This was especially true for students with special needs, whose learning opportunities were greatly restricted in order to try to meet AYP goals, but it also endangered the concept of a well-rounded education for all students. NCLB’s relentless focus on these two subjects decreased the status of non-tested subjects and greatly reduced the degrees of freedom we had to foster hands-on and exploratory learning. There is a paradox in this. The intent of both NCLB and RTTT is supposedly to provide a strong and equitable education for all students, and yet, by severely narrowing the curriculum, the effect of these mandates was limiting education to the content of the required tests.

Despite all of this, my analysis also revealed that in the context of practice, our interpretation of the mandates and regulations included some “bending” of the requirements to make room for our own perceptions of what good teaching was and what a good school should look like. The expansion of our PLCs beyond the district-required SMART goals and the analysis of assessment and student work was a form of resistance to the pressures to conform to the high stakes test environment. We tried to push back against a narrowed curriculum by fostering teacher and student leadership, project-based learning and interdisciplinary work. We established, maintained or improved schoolwide, morale building events in a constant battle against the somber influence of accountability requirements. In the final analysis, and I believe my staff would agree, I believe that Southeastern continued to be a great school, despite NCLB and RTTT influences that drove us away from our own values and commitments.
Returning to a point made in Chapter 4, the stated intent of the federal mandates was to save a public education system they deemed “in crisis.” Applying that notion to Southeastern, I would argue that our school was not in crisis prior to the advent of NCLB and RTTT. However, my study of what happened over ten years indicates that NCLB/RTTT regulations created a situation wherein we were more or less compelled to obsess over AYP status. This drove us to make preparation for the annual tests our priority, which resulted in a type of generalized anxiety that was detrimental to students, parents, teachers and myself as the school’s leader. It seems to me more reasonable to conclude that we are now a school in crisis, trying desperately to maintain some semblance of a positive attitude and to push back in whatever spaces we can find against the tide of unrealistic, unfair and unreasonable demands.

I want to repeat that from my perspective as a person working deeply inside the system, Southeastern remains a “good” school whose teachers continue to be dedicated and who continue to state that they love working at the school. But it is undeniable that we have changed, and we have changed in ways that we may not be able to turn around.

**Implications of This Study**

The only way to judge whether NCLB and RTTT are producing their stated results is to study what has happened to schoolchildren under their regulations. As stated in Chapters 1 and 2, thousands of studies have examined the impact of NCLB on schools, students’ test scores, and particular targeted groups. However, few if any of these studies provide a holistic view of the effects of the NCLB and RTTT initiatives on a school and the people who worked and studied there over a long period of time. Many studies look at programmatic changes or interventions in order to determine whether NCLB brought
about improved test results for students. But even looking at interventions or programs that were created in response to NCLB does not really help us find out how these changes affected students, parents and teachers. To have a partial view of the effects of federal policy is, in my mind, not only insufficient, but possibly dangerous. This longitudinal study of the effects of federal policy on one school provides information that is not limited by what could be a temporary change. For instance, at Southeastern, our special education students improved their mathematics test scores for a portion of the time involved in the decade of this study, but the rising scores were stalled when the target levels continued to be raised. A shorter study period would have missed the decline and perhaps assumed that program changes were successful.

Despite the fact that there are many school-based studies about NCLB, the vast majority are about schools that clearly needed significant and even sweeping reforms to serve their students equitably. Urban schools are often troubled schools for a variety of reasons including many factors out of the school’s control—poverty, crime, dysfunctional home lives, and the lack of resources and supports related to jobs, healthcare, and transportation. Although studies about the progress of urban schools (or their lack of progress) under federal mandates are very important, they represent only one part of the American educational scene, and NCLB/RTTT are mandates that affected everybody in every public school. We have a responsibility to provide the academy and the public in general with evidence from studies about the effects of federal mandates on public schools that are generally regarded as serving their students well—schools that are representative of the many “good” American public schools in small towns and city suburbs. Because there are many schools like Southeastern, it is important to know how
federal education policy affected them. This study does not stand alone of course. It should be one of many studies of different kinds of schools so that its conclusions can be confirmed or refuted. It is very important to know whether what happened at Southeastern also happened—in various forms—in many other schools across the nation.

In addition to providing a view of what happened to a “good” school under federal education policy, this longitudinal study presented evidence from an insider’s viewpoint. Practitioner research is beneficial here in that it delivers a more holistic and realistic portrait of the complex elements that constitute a school. As a practitioner researcher who is also the school’s principal, I have the advantage of constant access to knowledge about programs, structures, curriculum, procedures, staffing, students, parent and community connected to the school I lead. Having access to all of Southeastern’s data helped me to understand that test results were not the only essential information about student progress. I was also aware that special needs students were missing out on foreign language and that all students were shortchanged in the related arts. The call for future research should go beyond the need for finding out which schools reached their proficiency targets, but should also examine how federal laws and regulations affected the most important element of our schools—the people who learn and teach there.

Ball’s (1990b) policy cycle framework helped me to understand the importance of exploring the concepts and influences that created NCLB and RTTT, how these concepts were translated into texts and how we, in turn translated those texts into our daily practice. Taking an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009) allowed me to reflect, question, and theorize throughout the study process. The inquiry process helped me to begin making changes that pushed back against the negative influences on our
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school culture and educational values. Practitioner research helped me to see what was really happening to Southeastern and to determine what was needed to rebuild our belief in ourselves as professionals and to find ways to enhance our programs and structures to restore a more positive and balanced education for our students.

Part of the “one size fits all” mentality of federal mandates is the assumption that all American schools are “in crisis” and that they can all be “saved” by the same set of regulations. I do not believe we can make a decision about all US public schools by treating them as if they were all facing the exact same challenges. Educational policy must not ignore that school reform must come from local knowledge as it was originally intended. At Southeastern, top-down directives and a narrowing curriculum were detrimental to our entire school culture. Great teachers began to show signs of burnout and of calling into question their careers of service to the students. Students and parents exhibited anxiety and sometimes hostility towards the educators who were supposed to do “whatever it takes” to provide students with a great education. From my insider view, I think that policymakers must take a step back and decide whether American students are really being served well by policies that ignore the knowledge of local parents, teachers and school leaders who are dedicated to the children in their schools.

NCLB and RTTT purport that accountability measures are intended to ensure that teachers will provide all students with an equitable and excellent “grade level” education. In order to achieve this purpose, NCLB was designed as a system of punishments for schools not meeting the stipulated targets. RTTT was promoted as a respite from NCLB’s punitive measures, but in a sleight of hand move, it did not remove, but simply switched the accountability burden to a new teacher evaluation system that required
teachers to prove their value to their students through “multiple measures” (RTTT, 2012). Understandably, Southeastern teachers reacted with fear and worry that having students with disabilities might reflect poorly on their ratings. Ball (2008) argues that this type of pressure put on teachers and students creates

a culture or a system of ‘terror’. It is a regime of accountability that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change. The performances of individual subjects … serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’, or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. These performances stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual…(p. 49)

The voice of Venn, a teacher at Southeastern for the past 6 years, echoes in my mind: “I don’t like who I’ve become as a teacher!” (Interview Group D, p.9). What is happening to our teachers? And how do we make it stop? It is clear that the intention is to put pressure on teachers to feel personally responsible for student achievement (test results), but there is a problem here. If the intent was to remove the ‘bad’ teachers, that intent is not served well at schools like Southeastern—and perhaps many other schools where many teachers are doing the best they can for students and already take accountability for their students’ learning. The type of anxiety Southeastern’s ‘good’ teachers feel is not an incentive to feel great about teaching, especially about teaching students who have learning disabilities and may take more time to master content than the time given in one school year. Teachers are not factory workers producing computer chips, they are professionals who have chosen a career of service to assist students to learn how to be productive and good citizens.

In 2009, I began journaling and putting the concept of inquiry as stance to work. At that time, I began to systematically reflect on and analyze what was happening at
Southeastern rather than simply following the government’s directives without question. Practitioner research allowed me to be a scholar in my everyday work. Providing myself with the opportunity to step back and consider the many ways NCLB and RTTT touched the staff’s daily work, assisted me in making more informed decisions. None of the more positive school-generated initiatives would have happened without the strength I drew from regularly keeping a journal that carefully documented what was going on and taking the time to learn what was happening to us.

Expanding my own understanding about how NCLB/RTTT laws and regulations were affecting the school made me feel responsible to effect some changes in the programs and structures set in place in response to NCLB. As I explained in Chapters 5 and 6, in 2010, I began the process of encouraging teachers to expand their PLC work to make decisions about curriculum and to think of creative ways to conduct interdisciplinary work. Through the PLCs, our Faculty Senate and the Professional Development Committee we began the task of resetting our values, freeing ourselves somewhat to design non-MCAS oriented events and projects. We understood that it was essential to our school’s survival that we pay attention to and comply with state and federal demands, but we were better able to discuss the best ways to meet those obligations without giving up what we thought was best for students. The ability to take the time to reflect, question and collaborate on decisions resulted in many of the positive changes we made at Southeastern in the past three years.

One major change our inquiry work accomplished, was the creation of several initiatives to involve students in opportunities to develop leadership skills. Teacher volunteers headed different groups of students depending on their interests. One group
was dedicated to developing positive relationships between general and special education students. Another group generated a number of activities to promote a respectful school community where bullying has no place. A third group joined the governor’s community service project and conducted a huge clothing drive for the children of Massachusetts. An academic team took on renovating a small room into a greenhouse, planted seedlings that were transferred outdoors in the spring and eventually turned into vegetables for the local food pantry. A sixth grade team took another community service project, and led the entire school in a recycling program. Many more initiatives followed, as we realized the benefits of freeing our students to focus on building their talents and strengths at the same time that we worked on programs to boost the test scores of students in the targeted groups.

As Bowe, Ball and Gold (1982) point out, in the context of practice, practitioners interpret texts which are themselves an interpretation of the intentions of the original federal mandates. As a practitioner researcher and the leader of my school, I am aware that my interpretation of the regulations of RTTT, the current guidelines that govern our efforts at Southeastern and every other public school in the U.S., affects all stakeholders at my school. Moving forward, I want to make sure that I emphasize any and all positive aspects of the regulations and mitigate as many of the more negative aspects as possible. While many politicians and policy makers seem to regard schools—and education generally—as just another business, which can be governed by quality assurance procedures and evaluated by productivity outcomes, I believe we are much more than a business. It is essential that we are not taken in by the discourse of the market, where everyone is treated as replaceable and where the only thing that matters is outputs.
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But emphasizing the positive, a worthy virtue for a school leader, does not take away the constant pressure and anxiety that continues to be present every time the results of the annual MCAS test and Southeastern’s state rating arrive. We ask ourselves, what happens if our neediest students continue to fail to reach unrealistic, unfair and unreasonable goals? Will Southeastern continue to be a great place to teach and learn, or will we succumb under the weight of new, tougher standards, a new test and an evaluation system that ties every educator to test numbers? How do we provide a rich and well-rounded education for every child amidst the continued tension and rising demands?
APPENDIX A.

LIST OF NCLB, AYP AND RTTT DOCUMENTS.

The table below reports on documents related to NCLB and RTTT archived by the author for the period 2003-2013.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>AYP Status and NCLB or RTTT consequences</th>
<th>Principal’s Letter to Parents</th>
<th>School Report Card (c)</th>
<th>Action/ Improvement Plan</th>
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The table below reports on documents related to Professional Development Records archived by the author for the period 2003-2013.

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<th>Southeastern Faculty Senate Records</th>
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APPENDIX B

LIST OF INTERVIEW DATES AND PARTICIPANTS.

(Pseudonyms are utilized to protect confidentiality)

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