The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: The Politics of Accountability and Building Civic Capacity in Four Schools in Maryland

Kenann McKenzie-Thompson

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ABSTRACT

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The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, ushered in a new level of accountability to all public schools that accept federal funding under this Act. Inclusive of requiring that schools meet adequately yearly progress (AYP), there is a set of recommendations in the legislation for building the capacity of the community to assist in school reform and success. This qualitative study examined four school-communities in Maryland to ascertain the degree to which building civic capacity comprised a part of the schools’ reform and academic success strategies. Schools were selected to match three AYP categories: Actively making AYP, rebounding from failing to make AYP, and actively failing to make AYP. Four schools in two counties in Maryland participated in the study. In addition to school staff, interviews were also conducted with parents and members of community groups. The findings suggest that schools with strong community resources are able to maintain adequately yearly progress or utilize those resources to meet it if they have failed to do so in the past. However, in a school that is failing to make AYP, building both internal and external capacity is very challenging without a strong civic capacity history. External resources were especially marshaled in the school that rebounded from failure to make AYP.
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Should this work add to the knowledge of building community capacity, I have done as I set out to do. I pray that it does. Ian Adrian Thompson, this is especially for you, may your soul find comfort, love and peace.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was a sweeping reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965; it dramatically changed the ways in which public schools were being held accountable to the federal government for educating all students in schools receiving funding via Title I of this act.

Title I of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was devoted to ensuring that disadvantaged students and the schools that served them received additional funding and support. Since NCLB affected all public schools, such a far-reaching law potentially set the stage for stakeholders to become active participants in schools’ efforts to reach the “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) goals of NCLB. The civic capacity literature on which this study rests suggests that schools, as a part of a larger system, needed the assistance of a civically engaged community to sustain reforms and meet achievement goals. The 2001 law devoted an entire section to ensuring parent involvement and building capacity for community-wide involvement (ED, Website)\(^1\). Section 1118, part E, reads:

(e) BUILDING CAPACITY FOR INVOLVEMENT- To ensure effective involvement of parents and to support a partnership among the school involved parents, and the community to improve student academic achievement … (See Appendix A for full section).

\(^1\) [http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html), Section 1118 of the Law
My study asks: **How does No Child Left Behind, as an accountability policy tool, affect school communities’ focus on building civic capacity to meet student achievement goals such as AYP?**

**Conceptual framework**

According to Henig and Stone (2008), the politics of school reform was cast in three, sometimes overlapping, frameworks. The first was the professionalism model, which often looks at how schools increase their capacity through policy changes regarding the professionals who teach and manage education. The second was the market model, which draws on competition as a means for improving school performance. The third was the community organizing model, where the community places pressure on the school system to adjust to its preferences and concerns (Henig and Stone 2008). NCLB, however, drew on all three: it mandated that “highly qualified teachers” were necessary in all classrooms (professionalism); it introduced choice for parents in failing schools (market), and called for increased community capacity (organizing). The framework of my research is a hybrid of the professionalism model and the grassroots model, with the belief that educators as well as the local community have a large role to play in how school performance is supported.
**Theoretical Framework**

In this study, I focus on the ways NCLB might motivate or enable schools and communities to enhance their civic capacity. A rival outcome is that the law may unintentionally undermine civic capacity by causing schools to become more insular to buffer themselves from scrutiny.

The study was built on the assumption that it was possible for two things to occur as a result of the sanctions involved with NCLB: communities could either rally around their schools to support them in their efforts to meet AYP or the community could be unsupportive and even uninterested in investing in a school that seemed doomed to fail. If community engagement is important to sustained school reform, as argued by some scholars, laws aimed at creating better schools should not have the unintended consequence of eroding community support and involvement where it is most needed.

There are theoretical reasons for expecting either outcome. One perspective suggested that the impact of a “failing” AYP label might create urgency such that the school would seek external support which requires a building of civic capacity. However, a rival perspective suggested that being labeled as poor performing might lead a school to become even more insular as it tried to build up its own internal instructional capacity and coherence. Certainly, in cases where capacity was lacking, a combined result might occur where a school attempted to create more alliances but was very guarded in its outreach (Walker and Gutmore 2002).
Some scholars argued that low-performing schools first needed to develop their internal capacity in response to assessment outcomes before seeking external support (Elmore 2002, 2003, Sunderman and Kim 2004). Although it is not universally agreed that community involvement is required for successful school reform, my research is based on the theoretical framework that long-term success for schools requires external community support, enhanced by building civic capacity (Shirley 1997, Stone et al., 2001, Nettles 1991).

The hypothesis that preceded this study was: Since NCLB may introduce external pressure to meet AYP, I proposed that a school’s AYP status may affect how schools approach building capacity for student achievement.

The definition of civic capacity building that informs my study is as follows: parents, local community members who are leaders, representatives from government, business, and other members of community-based organizations working collectively to meet a common challenge (Walker and Gutmore 2002, Anyon 1997, Stone et al., 2001)\(^2\). In this study the “common challenge” is supporting student achievement in schools. For schools, this may be focused through the lens of NCLB and AYP goals.

**Overview of the cases**

The unit of analysis was the school community, envisioned as concentric circles with the school as our focal point. Schools, surrounded by an immediate layer of

\(^2\) Most of the elements are agreed upon in the research of these authors. There is some variation in language used. The Research in Action authors included “elite and low-income constituents collaborate as equals.”
parents/guardians for students, then surrounded by community based organizations and groups. This group is encircled by the larger school district, which is a part of a larger state system that ultimately affects operations at the local level.

I studied four public elementary schools in two districts (in Prince George’s County and Montgomery County, Maryland) in various stages of meeting AYP targets for the academic year 2008-2009. To assess their strategies around creating capacity to increase student achievement, I conducted interviews with school and community participants to get at the school’s “civic capacity history,” as well as their recent efforts at building enhanced community-wide support.³

Across the two districts, at least one school had to meet the following criteria for the 2007-2008 academic years:

1. Always made AYP
2. Never made AYP

³ a term used from Jean Anyon’s (1997)
The intention of this design was twofold: to maximize the understanding of how a school’s AYP status may impact its efforts at building community relationships, engaging support, and institutionalizing those resources. To understand how civic capacity building had occurred around student achievement under the mandate of NCLB, two schools were chosen which had always made AYP, one school was rebounding and one school was actively failing to make AYP.

**Background of No Child Left Behind**

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was the reauthorization of the historic Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). ESEA, created during the civil rights era, was intended to create greater educational equity. Sunderman and Kim (2004) of the (Harvard) Civil Rights Project described NCLB as attempting to “mandate something never done in US history-ensuring a minimum level of progress for all children, regardless of background” (p. 1). They pointed out that in a racially and economically stratified society such as ours, education was then, and is now, the best vehicle for equalizing social mobility (Sunderman and Kim 2004). A historical review of how ESEA was formulated provided insight into how NCLB was crafted.

Documents surrounding the birth of ESEA showed that equity and opportunity were certainly cornerstones of the initial piece of legislation (Sunderman and Kim 2004, Kantor 1998). The economic report in 1964 from President Johnson’s advisors declared, “Equality of opportunity is the American dream; universal education is our noblest
pledge to realize it. But for children of the poor, education is a handicap race … and
many communities lengthen the handicap by providing the worst for those who need it
most.” Frances Keppel, Commissioner of Education under Johnson, added:

This program dramatically parts ways with the education programs
from the past … it provides aid to students in elementary and secondary schools
to a larger degree than ever before proposed. It gives special and long-needed
attention to the education of children of the poor who need the best of our schools
and who usually have received the worst … it commits education to end the
paralysis that is chronic and contagious and runs from generation to generation.
(In Meranto, 1967, p.49). 4

In these times of social strife, legislators had to tread carefully. ESEA was
designed to avoid political land mines such as church and state issues, desegregation and
distribution formula controversies. Despite the legislation suggests that one intent of the
law was to “provide additional monies to districts that suffered from the adverse impact
of concentrations of low-income families,” in some states the funds were treated as
general aid while others used it for special services for minority children (Timar 1994).
Moreover, Senator Robert Kennedy’s suggestion that an evaluation component be
included went unheeded and no provisions were made to ensure that monies were being
allocated in a manner that fulfilled the spirit of the law. So while federal interest began to
focus on the equal education of all children, “the law was still unable to greatly change
priorities at the local level, within communities” (Timar 1994, p.52). The genesis of
ESEA was “firmly rooted in the civil rights movement as well as the Great Society
antipoverty programs. Education became a large part of the struggle for social, economic
and political equality” (p. 52).

4 In Kantor 1991, quoted from Philip Meranto in The Politics of Federal aid
Therefore, one aim of ESEA was to address poverty through education. Social scientists, such as Oscar Lewis, argued that the larger community could be also important in altering poverty though this aspect of legislation appeared further down the road of reform. The original law did not specifically address this issue of community control and participation. Therefore, at that time, it became necessary for individual localities to manage matters of community involvement, changes in institutional prioritization, and policy implementation.

In the early 1970s communities experimented with having supervisory roles over local schools, as in New York City. For example, in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn, this took a unique form. In this community, the minority community members’ experience with persistent exclusion in American society led them to adopt a “watch dog” stance over local school activities (Gittell 1980).

The community in Ocean Hill-Brownsville hired and fired school staff, allocated monies and adopted various educational programs. Gittell (1980) reports that the largely minority, low-income community was met with resistance from the schools. Their attempts at school involvement were considered invasive and controlling by the education professionals who responded by leading a successful strike. This example of local supervision exemplified the type of adversarial relationship that the government sought to discourage. Gittell concluded that, “Though the injection of community
decision making and public accountability is essential to educational change” (p.221) the initial effort to make these changes after the passage of ESEA was met with frustration.

Over time, ESEA began to demand more accountability for funds. Subsequent ESEA reauthorizations resulted in increased measures for accountability in exchange for federal dollars (Kantor 1991, Doyle and Cooper 1988, Peterson and West 2003). The Hawkins-Stafford amendment of 1988, for example, added recommendations for parental involvement, thus representing a shift in federal ESEA policy.

Under these amendments, schools that did not show adequate improvement were required to make school improvement plans. Districts were encouraged to create local standards, and school-wide Title I funds were made available for flexible use in institutions where 75% of the student population was economically disadvantaged. Finally, parental involvement in program design and planning was added as a requirement for funding (Timar 1994).

ESEA went further in 1994, adding stronger measures to increase parental involvement. One of the goals of the “Improving America’s Schools Act” was to empower parents to take on school planning and advisory roles (Johnson 1997). The policy response was to increase pressure on schools along with heightened sanctions.

In 2001 the federal role in education increased dramatically with the passage of NCLB and its tough accountability requirements. “Adequacy” under NCLB was
determined by state-adopted standardized tests. Failure to make the necessary progress resulted in sanctions that increased in severity with each successive failure. Further, in order to close the achievement gap among various subgroups (based on race, economic status, and gender), “States must describe how they will close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency … [and] produce annual state and school district report cards that inform parents and communities about state and school progress. Schools that do not make progress must provide supplemental service … [and] take corrective actions; and, if still not making adequate yearly progress after five years, drastic steps must be taken” (ED 2003, Website).

Some scholars argued that these changes were a natural evolution in federal policy in education and that what mattered was making the policy work effectively. By making accountability a centerpiece, the Bush administration strengthened a national theme of state policies aimed at improving education (Hess and Finn 2004; Linn, Baker and Betebenner 2002). In fact, many states already had accountability schema in place prior to NCLB. Consistent with legislation adopted in many states, NCLB relied on assessment and accountability requirements as a major mechanism for bringing about desired changes.

Ongoing debates continued over the feasibility of achieving these goals of full compliance by 2014. A source of frustration with the current NCLB’s accountability system was that it was perceived by some educators as adding additional layers of
bureaucracy to schools (Timar 1992). Further, external pressure to perform added an additional burden to schools which were already struggling. Elmore (2002) argued, “Internal coherence ... precedes external accountability. Low performing schools are not coherent enough to respond to external demands for accountability. Test scores may tell us about students’ response to a problem, not how to improve capacity” (p.33). He further related that while high performing schools relied on the social capital of families, low performing schools could not, and therefore, must have internal capacity fully in place.

Further complicating the matter were varying levels of student preparedness, as schools faced sanctions for failing to make AYP (Orfield 2004, Elmore 2002, Meier 2004). I hope to determine how the larger community can play a role in helping schools navigate these complexities.

Including all of the necessary stakeholders remained a challenge not only for the educational establishment, but for those constructing policy as well. This study seeks to understand how sanctions affect the creation of these synergistic communities.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

NCLB mandated that each school make an effort to build the capacity of its local community, and engage parents in particular, to assist it in its efforts to reach academic goals. I will present literature about building civic capacity in general and, more specifically, findings on the role of parental involvement in education policy.

Building Civic Capacity

According to Nettles (1991), “communities have always played a part in students’ development …. Educators, advocates, and policymakers have called for increased community participation to solve problems of educationally disadvantaged students.” However, Stone, et al. (2001) suggested that moving beyond participation required a politically savvy way of coalescing participation into a “shared understanding” and the “physical, personal and communal” sharing of resources. Furthermore, communities and schools needed to create a “base of involvement along with a shared and durable understanding of public education as a major community concern and a high priority for action” (p.27). Nettles similarly defined community involvement as consisting of the actions that organizations and individuals take to promote student involvement through the allocation of resources, mobilization and instruction (Nettles 1991).

To define elements of building civic capacity, I first needed to refine the terms I use to define community involvement, a precursor to building civic capacity. Epstein and
Dauber (1991) defined involvement using five typologies that were specific to parental and school roles: basic obligations of schools, basic obligations of parents, involvement at school, involvement in learning activities at home, and involvement in decision-making (Councils, PTA). For purposes of building civic capacity, “broader community involvement,” an element that they included as somewhat optional, would in fact be necessary.

In their study of civic capacity in eleven cities, Stone and colleagues found that cities with the highest scores for involvement were often high in civic capacity. Though their study did not examine the interaction of a specific law and building civic capacity, as my study does, it was full of meaningful examples of how the larger community’s involvement and commitment of resources affected the ability of disparate groups to stay focused and collaborate to create civic capacity.

*Parent and community involvement in building civic capacity*

James Coleman’s 1991 report on “parental involvement” cautioned against schools’ efforts to keep activist parents at a distance. Although societal shifts had left the care of children more and more in the hands of schools and daycare centers, he argued that parental involvement had been shown conclusively to have great benefits.

Because of renewed interest in reciprocal relationships among parents, communities, and various education policy initiatives, community and parental involvement became central to many federal policies in the 1990s. The federal
government enacted the Hawkins-Stafford amendment to ESEA in 1988, expecting to accelerate progress towards parental involvement in meeting educational goals (Le Tendre 1991). Other initiatives included the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education (Keith 1999). Partnership for Family Involvement in Education (archived info, Ed.gov) was established in 2000 to “increase family involvement practices in education” and to promote children’s learning and achievement.” It sought to foster: (1) mutual respect between school and home; (2) effective two-way communication between school and home; and (3) a well-planned partnership with a common vision among family, community, and religious institutions.

Goals 2000 was signed into law in 1994 (NCEL.org) and mandated that by 2000:

1. All children would start school ready to learn.
2. High school graduation rates would reach 90%.
3. Students in grades 4, 8, and 12 would be able to demonstrate competency in major study areas.
4. The United States would be first in the world in math and science.
5. All adults would be literate.
6. All schools would be free of drugs and violence.
7. The nation’s teachers would have the resources needed to improve their teaching skills.
8. Every school will promote parent involvement via partnerships.

The ‘goals’ of this legislation were lofty and unrealistic and were not met; however the idea of incorporating parental involvement as a key component of academic success survived in subsequent legislation.

Prior to NCLB, the Department of Education determined that there wasn’t enough return on the Title I investments with each reauthorization of ESEA (Timar 1994).
Schools were not necessarily delivering the achievement results intended by the funding of Title I. The first major revision came in 1988 with the Hawkins-Stafford Amendments (which made changes in service delivery and increased assessment) after policy makers and researchers determined that, “after two decades Chapter I should be doing more than helping children make modest gains” (p.55). Subsequent policy recommendations included timelines to close the achievement gap, such as Goals 2000. Then Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander felt it was essential for Goals 2000 to bring about a revitalization of American education and that it would not occur “unless all community actors played a role in both supporting learning and providing support for parents” (Coleman 1991, p.2).

In the chapter “Family advocacy,” Davies (in Lutz & Merz, 1992) described sharing in decision making as the most political and controversial process of parental involvement, noting that schools often resisted this type of inclusion. Davies, however, insisted that parents who organized to support the school could be a powerful way to build civic capacity. Over time, however, the boundaries among parental, community and school roles became rigid which has led to their being portrayed as mutually exclusive (Lutz and Merz, 1992). In reality, the community governed the schools through the school boards, and the interest of the community, even if it was discontented, could be harnessed to create greater capacity.

Epstein (2001) argued that the term “parental involvement” was in fact too narrow and that the more appropriate description was “school-family-community partnerships,”
a term that took into account each area’s overlapping sphere of influence at all levels. Epstein’s typology, adopted by the national PTA, involved (1) parenting, (2) volunteering, (3) communicating, (4) learning at home, (5) decision-making, and (6) collaborating with the community.

Johnson questioned the effectiveness of parental involvement beyond volunteerism in his analysis (1997). He argued that there were two essential prototypes for involvement: the school level impact and the parent impact models. He proposed that the parent impact model, described in the next section, was most appropriate to attain larger policy goals (1997).

*The Parent Impact Model and the School Impact Model*

Johnson (1997) believed that Title I should focus on involving parents with their child’s learning. The ‘parent impact’ model stressed influencing parent contact by providing parents with resources and training them to improve the support they could give to their children at home. The ‘school impact’ model, on the other hand, explicitly sought to alter the structure of power in schools and districts through decentralization. Johnson argued in support of the *parent impact* model since it emphasized commitment to the way the school wished to manage itself, whereas the *school impact* model emphasized restructuring power dynamics between schools and parents, with the latter model being potentially too divisive (Johnson 1997).
According to Johnson, the school impact model (working with one’s own child) contrasted sharply in practice with the parent impact model because it supported policies such as parental advisory committees. He argued that, by necessity, the school impact model was an inferior model because only a small sample of a school’s parents could be involved in school governance activities. He maintained that parental advisory roles had not led to increased achievement while parental impact roles had. While some parents preferred the school impact model because of the apparent power it gave, Johnson argued against this approach because, “though parent councils were initially watchdogs, many were often co-opted by the schools” (Johnson 1997, p.1784). The debate on parental involvement made clear that involvement was necessary, but the type of involvement required for sustained reform was not clear. The element of community and civic capacity building required further testing in the era of NCLB.

Communities, social capital and building civic capacity

“All forms of capital--human, social and financial--are important for children’s education,” argued Coleman (p.8). Social capital was the glue that held relationships together and created the bond that made others’ resources available in times of need. This limited expression of capital took many forms in society, including (1) educated parents who were financially strong, but had little time for investing in their children’s education; and (2) low-income parents who had low educational attainment, but enough interest and drive to assist and find additional resources for their children, thus making up for their limited human capital in ways that tapped into social capital.
The social capital of a community at large could offset, to some degree, the limited social capital of individual families. Thus higher educational attainment was made available to children in families who themselves were not high in overall social capital (Coleman 1991). The school’s role was to partner with agencies or groups who fostered the building of capital in the community for the benefit of those who lacked it. This enhanced the school’s ability to do more and in the process also assisted in building the parents’ social and human capital. The common interest in schools that served students well and had a strong reputation could be a galvanizing force to establish relationships among schools, families and communities.

Calls for inclusion of communities within school walls had taken three forms in the past: (1) site-based management (SBM), (2) the movement to use schools as the base for social services (the community schools model), and (3) the school choice model. SBM structured decision-making so that it rested locally in schools rather than in a central administrative office which did not necessarily include parents.

In the community-schools approach that brought services to schools, the primary emphasis was placed on programs that dealt holistically with the social, health and family issues facing school-aged children (Sanders 2001). Schools were seen as only one vehicle on the road to success, among a vast network of providers. However, this model was distinct from building civic capacity because the schools did not necessarily aim to create collective civic action with the larger community. The school choice model assumed that power was in the hands of parents (Driscoll 1998); and was one of the
mechanisms that NCLB encouraged as an option for parents with children in schools failing to meet AYP (Driscoll 1998).

How schools went about utilizing community involvement could be contentious. In the next section, I consider the literature on community involvement and civic capacity building for public schools.

*Why Build Civic Capacity?*

Without citizen participation, the capacity for government to provide public goods and services is severely compromised. Local initiatives can make a difference once the constraints they face are dealt with in a meaningful way, argued Henig, et al. (1999). Henig noted that much of the education community de-emphasized the importance of the politics and coalition building necessary for sustained reform while favoring a professional and internally-driven reform effort. Henig, et al. also expressed concern that “the tendency of national school reformers to emphasize school-based decision making … partnerships between individual schools and businesses ... may consequently channel parent and community involvement away from system-wide reform efforts” (p.203).

Marschall (2004) supported Stone et al. in her assessment of what kind of participation was needed to support public goods. Based on her Detroit area study, which is described in detail below, she concluded that greater participation and involvement in the politics that are intrinsic to the process are necessary for creating change. She stated: “The purpose of citizen participation is as much to communicate preferences and
influence policy making as to assist in the implementation of the public good and to contribute to its preservation and continuation” (p.232).

Marschall’s study combined notions of co-production and models of political behavior to examine how citizens perceive and get involved in issues related to crime and education and demonstrated the importance of actively seeking and creating pathways for involvement. Marschall concluded that “the presence of institutional structures that disseminate information and provide other assistance to parents eliminates gaps in participation levels among disadvantaged and advantaged parents” (p.233).

This was a very important factor since residing in a high-poverty neighborhood negatively correlated with belonging to a community group or attending meetings about community problems (Marschall 2004). Neighborhood socio-economic status (SES) also influenced residents’ awareness, as noted in her Detroit study. Her study on participating in school and crime prevention related activities indicated that those who were formally contacted were more likely to be aware of and participate in activities aimed at addressing issues related to schools and crime. She cited Gittell (1980) and concluded that co-production happened when the voluntary action of citizens and the opportunities and arrangements to participate coincided.

Walker and Gutmore (2002) argued that “urban schools are not closed systems, but rather are embedded in a set of social, economic and political relationships that significantly impact how they operate and function...” (p.62) therefore, reform within
these porous systems requires the “creation of alliances among vested groups in the communities in order to further the reform agenda, since structural constraints limit the range of educational action by school level actors” (p.62). In addition, Coleman (1991) advised that keeping parents away may simplify administration, but fails to incorporate them into the school’s goals. Taking the first step towards parents is crucial. He argued that since communities no longer have consensus on children’s behavioral norms, parental input has the potential to create some common goals and understandings that promote achievement while increasing parents’ ability to act as agents for the children of the community.

Wirt and Kirst (2001) claimed that it was a myth that schools were apolitical. When schools elect their programming and with whom they will interface within the community, they are engaging in political acts, Wirt and Kirst also underscored that external stimuli, such as the political economy, new ideas, crystallizing events and the economy also impacted schools’ politics. The school’s agenda does not exist in a vacuum, but is shaped by issue recognition, adoption, prioritization and maintenance.

In Stone and colleagues’ eleven-city study, they found that there were limits to external interventions and that local factors needed to be considered. The communities in their study that were considered “highly mobilized” had a history of neighborhood activism. Stone et al. found that in “highly mobilized” cities, elites proposed more solutions that those cities considered “less mobilized.” Hence, determining levels of “civic capacity history,” as done by Anyon (1997) in her study of urban schools, will be
crucial to drawing conclusions in my study about the current levels of growth versus previous levels of civic capacity.

Interpersonal dynamics can stymie local efforts and the interaction of local actors. The civic capacity literature contained several dominant themes about interpersonal tensions that greatly impact efforts to achieve school reform. Race, socio-economic status (SES), and their interplay when local actors attempt to coalesce around issues continue to be crucial in efforts to build civic capacity in urban education.

Coalition building can be complicated by both race and class dynamics because of the history of race relations in the United States and the differences that can arise over varying degrees of resources (Henig et al., 1999). Or, as Walker and Gutmore (2002) put it, “Urban schools occupy two social spheres, one defined by political economies and the other by racial and ethnic identity. Both hold implications for developing and sustaining educational regimes and for their ability to become high capacity systems”, (p.65). Their study on the Abbott Districts in New Jersey where a court ruling determined that greater parity on school funding needed to be enforced for the benefit of these poorer areas. Several assumptions guided their study: the city’s economic structure and degree of political discord influences civic capacity building, cities with a strong history of capacity will do better under the new reforms, districts with greater civic support will have less resource issues and districts will be better able to implement reforms where there is greater civic support.
In their study, civic capacity was operationalized as “the degree of involvement from major civic groups” before and after the court-mandated reformed. In their regression analysis, they utilized three predictors of civic capacity, one of which was directly linked to court class: (1) percent free and reduced lunch, (2) percent owner-occupied homes, and (3) civic capacity history. The dependent variable was “the embracement of elementary school reforms.” Surveys were sent to 28 district superintendents, seeking to determine their perception of the implementation of a court ruling to create greater funding parity as well as to gather demographic data. The predictors ‘free and reduced lunch’ as well as ‘civic capacity history’ proved to be significant indicators as well. With a response rate of 79% (22 of 28 district superintendents) their research showed that lower SES status correlated with lower levels of capacity in the Abbott districts. The challenge of garnering community input, coupled with the demands for accountability increases the complexity of studying the effects of ESEA/NCLB at the local level. Next, it’s relevant to review federal accountability requirements as they devolved to the local level.

**Accountability**

The design of the accountability mechanism of NCLB engendered responses nationwide from educators, state government, and interest groups. Although No Child Left Behind has generated quite a bit of publicity, Hamilton (2003) argued that it simply continued in the same vein of “test–based” accountability systems that had been evolving at the state level, the characteristics of which were “goals, measures, targets, and consequences” (p.27).
High-stakes testing in education began to take hold in the 1970s. The emphasis on using tests to evaluate instruction became more pronounced in the 1980s. After *A Nation At Risk* was published in 1983, there was growing concern about how American students were performing compared with their international counterparts (Hamilton 2003). Large scale testing has evolved into an accountability system that relies on tests for external monitoring purposes.

Hannaway and Woodroffe’s (2003) review of recent education reforms examined the two major classes of policy instruments that had been used recently: market-based mechanisms which sought to broaden school choice, and accountability-based mechanisms which built incentives into the administrative structure with performance-based rewards and sanctions. In essence one was meant to address government failure (sanctions) and the other, market failure (2003). Those market-based mechanisms designed to address “government failure” were vouchers, tax credits, and charters (Hannaway and Woodroffe 2003).

With regard to the effect on schools, Hannaway and Woodroffe indicated that accountability *does* affect school performance and may in fact disproportionately benefit schools serving children with low SES by providing more defined strategies and goals. Case studies of Florida showed that even schools that were performing well felt pressure to stay that way under strong accountability laws.
Public schools which received Title I funds were required to show that students of various disaggregated subgroups were meeting “adequate yearly progress” and, according to the Department of Education’s website on No Child Left Behind, “poverty levels, race, ethnicities, disabilities, and limited English proficiencies” would not be considered acceptable reasons to exclude students from meeting these minimum requirements. Attendance and high school graduation rates were also considered. Additionally, NCLB testing focused on ensuring that minimum levels of reading and math abilities were met in third and eighth grades. The penalties for failing AYP became increasingly severe. The first time a school failed to meet AYP for any subgroup, the school was described as being “in need of improvement”. First, assistance was offered, then sanctions and possible restructuring followed.

Critics of this approach argued that high poverty schools as well as schools with high immigrant and minority populations would be penalized (Orfield 2004). The concerns stemmed from the large concentration of poverty in many of these schools, which might require more time to remedy academic deficiencies. However, even if these schools showed the same growth rate per year as schools with significantly less disadvantaged students, the law did not recognize the positive gains. To remedy this disparity, seven states started pilot “growth model” programs to consider overall growth instead of just the actual score (ED 2002).
The law provided the option that “parents with children in schools that fail to meet state standards for at least two consecutive years may transfer their children to a better-performing public school, including a public charter school, within their district. If they do so, the district must provide transportation, using Title I funds if necessary” (ED 2002). Students from schools that failed to meet state standards for at least two years were also eligible to receive supplemental educational services, which included tutoring and after-school services. These options originally became available after three and two years, respectively; however, the law has been adjusted to allow for flexibility in the order in which they are implemented in cases where exceptions are requested by the schools. In some cases, choice was an option only after the third year of failing (Ed.gov). After failing to meet AYP for three consecutive years, schools face stricter sanctions which might involve reconstituting a school by replacing the administrators and teachers or making it eligible for other takeover, such as by a private organization.

The choice provisions under NCLB were important because the availability of spaces in non-failing schools was emerging as a major problem in many cities. The option to relocate was seldom utilized in the area included in this study. Other scholars argued that the notion of positive pressure was contrary to the goal of increasing capacity, because when accountability was managed this way, it actually hurt schools’ morale (Sunderman and Kim 2004, Orfield 2004, Elmore 2002, Mintrop 2003, Meier et al., 2004). Linn, Baker, Betebenner, 2002 explain that the notion is that external pressure is utilized to motivate teachers, however goals that are perceived as unattainable may have a

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5 Education Week also has a full section on “low-performing schools” that describes the results of intervention policies of NCLB.
pervasive effect on teachers. Further, there were concerns about the effect on students if disproportionate numbers of minority and poor children were being detained in their grade (Hamilton 2003).

In *Redesigning Accountability for Education* (2004), Elmore and Furman identified several assumptions upon which NCLB/ESEA was based: (1) student achievement is key, (2) the current instruments work in measuring student achievement, (3) consequences motivate; therefore better performance will come, and (4) there will be minimal unintended consequences. The major flaw of these assumptions was that the standards were too vague. Teachers became too concerned about the test results, so instead Elmore and Furman suggested rewarding effort, giving testing a more realistic time frame, holding students accountable only for material that was taught; and finally, deploying more resources.

In Mintrop’s study (2003) of Kentucky and Maryland schools facing sanctions, he concluded that putting schools on probation was a weak motivator for the majority of teachers, who saw the assessments as unrealistic or unfair. The burden was considered even greater when sanctions were placed on individual schools, not just the school districts. Not all teachers responded to the pressures in the same way. A few teachers thought the stigma of being on probation was “worth it” if it meant more resources would be made available. Teachers who felt their school was a “sinking ship” were most apt to leave.
Mintrop found that if the school’s organization became more rigid and rule-oriented in an effort to improve, teachers were more likely to contemplate leaving, creating high levels of instability. Many teachers in his study did not leave and tried to follow the procedural requirements of the law. Mintrop indicated, “Teachers truly served two masters; although they saw the accountability system as unhelpful and stacked against them, they did not reject it and did not outright condemn it (p.19).” In Maryland all seven schools in the study were able to stem the decline of achievement in the first years after identification, but they did not make significant gains.

The “probation” stigma initially created a crisis environment and the sense among the school’s staff that “we are in this together,” but in the end, the crisis environment only created joint action towards improving school performance in the school environments that were already cohesive. In fact, Mintrop argued, many schools needed baseline stabilization before they could take on an ambitious reform effort. Mintrop’s study did not delve into matters of external support, but found that schools lacking internal cohesion simply could not respond effectively to the crisis environment. This echoed Elmore’s (2002) critique that internal coherence was a necessary precursor to a sustainable response to external accountability requirements.

Elmore’s analysis, however, did not emphasize the community component. Its focus was on building internal capacity because some communities lacked the social capital and resources to contribute if many of the parents were low-income and themselves disadvantaged. This argument, however, contradicted policies aimed at using
community involvement as a mechanism to create greater capacity for low-performing schools.

NCLB differed from the way traditionally “effective” accountability systems were defined, according to Wohlstetter. More traditional” accountability systems “feed information into the policy cycle, improve schools and … are biased towards action”, (Wohlstetter, 1991, p.31). According to her research, the best accountability system: (1) is empowered by state government, (2) has monitoring as a primary mission, (3) is independent from implementers, (4) has strong relationships with other policy actors outside of government, and (5) communicates findings to multiple constituents. There was no mention of community engagement, despite the trends reflected in federal policy at the time.

Given that Wohlstetter’s research was done prior to NCLB, it is interesting to note that some elements of NCLB were considered strong by these standards, such as the way findings were communicated to multiple constituents; however, the law not only monitored, but also sanctioned. Further, the state government was not the primary sponsor. And her assessment, like Elmore’s did not address the community’s role.

Hamilton (2003) deemed the success of any large-scale accountability system as depending to a large degree on the capacity of teachers, administrators, parents, students and policymakers to respond to the (federal) system in effective ways. This guideline
came closer to acknowledging the necessity of creating the synergy needed to build civic capacity. My study adds to the literature on how the current accountability system affects efforts at building civic capacity that intentionally includes community.

_Challenges to building civic capacity_

Rotherham (2002) argued that federal accountability was in fact an effective tool for large-scale change, terming it a “national good.” There were two possible outcomes to the imposition of sanctions by NCLB: communities could either rally around their schools to support them in their efforts to meet AYP or the community could be unsupportive and even less interested in investing in a school that seemed doomed to fail. If community engagement was deemed important by scholars and community members, then it was crucial to ensure that laws aimed at creating better schools did not have the unintended consequence of eroding community support and involvement where it was most needed.

Statistics suggested that children performing below expectations were primarily minorities with limited social and economic capital. As Walker (2002) and Oliver (1999) also argued, economic disadvantage created a barrier to building greater civic capacity for parents as well. Walker identified economics as a key predictor of participation. Those with fewer resources were less likely to be supportive in community movements or politics. Race and class also continued to play a very crucial role in social interactions. Distrust between groups and _de facto_ social segregation could stymie the desire to collaborate for a common cause across these perceived divisions.
Henig et al. (1999) studied race relations in relation to civic capacity efforts. They focused on “the governance regimes and the way in which race has complicated or facilitated the building of civic capacity” (p.6) in four major cities (Atlanta, Detroit, Baltimore and Washington, D.C.). They found that these issues were real constraints even within racial groups when it came to cooperating in reform efforts.

Another challenge to building civic capacity may be lack of preparedness on the part of districts and schools to be in reliable partnerships. Fullan (2001) suggested that some schools had little agreement on expectations and blamed the students and community. Elmore (2003) contended that “schools (first) need support developing internal coherence and instructional capacity” (p.9). This view suggested that low-performing schools did not have the internal structures necessary to respond well to external accountability pressures, but “at some point, external help will be necessary for resources and support” (p.9). Elmore’s contention that schools needed to develop internal cohesion was well taken, but he framed it in a continuum from internal to external capacity. This notion challenged the idea of simultaneously building support both internally and externally.

While Fullan (2000, p.2) concurred that there needed to be two kinds of capacity building, he suggested that they could be done concurrently. He added: “Effective schools use their internal collaborative strength to seek out relationships with the community ... they pursue two-way capacity building in order to mobilize the resources
of both the community and the school in the service of learning.” These external forces, however, did not come in helpful packages; “it was up to the school to figure out how to make its relationship with them a productive one” (p.2).

A recent study in Philadelphia looked at civic capacity in the NCLB era (Research in Action, 2007). This study indicated that one of the obstacles to building capacity was the resistance education professionals had to engaging with a public that was critical of their work. The outsourcing of contracts for supplemental services, however, served as the impetus for the schools’ efforts to begin building partnerships.

**Summary**

Because there are numerous challenges to building coalitions around school reform policies, those who have grown frustrated with the reform movements’ seemingly slow progress may understandably view relying on collective efforts with skepticism. However, a paradigm that focuses on ‘social capital’ allows for a more individualized focus, apart from the more difficult and slower-paced work of coalition building (Putnam 1995). Civic capacity takes it a step further than social capital and “captures the deliberate and concerted attempts by diverse sectors of the community to address… a public issue” (Henig et al. 1999). Also influencing how sectors converge to support schools is the accountability schema for schools failing to meet AYP. This is discussed in the next section.
Accountability Dilemmas: NCLB

Critics of NCLB argued that schools that served large numbers of disadvantaged students were unfairly targeted because while they served a needy population, they were expected to perform within the same time frame as those who did not, without added resources (Orfield 2004). Even some proponents of NCLB believed the provisions might not be effective because of flaws in how the law was being implemented or for other technical reasons (Peterson 2005, Hess and Finn 2004, Popham 2004).

Sunderman and Kim (2004) argued that ESEA did not change internal operations of schools in its inception; and that standards were not uniform and could punish those with higher standards. Growth models have since been approved for some districts to address this concern (ED 2005). Sunderman and Kim argued that since few parents were exercising the choice option, making choice available across broader district lines might be necessary.

In Sunderman and Kim’s 2004 study of eleven districts, they identified many start-up challenges; for example, the coordination of supplemental services created an accountability dilemma. These services, which were paid for out of Title I funds, could further weaken internal coherence if they were not in agreement with the daily curriculum. There were also few mechanisms to communicate with teachers among these services. It was also difficult to assess causal effects since participation was not random. On the other hand, groups like the Education Trust, which described itself as being dedicated to closing the achievement gap, argued that the new accountability measures
were not harmful. In a February 2005 press release, the Education Trust upheld its support for strong accountability measures, stating: “We know these changes must happen to close gaps. We must tackle these issues head-on, with an accountability system that holds systems of public education responsible for educating all students (website).” Further, on behalf of Education Trust, a group of school superintendents supported all of the accountability requirements in a letter to Congress, asking it not to “roll back the clock” on accountability provisions, but instead to provide more funds to better meet the demands of added services for schools not meeting adequate yearly progress. This move garnered a lot of attention since teachers’ unions generally disapproved of the law. This show of support countered the general assumption that school leaders were united in their opposition to NCLB.

An additional dilemma was that populations in failing schools might find it difficult to move to communities where schools were considered to be superior; therefore, the larger community’s help might be sought not only by the schools, but also by parents who were unable to exercise choice. If Orbell and Uno’s proposition holds true that low income people are limited in their ability to use exit or voice, for lack of resources, one would not expect to see much direct involvement from parents of students in failing schools, but it does not preclude a broader community response. Even with the choice provisions of NCLB, the limitations of space suggested that the option to leave failing schools would not be available to most children (Hannaway and Woodroffe 2003).
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

In order to research this issue, I examined four school communities in suburban Maryland that were in various adequate yearly progress (AYP) categories for the 2007-2008 academic year. In order to assess the communities’ capacity for marshaling community support, I conducted interviews with key school and community participants to gain a sense of the “civic capacity history,” as well as the current state of capacity building. Using the school community as a unit of analysis, I collected data from parents, teachers, principals, community groups, and administrators who lived or worked within the school tract boundaries to determine how NCLB has impacted their level of capacity building. In this section, I describe my unit of study and discuss my hypotheses and data collection.

My school-communities are located in Prince George’s and Montgomery Counties in Maryland. I define the school community as the public schools, local businesses, community-based organizations, formal groups, residents, and parents in a school’s boundary area.

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6 This term is taken from Jean Anyon’s research on the Abbott Schools in New Jersey, as well as Walker and Gutmore (2002)
Table 1: Racial Demographics of Prince George’s County, 2006

Table 2: Racial Demographics of Montgomery County, 2006
Collective participation is the key to building greater capacity. For purposes of this study, I define “participation” as the interactions between the school and its community members initiated by either party with the intention of exchanging information or lending support to the school community. These activities do not necessarily have to be done to address a common problem. However, building civic capacity requires not only participation, but an agreed upon agenda and strategy for pursuit that involves all the relevant parties.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that guided this study was one in which schools and communities were in a symbiotic relationship, both responsible to the students who were the primary users of this public good. Undergirding the framework is the theory that building civic capacity is an essential component of meaningful and productive organizational change for school communities. Building civic capacity can be distinguished from community engagement in several essential ways: building civic capacity means reaching across sectors to create alliances that are held together by institutionalization and a commitment to a broader, *commonly shared goal*. Governmental, business, and community-based organizations and residents represent demographically significant participants. Even residents who do not have children in school may participate in activities that support schools out of an interest in the community’s overall well-being. The politics of these alliances can serve to strengthen the focus of resources made available to address the common area of concern, in this case, the schools’ need to meet academic goals.
The concept of civic capacity building goes further than participation because it creates a coalition of various stakeholders to work on a common area of concern; in this case, supporting student achievement. The research question seeks to uncover: Do the potential sanctions for failing to meet AYP have consequences for building civic capacity to meet educational goals? What kinds of capacity-building activities are occurring and which are not?

This conceptual framework provides a lens by which to analyze the community responses by indicating the degree of shared understanding and joint action around the issue of meeting the goals of increasing and maintaining student academic success. In this case, schools are under the mandate of NCLB and parents are integral to the community and parents are integral to this mandate in the letter of the law. The actual experience of this potential effort to build capacity is the subject of this study.

Hypotheses

One can posit several hypotheses for the study of these four school communities. One possible hypothesis (H1) is that the threat of sanctions will indeed motivate all schools, regardless of performance, to reach out, and building civic capacity will occur, especially in schools with low income populations. However, this seems overly optimistic given the many challenges to doing so. A competing hypothesis is that school communities failing to make AYP will not be able to increase their levels of civic capacity because they lack the capability and/or motivation to reach out. Levels of participation may in fact decline and there will be no evidence of building civic capacity.
Those schools making AYP will be better able to gather resources because they will enjoy a more positive relationship with their constituents (H2). My own hypothesis, based on the challenges of building civic capacity mentioned in the literature and on Mintrop’s study, was that affluent communities will marshal external resources to improve their schools, make sure they retain their good standing and at the very least help with improvements if their schools are failing to make AYP. Based on Mintrop’s (2003) analysis, schools that are already cohesive were able to use the sanctions as a motivating factor. However, schools that are in distress will be internally focused and limited in their outreach capacity.

**Units of Analysis: Descriptors**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators, parents and community and business groups in two counties in Maryland. I chose these districts because they offer a diversity of economic and demographic contexts, yet they are in the same metropolitan area, making access to them relatively easy. This ease of access and proximity can also help in comparing and understanding neighborhoods and context clues.

Demographically, the two counties are wealthier than the average U.S. household. About 13.3% of the US population lives below the poverty line; however, only 4.6% of the population of Montgomery County lives in poverty, and, in Prince George’s County, only 7.7% (Survey 2006). The benefit of studying these areas is that the financial resources the districts have available to them from the larger community may not be a
major limiting factor in their ability to seek to build greater capacity for involvement, per the NCLB legislation.

The two jurisdictions tend to be fairly representative of the national racial subgroups as well, per census data, see table 3. They do vary from each other, however, in the makeup of their student populations. The 140,000 student population\(^7\) of Montgomery County schools is 22.9% African American, 21.5% Hispanic, 21.5% white and 15.2% Asian. The population of non-English speakers is roughly 9.5%. The percentage of students who are on free and reduced lunch is 24.7%.

![Bar chart showing racial subgroups in Montgomery County, Prince George's County, and the US.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Montgomery</th>
<th>Prince Georges</th>
<th>US</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15.2</td>
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Table 3: Largest racial subgroups in the US, compared to the case districts

Prince George’s County, on the other hand, has a less diverse population of about 133,000 students. The overwhelming majority of students are African American (73%),

\(^7\) Montgomery County is the 16th largest district in the country, source MCPS
while Hispanic students comprise 14%; white, 6.3%; and Asian, 3%. The proportion of students considered economically disadvantaged, on free and reduced meals, are 43.2%, with non-English speakers constituting 6.2%. Per pupil spending averages $9328.8

National averages show about 45% of children under the age of five is considered traditional minorities. According to the Children’s Defense Fund, while 17.8% of US children live in poverty, on average, a larger proportion of black and Hispanic children live in poverty than their white counterparts.9 This region, while relatively better off than the national average, has an over representation of African Americans compared to the national average and is fairly representative of the Hispanic and Asian populations.

I felt the counties were a good choice because the large minority community allows us to examine issues of race. Also significant percentages of students are also on free and reduced lunch, which allows for economic variety among the student body. In general, compared to the larger U.S. population, the districts under-represent the percentage of white students and Prince George’s County over-represents the percentage of African American students. However, the overall mix allows us to see different environments, groups and perspectives on the issue being studied.

Selection

For the purposes of my research, I originally intended to include one elementary school per district that met the following criteria: 1. “always met AYP”, 2. “Failing to

8 http://www.greatschools.net/cgi-bin/md/district_profile/17/
9 www.childrensdefense.org
make AYP‖, 3. “rebounding from failing to make AYP”. I ultimately included three schools from Montgomery County and only one school from Prince George’s County due to limited interests in participation, while using a stratified randomized selection process. I explain this process in more detail below.

Of Montgomery County’s 200 public schools, only four elementary schools were failing to meet AYP and over 160 schools were meeting AYP. In Prince George’s County, almost three times as many schools were failing to meet AYP (eleven versus four). In 2007 ten elementary schools in Prince George’s County were able to exit the “watch list,” but the situation was still serious enough that 56 elementary and middle schools were in “improvement status.” 10 In Montgomery County, only two schools failed to meet AYP, leaving few options for random selection of subjects to interview. Given the rare status of these two schools, it became no surprise that the principals were unwilling to engage in a study, though attempts were made to include one of those schools not making AYP in Montgomery County.

The units of analysis are the 4 elementary school communities, which were randomly selected from the online report card database that identified AYP status. First, I separated Prince George’s and Montgomery County schools. Then, I selected each school in a stratified manner according to three categories of AYP status I identified for purposes of my study: 1. always met AYP, 2. failing to make AYP, 3. rebounding from failing to make AYP. Among these three strata, a school was randomly selected so that there was a school representing each AYP status group. In this study, the schools that

10 http://www.acps.k12.va.us/schools.php
participated were the first schools that were randomly chosen from its particular AYP category and agreed to participate. In Prince George’s County, after months of trying, only one school agreed to participate in the study and it was a school that fit category 2. “failing to make AYP.”

To begin the study’s approval process in Montgomery County, I first needed the support of a principal before the review by the county’s central office could begin. Through contacting the PTA member of one of the schools, I was able to secure the principal’s support to access the school. The process of gaining access to the individuals I sought to interview was in itself a very educational and involved process which will be discussed in more detail under the data collection section. After schools were chosen, I requested permission for access to various schools and community organizations through an email introduction, followed up by a phone call. As noted above, these efforts did not yield willing participants, but had to be done each time a school was selected to solicit interest in participation. Though it was time consuming and at times discouraging, interview-based, qualitative case studies remained the chosen method for several reasons.

The benefits of using case study analysis are three-fold: it is helpful in uncovering contextual information, especially if it is subject to many variables; it lends itself to an issue that can be investigated in a real-life context; and it is useful in situations in which behavior cannot be manipulated (Yin 2003). In this case, the nuances of each community need to be accounted for.
Twenty-six semi-structured interviews were recorded. Recordation was useful for conversation analysis and to limit the need for note-taking to ensure a more natural interaction (Silverman 2000). Transcripts were also useful in seeing how stories are “co-produced” or shared among respondents in the same setting. One limitation with interviews, however, is that they provide an individual’s perspective and may not be unbiased and objective; therefore it was important to reflect on the broader social context of each area and school (Silverman 2000). This was accomplished with available public information on demographics and by choosing to go into great depth using a small number of cases.

Data Collection

Initially, interviews were sought with school principals by letter. This strategy was meant to provide greater access to teachers and PTA leadership. However, it proved to be more fruitful to begin with a PTA member as the initial source of introduction to the schools. School principals were sent letters notifying them of the study. However, when I reached them via letter, then phone, they tended to be very protective of their time and information and resisted being interviewed.

In Montgomery County the leadership of the countywide PTA provided the entrée to the first principal interview (school 1). When I realized one of the schools selected had an active PTA I was familiar with, I contacted the president. I met her at a PTA presentation for a group of preschool mothers and sought her help in securing a meeting with her principal. That effort proved most fruitful. The second principal I

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11 Personal conversation with Clarence Stone, 2009
contacted was in a school (2) that had previous struggles with AYP and was now succeeding. I was finally granted an interview after several attempts. The third school (3) had never made AYP; the principal repeatedly requested to see paperwork and ultimately ignored interview requests. Given the few schools available in the county that were entirely failing, I had to rethink my design at this point and decided to select another school regardless of AYP status. Thus, I chose another school in the county randomly.

In Montgomery County, several attempts were made to reach the central office official that served as a counterpart to the Prince George’s County’s official. I made repeated efforts to be on his calendar, but these came to no avail. At first, I was advised that the superintendent did not participate in studies. Therefore, I asked a colleague of his to intervene and contact his office. I was able to connect with his office by phone; however, nothing came of promises to schedule an appointment.

Prince George’s County proved to be more of a challenge for securing interviews. Initially, their principals routinely did not return calls. The superintendent was very willing to speak and was initially responsive; however, it stopped there. One school that was initially chosen had to be replaced in the study when the principal of this “failing school” declined to become involved because she was “busy trying to make AYP.” In a desperate attempt to keep Prince George’s County in the study, I had to step back and think of how introductions could happen with these schools where I had no contacts and wanted to maintain random selection.
Once approval was granted in Prince George’s County, all schools were notified by letter by the accountability office. The first two schools responded after several contacts over the course of two months. No other school responded to the first several requests for principal or teacher interviews. Further, I was advised by the accountability office to refrain from contacting schools from late January until after March, which is an intense preparation and testing period. In the end, one principal in Prince George’s County agreed to participate after two months of overtures. The other said ‘no’ initially then acquiesced on a follow-up request, which ultimately did not include speaking with her staff. The third principal never responded.

**Handling the detours**

After I had made several attempts to reach this principal I shall call Ms. Beauford, she emailed to ask about the nature of the study. She was a principal in Montgomery County, where no prior letters are sent to principals until the approval is given at the school level. After receiving several emails explaining the study, Ms. Beauford contacted the district to verify that I had received permission to engage in the study. After verification, she continued to ask for paperwork. Finally, I suggested that I would look for another school. She asked that I wait until after AYP testing. When I contacted her then, she again inquired about how the study would be used. Again, I suggested perhaps I should move on in the interest of time and she suggested I contact her again in the future. Instead I contacted the PTA in hopes of gaining their participation and perhaps returning to her later.
However, this proved to generate a set of problems. When the school’s PTA president was asked to participate in the study, she indicated that she was willing but needed to check with her principal who was “a stickler for details.” She responded by email indicating that her principal did not want the PTA involved. At this point, I contacted the district PTA to ask for the proper protocol for contacting PTA leadership, as it struck me as odd to need the principal’s permission for PTA participation. The district president responded by sending an email expressing her concern that a parent felt the need to check with the principal. She then wrote the school’s PTA president, copying me, indicating that the PTA is a separate organization that supports the school and should act independently when it came to whom they had at their meetings or spoke to concerning academic issues. Given the tensions, I declined to pursue the school or any of their affiliated groups as a part of my inquiry.

In an effort to maintain the original design of six schools as the units of analysis, I again randomly chose two schools according to a stratified sampling design that only chose from among schools who were failing to make AYP. Once I had selected those schools, I thought it would be wise to see if any colleagues knew the teachers or principals so that they could provide an introduction. I found a colleague who was a traveling therapist for various area schools and she was happy to do so. However, by this date, it was relatively close to the end of the school year and again responses were hard to come by. I persisted into the end of June and summer to secure their cooperation. At this point the process of securing six interviews had now spanned from December 2008 to June 2009.
Having only four cases changed the design significantly and created increased internal and external validity threats. I no longer had the symmetry of AYP categories that I was seeking per district. I decided to create a design that looked at the effect of meeting accountability challenges, while taking into account the AYP status of the schools. I would be less able to make comparisons among school communities on the basis of their AYP designation. However, I felt valuable information could still be gained by studying each community, such as looking at the aggregate results and responses to building capacity for student success, as defined by meeting AYP goals.

Determining the parameters of community actors was defined largely by the interviewees I had access to and their willingness to share this information. I came to rely on the groups that were often mentioned, such as Soundoff, and those that held an official capacity, such as the Roundtable. This study should not be conceived as a thorough representation of the community resources available to these schools.

Interview schedule

At each school, my goal was to interview the principal, at least two teachers, two parents and the PTA leadership. I also sought out community groups and business groups. I interviewed one central office administrator, four principals, six teachers, four PTA officers, seven (non-PTA) parents, members of three community-based organizations and one business group for a total of 26 interviews. Questions were designed to gain more depth and clarity about the perspectives of parents, educators, and members of the community. The questions are given in the interview schedule in
Appendix B. Categories of persons who were contacted are listed below, as well as where names were obtained:

1. Principals (school website)
2. Teachers (from principal)
3. PTA officers (state PTA and school websites)
4. Business groups (local papers, PTA, suggestions from principals)
5. Superintendent (District website)
6. Parents (community and school listserv requests for participants)

I chose only elementary schools because they are most likely to have the highest levels of parental and community involvement (Epstein and Dauber 1991) and seemed to offer the best chance of capturing activity that builds civic capacity.
The underlying questions designed to answer the larger research question about how AYP status is affecting the building of civic capacity with regard to these schools include:

- How aware are the interviewees of AYP status and implications?
- How do they define involvement?
- Who is considered community by their definition? (Sometimes there is disagreement about what even constitutes community.)
- Are there disagreements among respondents’ answers about who are the relevant stakeholders?
- What roles does each stakeholder (mentioned by respondents) take on?
- How have outreach and other activities changed and when?
- What has changed within the last several years since NCLB has been in place? (See Appendix B).

12 Source: *Washington Post* article on Montgomery and Prince George’s schools now making AYP, confirmed with department databases.

13 The time frame for making AYP as defined on this chart is based from 2002-2007 only.

14 Pseudonyms used.

15 Full interview protocol is in Appendix D.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AYP Status</th>
<th>Montgomery</th>
<th>Prince George’s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always Made AYP</td>
<td>Ashley Elementary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Newton Elementary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No longer failing to make AYP</td>
<td>Perkins Elementary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failing to make AYP13</td>
<td></td>
<td>Oaktown Elementary</td>
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</table>

Table 4: Public Elementary Schools As Organized by AYP Category14
Respondents were also asked about current activities as they pertained to increasing or maintaining student achievement. I also attempted to ascertain their perceptions of how resources are being allocated, how decisions are made about how resources are used, and the rationale for these decisions. If there was evidence of building capacity, I delved into the nature of these alliances to see how they compared to Sanders’ (2001) typology about effective partnerships and if they constituted high levels of civic capacity, as defined by this model and that of Stone, et al. (2001).

In no case was permission granted for me to stay in the school and observe the functions of the school day. Observations occurred during the process of waiting to meet with interviewees. Having the ability to simply tour the halls and observe the role of partners who may be serving the schools or how interactions occurred between staff and community members would have added an additional layer of perspective for analysis. However, that is not the nature of what was permitted.

Data Analysis

Once interviews were taped and transcribed, I coded them by first conducting a microanalysis of the data, then creating larger themes through open coding to compare schools and the responses of subcategories of interviewees (Strauss and Corbin 1998). After the initial manual micro-analysis of the data, Atlas Ti was used to sort the data in a broader sense so that the review is all inclusive at the micro and macro levels. Phrases such as “sanctions,” “involvement,” ”parent administration,” “outreach,” “community involvement,” and related themes were pulled from the text.
The thematic approach used in open coding is meant to determine what commonalities and dissimilarities exist among schools. Questions considered included: What efforts are meant to build civic capacity? What do schools have in common (or not) in relation to their support networks? How are parents involved (or not) with schools that are or are not making AYP? How do the schools compare to each other in their views of the larger community?

The downside of using quantitative data software is that one has to be careful not to make the review overly narrow. Silverman (2000) cautions that using thematic categories to code data can create rigid grids to function in. Furthermore, in an interview format, one can only get the respondent’s perspective which is not objective, so one has to be mindful that it is a unique perspective and not to generalize beyond the cases too broadly. In addition to recordings, it was necessary to have field notes to record visual cues, atmosphere, the physical condition of the schools, and physical reactions and gestures that are not apparent in audio.

Finally, the interview responses were analyzed for similarities and differences among schools by AYP categories. It was important to compare across labels to see, descriptively, how civic capacity building efforts have been occurring (or not occurring).

**Limitations of the study: Case selection and elementary school status**

When studying the families of elementary age students in relation to NCLB, it is important to find families who have had experience with their schools for at least a year
so they can speak to changes over time. Because of the grade range, many parents will just be starting their school participation process while NCLB as a policy is almost a decade old. Because a reliable group of parental participants was crucial to the study, no interested parents were turned away unless they had children who were in their first year of school. In the analysis, the coding differentiates between the views of parents who had experienced the school environment before NCLB because of older children or other activities, and those whose school experience has occurred exclusively within the parameters of NCLB.

To assist in creating greater external validity, I included a section of interviewees who were willing to be part of the study but was not tied to a case school because the administration did not participate. This allowed for some broader perspectives outside of the case schools that allowed for comparisons of feedback about building civic capacity.

**Limitations: non-parent, school staff and administration participant selections**

The selected principals’ perspective on the school’s history for building civic capacity (before NCLB) was somewhat limited because two of the four principals were appointed after NCLB was implemented. However, they were encouraged to speak of how their positions had evolved over time. For example, both the school that was rebounding from failure and the school failing to make AYP had changed principals less than five years before the interview date. Understandably, these respondents could not elaborate on the civic capacity building efforts of their predecessors or teachers who had left the school, although they offered their perspective on these efforts. Therefore, what
may be lost in this study or misattributed to the current administration is any foundational work in building internal capacity that was laid by their predecessors.

The teachers faced a similar limitation bias in that they were not always the same teachers who were teaching in that particular school at the inception of NCLB or they may be newer teachers who’ve only taught under NCLB. “Community groups” posed an interesting selection conundrum because some of the groups’ target areas were the entire school district. Therefore, community groups were selected on the basis of service area, which had to include the case school. While each case describes the role of teachers, parents, etc. by school, the community groups’ interviews discuss civic capacity building on a macro level.

The demographics of the participants were also skewed in favor of primarily white parent and teacher participation partly because of the schools that chose to participate. Some of the distortion occurred because the schools that chose not to participate were predominantly in Prince George’s County, which is predominantly African American. Although two of the administrators were African American in the study, the parents were less diverse in representation. There were several African American parents represented, and one Hispanic mother. However, I feel a much better representation of the parental diversity in a future study would be very valuable to gaining a fuller perspective of the parental role in the pursuit of student success under NCLB.
Because of the limitations mentioned and the small number of cases, one cannot make generalizable conclusions, however, the information is meant to contribute in the discussion on how NCLB’s role in school accountability may drive programs, policies or behavior between schools and their communities. These individual communities provided a real snapshot of what over twenty individuals felt were salient in their views on community and school relations from their vantage point. While the sample was small, it does not invalidate the true perceptions of their school communities and in some cases their direct experiences with no child left behind. All analysis and feedback create more clarity into the sometimes murky world of how the implementation of federal policies happens on the ground.
Chapter 4: Findings

Background

Data collection occurred between November 2008 and December 2009. Significant historical events occurred during this time that may have had bearings on the civic activities of study participants, as well as the financial resources that schools and local businesses may have had at their disposal.

In November 2008, the country elected the first African American President, Barack Obama. This election garnered much attention and inspired widespread political grassroots participation. His campaign boasted eight million volunteers (CNN). One could speculate that this may have increased the degree to which local actors participated in community efforts or paid attention to community political issues like education. Significant economic turmoil preceded the election and continued to unfold after it, leading to the collapse of both the housing and credit markets across the country. I would define these major occurrences as “crystallizing events.” Wirt and Kirst (2001) encouraged a study of education reform within the context of “crystallizing” effects that suddenly shaped the political landscape.

Keeping the significance of these events in mind, I noted that the two communities I chose to include in the study were impacted in different ways economically. Montgomery County was a wealthier county on average and experienced a lower rate of foreclosures and economic distress than did Prince George’s County. As expected, the communities’ ability to marshal resources in support of local schools were
hindered as families become more concerned about their personal welfare or were forced to relocate.

When the magnitude of the economic collapse became apparent, both counties set aside additional funds for schools, so that they would be able to continue with their normal operations. Further, the federal government later intervened by providing financial assistance to schools. In that sense, I was aware that Prince George’s County was more affected by the economic crises in comparison to Montgomery County, however the school funding has not been impacted. Nonetheless, it was unclear if this impacted the ability for local agencies to be more engaged philanthropically with school efforts, therefore impacting available resources to build civic capacity.

Concepts that were operationalized through the interview protocol included “community engagement” as a precursor to capacity building work. I defined community engagement as joint action with schools towards improving the effectiveness of the partnership. In this study “civic capacity” was defined as the community's ability to coalesce around a common goal or concern. The boundaries of the community were determined to some degree by the goal. In my study, schools as a local public good had access to community groups and businesses within their district as well as parents and community members who lived within the boundaries of the district. Building civic capacity, therefore, entailed the community alignment of goals to address the common challenge of meeting student achievement goals. In the following sections, I discuss respondents in the study, such as parents, PTA leadership, principals, teachers, community-based organizations, and participants outside of these school communities
whose views I valued for the added balance and perspective they brought. The full interview schedule is listed in Appendix B.

Parents

Parental involvement has often been touted as the cornerstone of school and community engagement efforts because of the strong arguments made for its effect on student achievement (Epstein 2001). Epstein distinguished among multiple layers of parental involvement, including parenting the child, communicating with the school, volunteering or supporting school programs, assisting with learning at home and collaborating with the community. Based on this framework, I have operationalized parental participation using the latter four parameters. In line with these parameters, parents’ questions included:

- How do you avail yourself of information about how your child’s school is performing overall?
- Do you discuss your child’s achievement with (teacher, principal, school-level actors)?
- Do you offer assistance or feedback to the broader school community about achievement concerns?
- Do you participate in activities that have student academic achievement as a priority?

Principals

I utilized Epstein and Dauber’s (2001) typology regarding principal leadership as a starting point. This centered on how principals could help parents participate to the fullest extent possible and establish reliable community partnerships (Epstein and Dauber 2001). However, I also felt that the role of the principal in articulating a vision for teachers and the larger school community should be included in a model for building
civic capacity, and this aspect was added to Epstein and Dauber’s framework for the purposes of my study. I asked questions designed to determine if principals were:

- soliciting resources to support student achievement
- encouraging parental participation
- communicating achievement goals to all stakeholders (parents, staff, CBOs, governmental actors)
- building internal capacity to meet achievement goals
- creating partnerships and alliances with interested stakeholders

**Teachers**

I operationalized activities that contribute towards building civic capacity for teachers as:

- Encouraging parental involvement
- Communicating areas of concern to parents and school leadership
- Working with groups that promote school, family, and community partnerships

**Community-based organizations**

Operationalization of how community-based organizations build civic capacity included promoting activities aimed at improving the resources schools have access to and playing a role in bringing community members together. Further, the organization’s role should be institutionalized by an ongoing commitment to support the school.

**Overview of Cases**

To review, cases were chosen to reflect an equal pairing of two schools that (1) always made AYP, (2) that were rebounding from failing to make AYP, and (3) that were actively failing to make AYP. The number of schools ultimately represented in this
study (four) is the result of a thorough and rigorous search to enlist the cooperation of as many schools as possible. Within the two counties, the four schools that fully participated were stratified as: (1) two schools that were defined as “always making AYP,” (2) one that was rebounding from failure and (3) one school that was actively failing to make AYP. I am incredibly indebted to the latter schools because of their willingness to be interviewed and studied under these circumstances.

Additionally, in the original design, I intended to include the principal, two parents, one member of the PTA leadership and two teachers from each school, i.e., six respondents per school. Again, due to a variety of circumstances discussed later, this configuration varied at each school.

The cases are organized as follows²

- 2 schools that had always made AYP: Ashley Elementary and Newton Elementary Schools
- 1 school that was rebounding: Perkins Elementary School
- 1 school that was actively failing to meet AYP: Oakton Elementary
Schools that always made AYP

Case 1: Ashley Elementary

“Parents seem more hostile, but maybe it’s the economic downturn …. ”--Teacher

Ashley Elementary School is located in Montgomery County. It is in a quiet, middle-class residential neighborhood, in close proximity to many businesses. The participants at Ashley Elementary included the principal, one teacher, one PTA leader, and one parent who did not have a PTA leadership role. Individual school level characteristics are given in Appendix C. To summarize, the demographics reflected a population that was primarily white (56%); African-American students comprised 12% of the population, Hispanic students were 13%, and 7% of all students qualified for free and reduced lunch. Approximately 11% of the students were identified as in need of special education services and 19% were limited English speakers.
Table 5: Student demographics-Ashley. Data source www.mcpsmaryland.gov

Principal--Ashley Elementary

Principal Murphy was in her third year at Ashley Elementary, a school she described as a “good school under a lot of pressure,” although it had always maintained AYP. In her area, she said, “there are relatively wealthy families. However, it is a highly transient area for international families and pockets of immigrants” which made bringing students up to date quickly on the curriculum more challenging. Thus, her primary areas of “pressure” were in ESL and special education.

According to NCLB guidelines a subgroup must be at least 5% of the overall school in order to be tested as a subgroup towards meeting AYP goals. The use of subgroups had altered how she literally and mentally categorized new students, “a departure from when I began teaching fifteen years ago,” she indicated. “When students
walk in, they are immediately assigned to a subgroup,” she said. “When I see a new student I can’t help but think of what subgroup they will fall in; although I don’t like to immediately think of students this way, it has become the reality of my work.” As a result, the school had launched a specific outreach to parents of English language learners. More efforts were being made to help these parents understand how to support the school and how to offer greater support from home by sending home bilingual materials for parents to read and having parent evenings centered about cultural themes that would appeal to parents. Much of the parental outreach and fundraising, she said, was spearheaded by their very active PTA. The PTA’s initiative in this area freed her to focus on administrative tasks and working with teachers. She was not as familiar with the partnerships that the PTA relied on for support, deferring to the PTA in this area. Nonetheless, she felt that parents and local businesses were capable of filling any gaps in resources that the school had.

Her expectations for meeting proficiency goals for students who were in special education, however, were less optimistic. The goal to have these students become proficient in the same time frame as her general population of students was “unrealistic,” she argued. A major challenge was that many students with severe physical disabilities also had health-related issues, making it difficult for them to attend school as regularly as their peers. Nonetheless, she argued, “the severely disabled population is generally not large enough to provide a threat to meeting AYP, since they need to be a significant enough portion of the school population” (5 percent) to be considered a subgroup. However, as that group’s enrollment may potentially change, it remained a concern.
These concerns seem to have made her reconsider remaining a public school principal. She ended her interview by stating: “There are many days where I wonder what it would be like to be the head of a private school instead, without all of these restrictions and rules.”

Teacher--Ashley Elementary

Ms. Jenkins, who had taught for four years, participated in the study by submitting a written response to the interview questions; therefore, her answers were not as elaborate as those of some other teachers in the study. Though she did not have time to do an interview, she felt compelled to share her thoughts on how NCLB was shaping her school.

When asked what she thought the most pressing challenge facing the school was, she stated that the relationship between parents and schools was strained due to “difficult economic realities.” She felt that, even though outreach to parents had increased in efforts to meet AYP, there was still “more parental tension.” She characterized her greatest challenge as “children whose parents are not in their corner, [who either] exhibit borderline neglect, or push kids way beyond their comfort zone.”

To meet the academic challenges her students faced, her approach has focused on local neighborhood resources, rather than the central office, and she has turned to “senior citizens, high school students, and the local library.” Ms. Jenkins felt that NCLB “does not impact” how she teaches, but she did note that she had not taught before NCLB was implemented, so she had nothing to compare it to.
PTA member--Ashley Elementary

The outgoing PTA president, Ms. Paul, is a middle-class parent who attended graduate school. Her role as PTA president, as well as her involvement in local politics, made her well-informed about the implementation of No Child Left Behind. Her overall assessment was that NCLB was perhaps the most significant driver in how the school perceived students, parents, and their role in the community. She stated:

In reality one of the differences was that [our state] always had state tests, but you the parent would know the score. The driver of the tests now are the subgroups. How are they going to improve the performance for all these subgroups? That has been the good thing about it--to get the parents and families involved. You have to involve them to improve the performance. You have to show them what it takes to stay in school.”

As PTA president, Ms. Paul’s role included sharing information with parents to develop a more informed and active participation. “Once NCLB took effect, the statewide PTA sought to tackle dysfunctional PTA chapters” and streamlined parental outreach, she said. She noted that her county still had its charter intact; however she mentioned that “Prince George’s County was one of the areas where the charter was revoked.” Revoking a charter occurs because of an unacceptably low level of PTA activity. She surmised that “sometimes it was that the PTA was inexperienced and they made a lot of mistakes, others had financial issues, and there were a lot of conflicts in the communities, [and] different goals of the meetings.”

Along with this general response by the statewide PTA, “the county PTA sought to educate the local PTAs in their redefinition of community,” she indicated. The acknowledgment that teachers and community members at large were eligible to be PTA
members needed to be driven home. “Many PTAs don’t realize this, but PTA membership as a policy in our mission statement is to teach the children, promote schools; grandparents can join PTA, it doesn’t have to be just parents and teachers at the school.”

Further, she described how the data were displayed for parents in school meetings to show the achievement gap as a real problem the county faced. Prior to NCLB, this exercise may not have been as meaningful to parents because addressing the achievement gap was not tied to any particular accountability requirement, she surmised. Students with limited English whose parents also spoke limited English “got nothing extra. You couldn’t get anything extra to help. Now with No Child Left Behind …we can see there really is a need for [help for] schools, even if a school is relatively well-off,” she added.

Her negative critique of NCLB was limited primarily to the classroom effects. She expressed sympathy for the staff which faced an “unbelievable amount of pressure, which then means pressure on the students too; it does take some freedom away from teachers.” However, from her perspective, the benefits greatly outweighed the negative impacts.

Parent Interview--Ashley Elementary

Rose, a white, middle-aged parent from Ashley Elementary, volunteered to be interviewed after seeing the announcement email about the study. Though she felt that her child attended a relatively good school, she questioned the accelerated pace of learning and related the story of her family’s disappointing experience with the school.
Rose complained that she had been “forced to spend exorbitant funds outside of school for tutoring and psychological therapy.” Her son was behind academically, but she was not aware of this for some time because the teachers never told her that intervention was needed. Once she did learn that her son was struggling, her initial impulse was to exercise choice and to leave the school. However, Rose was advised by her son’s therapist that a move to a private school would be socially painful for him. “His education, as well as the education of many other students is being compromised,” she insisted. She argued that “sometimes the kids are smart enough to infer when they really don’t know how to read at the right grade level,” and this frightened her. She said parents hadn’t realized at first how bad it was, and that many were now using private tutors.

She now communicated regularly with her son’s teacher and used the school’s online portal to monitor her son’s progress on homework and activities. She remained convinced that the pace of school was “unreasonably fast and narrow for some students” which may mean that parents discover issues too late. Rose declined to specifically link her own experience with NCLB, but she was convinced that teachers were under pressure to move students along even when they were not fully grasping the material. Rose described her story as a very personal one and hesitated about generalizing that her school was not a “good school,” yet she implied that other parents had a similar outlook.

Case synthesis: Ashley Elementary

The principal and PTA leader of Ashley Elementary were in agreement on several issues. First, they felt that the parental role was crucial; however, there was pressure or tension in those relationships. Focusing on outreach to parents of at-risk students,
however, remained central to meeting the goals of AYP for both the PTA and school, according to our respondents. According to the principal, the school’s position was to utilize the PTA to interact with parents to better engage families.

Both the PTA president and principal were motivated to address the achievement gap. The principal admitted that the pressure to meet AYP had led her to think more intensely about the role of subgroups in her school, something that had not been an overarching concern prior to her NCLB. While an achievement gap had always existed in the county, at no other time had the principal felt under such scrutiny to close it. Further, like the PTA president, she remained concerned about how they would get a diverse group of students to all become proficient in the allotted time frame. The PTA president was the most optimistic respondent regarding NCLB; she felt it was responsible for allowing once neglected groups to get more deserved attention. NCLB also gave the PTA leverage to talk to parents about forming a vital partnership.

The non-PTA parent and teacher’s perspectives were in direct contradiction. The teacher stated that she did not feel any unique pressure related to NCLB, but, rather, that the tensions with families were due to economic pressures. Her sense was that parents were either neglectful or pushing the students too hard. The mother’s analysis blamed the pace of schooling in general, seeing teachers as forced into a role of speeding students along because “the system” required it. Interestingly, the PTA president was also sympathetic to the teacher’s views, arguing that teachers’ jobs were made more difficult by the demands of preparing students for the state test.
Comments from the respondents indicated that nurturing parent-school relationships in their high-need population was a dilemma for the school. Building the capacity of parents who had limited social capital because of their educational, language and economic limitations also remained one of their major challenges as a school. On the positive side, local businesses and wealthier parents in this resource-rich community could easily fill any funding gaps, according to both the PTA leader and the principal.

*Case 2: Newton Elementary School*

Newton Elementary School is a Title I school for grades K-2 in relatively well-off Montgomery County. The neighborhood surrounding the school, however, is comprised of many worn apartment buildings and some residential dwellings. The neighborhood has a large immigrant population, mostly from Spanish speaking countries. At Newton, Hispanic students comprise 60% of the student population African-American students are 22% and white students, 7%, with a smaller percentage of other groups. Full demographic data are available in appendix E.
Principal Interview—Newton Elementary

The principal, Ms. Liotta, noted that her challenges were twofold: she had to prepare her students for NCLB testing in the third grade, though her school only continued through the second grade, and she had a large ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) population with many first generation American families. The third grade AYP scores affected how her school was labeled under AYP guidelines.

Ms. Liotta began by stating, “As the principal[s], we are the ones that have the biggest challenges because we get the sanction if we do not make AYP.” Though it was a school-wide categorization, she felt the pressure personally, asserting that “blame falls squarely on the shoulders of the principal.” She added, we “have to go the same distance
but a lot faster” and “we can … hire only highly-qualified teachers [to meet the requirements] and finding these people in a crunch is difficult.”

She felt, however, that the county and community had been “incredible” in helping them to meet these goals. As a Title I school, they had secured additional resources through the county, such as a parent coordinator, technology staff, resource teachers, and money to train parents to be effective supporters of the school and their children. Her school even housed a public health center to ensure that sick children were seen and treated immediately. She said that her school’s ability to meet AYP despite its high needs population had improved their reputation and increased parental participation. A portion of their parental training program included, “assuring parents of the link between meeting student achievement goals and parental support.”

Although the sense of responsibility weighed on her, she stressed that NCLB encouraged her to “beef up” her own training in teaching, reading, writing, and math so that she could offer stronger professional development to her teachers. Knowing that her students needed to be ready to go on to third grade in any of the surrounding magnet or public school programs meant that they had to be academically prepared to “go anywhere.” The foundation her school had provided would be blamed or praised depending on how well the students performed in the third grade state tests. Interestingly, she felt that her role as principal and the additional parental participation were the most crucial components in the successful attainment of AYP goals. She did not mention the role of teachers other than her interest in ensuring that they met the “highly qualified teacher” standards.
Teacher interview--Newton Elementary

“We have to move all kids ahead, but not all students learn the same, so I have seen a lot of kids who should be getting special ed, not getting it. The law mandates that the children should get remedial tutoring. The law doesn’t provide the funds to get the services.”

Ms. Otis had spent all four years of her teaching career in this elementary school. She wanted to participate in the study because she believed “the opinions of teachers about NCLB don’t appear to be as valued.” She argued that teachers’ roles were the “most essential” for implementing NCLB.

Most challenging to Ms. Otis had been the difficulty of “teaching a richer curriculum while preparing students for the test.” Changes to the curriculum required that teachers not focus on what was not being tested because the administrators “don’t care about the subjects that are not being tested so we have to teach to the test.” For example, “if the science curriculum were not taught, it would be a non-issue for the administrators because it is not being tested.” Teachers, she argued, “solely in an effort to stay employed,” had been spending more time on reading and math and less time on subjects like social studies and science. She stated:

Instead of instilling a love of learning, I have seen a lot of kids get burned out by second grade. It’s really stressful for them and the teachers. Instead of creating students who love school and love to read, it’s done quite the opposite …. We cannot have a one size fits all law.

Ms. Otis stated that another challenge was increasing parental involvement. “The community consists of “low-income, non-English speaking children … so the parents
unfortunately are working three jobs to put food on the table. We don’t have a lot of parent involvement. The law ignores that parents are the first teachers. I know we have children of all types and we are still expected to teach them … with one size fits all.” Further, she was concerned that some of the basic things that these parents should do with their children, like counting and reading, did not happen because “a lot of the parents think they are going to hinder their kids if they teach them in another language.” As a teacher, she tried to overcome this, but said that it was hard to communicate these difficulties to the administrators.

It’s hard to talk to the administrators because they are all for [NCLB]. The superintendent and all the administrators are all for it because I guess they have to be … I don’t think they really see the problem with testing and the effects that it’s having.

The resources that she called on to increase achievement were primarily specialists in the school and parent coordinators who had the responsibility of engaging parents. She thought the administrators did not appreciate her perspective because “many administrators were never teachers, are no longer teachers, haven’t taught for any length of time, or don’t have their own children.” In fact, according to Ms. Otis, administrators were “very out of touch and there is a huge disconnect.”

Ms. Otis thought NCLB had negatively affected parental and community involvement. She contended that with all the testing and test prep that were overseen by proctors, not the teachers, less teaching was taking place and children were being tested “over and over.” However, parents who were frustrated often sought out the teacher as the first line of complaint. She stated that parents were intimidated by all the testing and, “when they see their five year old child being testing on a Palm Pilot, [it] confuses and
Education was important to the parents, she said, “but family is more important in many of their cultural frameworks, so they are concerned at how much time schooling and testing takes away from family time.”

Ms. Otis assuaged her frustration by focusing on her individual classroom. She hoped that in time the law would change to become more “realistic,” but meanwhile she found little help from her administration or from the level of parental involvement in trying to fulfill the current requirements for complete proficiency.

PTA parent interview--Newton Elementary

Ms. Lyons had worked with the PTA of Newton Elementary for the past several years. She is a white mother, who has her own business. Nonetheless, given that her child was within the minority population of the school, as whites are only 7% of the population, I found it noteworthy that she had served as PTA president and saw herself as “a bridge between two communities.” The PTA for Newton Elementary which is K-2 also served the elementary school, for grades 3-5, that most Newton students moved on to.

“The school works really well, given the population it serves and the resources it has”, she offered. Her task with the PTA was primarily focused around fund raising to “fill any budgetary gaps the school may have for its basic needs,” she said. The money raised was used to purchase instruments or fund after-school transportation, for example. She concluded that NCLB had not altered the school’s efforts in a significant way because, in her estimation, “Title I schools have always had to be mindful of engaging
the local community because of their high need population.” Rather than NCLB goals guiding community engagement efforts, the school’s Title I status had always served that purpose. She indicated that when fund raising or seeking other resources, it had been sufficient to say that they were a high need school or simply a Title I school to garner support.

“Parental involvement has been limited for several reasons,” she offered. The reasons included unfamiliarity with the American educational system, limited English, and obligations to provide for large families. “There is reluctance to get involved with something they don’t understand, but social events are well attended, which is where we do most of our community fundraisers. That is where we have our greatest successes.” Most of the fund raising efforts were done by the parents and the school. Their PTA’s focus was making sure there was a communication link between the school and parents. She indicated that “we do not focus on testing or NCLB or anything of that nature.”

As a parent, Ms. Lyons also felt that her teacher was the first line of communication. For greater academic needs, she said, there were county services. She did not typically find herself relying much on local groups—most services would be sought by the school. She mentioned that other parents and teachers had shared concerns about teaching a more restricted curriculum with her. However, she felt that the scores were “not an accurate reflection of the school or how students are doing because we have such a transient school.” She summarized by saying, “It is by every means a very heterogeneous group …. The children who fall right in the middle may get the short end of the stick because of a lack of creativity in the classroom, whereas those who are at an
accelerated pace or need extra services are getting attention. But I think we have great schools under the circumstances.”

**Newton Elementary Case Synthesis**

The respondents for Newton Elementary showed some decisive areas of agreement. The Newton Elementary principal, teacher and PTA parent all concurred that NCLB was a challenge for the Title I school, though they had consistently been able to meet it. The school’s design as a K-2 school may have played a role in this because the population was small and services could be targeted. Students were tested in third grade and the scores were then attributed to Newton Elementary. However, the principal and teacher agreed that they felt under pressure to move students along, including those who were traditionally more difficult to serve. The PTA parent agreed that the school’s demographics posed some unique challenges for parental involvement. All respondents acknowledged that the parents had both cultural and economic barriers that prevented full participation. Their expectations were tempered by their perception of the parents’ situations. There were important points of disagreement, however.

From the teacher’s perspective, the pressure of meeting AYP fell squarely on the teachers’ shoulders and her relationships resonated with tension. The teacher did not sense sympathy from the principal about the difficulty she faced in her daily work. She felt the administration supported NCLB blindly without acknowledging the negative effect on teacher morale or students. Interestingly, she too excused the parents for not being as involved as she would like, believing the parents’ roles were limited because of their circumstances.
The principal shared that she felt that her own skills as a teacher were perhaps lacking and saw meeting AYP as the motivation for improvement and working with her teachers. If she was aware of the pressure and dissatisfaction felt by her teachers, as portrayed by Ms. Otis, she did not express this.

Because it was a Title I school, Newton Elementary had already been charged with increasing parental involvement. Though the school had been meeting the goal of AYP, it seemed to have increased its efforts to ensure sound internal capacity and sufficient parental outreach under the threat of being sanctioned. The school’s in-house services, such as a health center, perhaps limited its focus on increasing external resources. Since the school had made AYP thus far, the arrangement seemed unlikely to shift. Governmental and county support, when added to the local resources, seemed to be sufficient to meet the school’s needs.
A Rebounding School

Case 3: Perkins Elementary

Respondents: Principal, 2 teachers, 2 parents, PTA president

“NCLB provided a necessary framework for accountability…” –Principal

In the year of data collection, 2008, Perkins Elementary had successfully met their AYP goals for two years, having failed in the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years. The school is diverse, with a large immigrant population and a relatively new principal.

The location of the school placed it in an area known for its activism and citizen engagement. I was eager to see if these circumstances affected civic capacity with regard to the school. First, I needed to uncover why the school had failed and how rebounding had been achieved.

Table 7: Student Demographics-Perkins. Data source www.mcpsmaryland.gov
Principal Interview--Perkins Elementary

The principal of Perkins Elementary, Mr. Sheldon, enthusiastically indicated that “NCLB provided a necessary framework for accountability.” In fact, he saw the requirements for meeting AYP as only a “floor” for achievement and was “excited at meeting AYP successfully for several years.”

Mr. Sheldon saw his primary leadership challenge as “making AYP, as [it] is the focus for the whole school system ... and related to that how subgroups are performing, since everything is disaggregated.” He felt that the increased use of data was instrumental in the turnaround for his school, because “data simplifies the sharing of weaknesses and strengths.” He said his school had previously failed to make AYP in the subgroup of students who spoke English as a second language as well as for those identified as special education students. The current population was 30% African American, 30% white and 40% Hispanic. Over forty different languages were spoken in the school, a source of pride as well as concern as it pertained to ensuring achievement.

However, after having been in good standing for several years, their major concern was maintaining the resources that came with being “under improvement.” He observed, “When the school was ‘in improvement,’ grants were received to allow for hiring more teachers, summer programs and equipment. However, once the school made AYP for three years, the funds were no longer extended.” In year four, he found that the biggest challenge was maintaining the additional staff and resources without the funding.
To meet AYP, he decided that the essential initial step was changing instruction. He sought to attract “highly qualified teachers who want to come to work and focus on instruction.” He shared data with his staff to convey that if they focused on instruction, they wouldn’t ever need to be concerned about the test, since the county curriculum was very rigorous. His students, in fact, had “high rates of acceleration.” However, he noted that this posed a problem, because in some ways students needed to review the work they would have been doing if they had not been in an accelerated program, since this work was what they would be tested on, not the accelerated material.

To address the challenges of instruction under this new model, more of an effort had been made to ensure that all children were matriculating through a rigorous program. He described how parents were currently involved in conversations about heterogeneous grouping because the students within one classroom possessed a wide range of abilities. The most challenging and vocal parents, he said, favored homogeneous grouping because they tended to have high-achieving children. These parents were concerned that their children might lose some of the additional programs, attention and resources they were accustomed to in accelerated classrooms if they were put into heterogeneous classrooms. He argued that these parents associated heterogeneous grouping with diminished resources, without the guarantee that all students would be performing at a higher level. However, he noted, “I appreciate their concerns and participation, but as the principal I have to advocate for all students. Now we are making progress and every group is moving up …. We have six to eight parents at a time involved in our school improvement process. My challenge is making sure it’s representative of our school population and in the school all parents feel represented.”
Once the grant aid was gone, the community had become the alternative source for resources that the county did not provide. The building of civic capacity to capture these resources and communicate these needs became a central focus of the administration. He referred to a local community group, Soundoff, as an ardent partner in empowering more minority parents to participate more fully in school-based programs. “I see the grassroots communities, my parents, businesses, and students as a part of my school community …. Even reaching out to universities has been important for creating partnerships …. Those are added resources, such as their student teachers, that help us improve our practice by having to teach others.” Businesses had not been as directly involved with achievement goals, he noted, but they contributed food and materials for school events that improved morale.

**Teachers--Perkins Elementary**

Two teachers from Perkins Elementary were interviewed. Though many of their views converged, their backgrounds and some of their perspectives differed. Ms. James had taught prior to the implementation of NCLB, while Ms. Wright had not.

**Teacher 1 Interview--Perkins Elementary**

Ms. James had been teaching at Perkins for a year. She had taught for a total of ten years, having taken a short break after teaching at her previous school before coming to Perkins Elementary. With teaching experience both prior to and after the implementation of NCLB, she was able to draw on both experiences to reflect on how NCLB had impacted her role. Overall, she was critical of the way NCLB had impacted
her personal teaching practice, yet she felt that as an accountability vehicle, it was the most effective tool yet. She began by expressing her concerns and criticism of the new accountability paradigm. She observed that the way she taught now “may not offer as much academic freedom” for herself and her students, but was designed to meet testing goals. She felt that learning for students had perhaps become less fun because the curriculum was “more bottom line-oriented, but more efficient.” She indicated that “there are parents who feel quite strongly as well as educators (my emphasis) that No Child Left Behind really is just about testing and ranking schools or accepting schools based on a standardized test,” and feel that ultimately, “the breadth and the wealth that comes in No Child Left Behind isn’t really being actualized. It’s sort of been reduced down to hitting targets based on a standardized test.”

Ms. James did not indicate whether she fully agreed with these statements, but she pointed out that some curricular changes had unintended consequences. For example, she believed her county made “this significant effort to accelerate kids in math. So for the fifth grade [test], if your child or class is taking sixth grade math or seventh grade math [it] means they could be missing some of the key concepts.” Ironically, students who had been accelerated through the curriculum often struggled on the exams when they were required to draw on previously learned concepts for the standardized tests. The answer, she said, is that “six weeks prior to the test, we’re working on ways of just sort of refreshing statistics or number computation or geometry or whatever just to make sure the sixth grade curriculum is in the same order as … the fifth grade.”
Though Ms. James indicated that, from her professional perspective, teaching under NCLB had become less “fun,” she didn’t think the AYP status affected students directly. She related:

I don’t think an individual score means very much to children because there’s really no great impact on them as an individual student. Whereas, the school, your numbers are being put out there, and your superintendents are looking at it and the state board of ed and your elected officials are; communities are looking to see, hmm … where are the kids?

However, her positive assessments counterbalanced her criticisms. Ms. James indicated that the use of data made discussions easy for the school staff and helped the school get a very concrete representation of how it was faring. Having failed to make AYP encouraged her school to take data seriously and to look out for students on the cusp of failure.

“I think the pressures of NCLB helped create relationships in a different way,” she stated. She described how teachers collaborated to increase reading and math scores after reviewing student data several times a week. Teachers also assisted in increasing the school’s capacity by building relationships with community groups that offered tutoring to students. One community group, for example, specifically provided test preparation and focused on “the kids who are on the cusp or who are at risk of not meeting AYP goals.” In her opinion, the subgroup status of students had an impact because of how students were categorized academically and the teacher’s perception of what kind of impact the student would have on the class’s scores. “I do think probably that as kids come in, that the administration does think, oh, well, this is an ESOL [English as a Second Language] kid or a FARM [Free and Reduced Meal] kid, and what is their
background? What have they done prior? But that doesn’t come into the class.” Instead, she felt that these categories were used solely for outreach purposes and preparation.

This categorization, however, formed a central part of the dialogue I had with the administrators in the study and will be discussed later. Ms. James indicated that the distinction was more of an administrative concern than a classroom level one.

As for community engagement and building civic capacity, from her perspective the amount of programming and parental outreach had not increased significantly from her pre-NCLB days; however, the content and framework of teaching had changed to reflect the urgency of meeting AYP goals. Her sense was that parental involvement had been recast so that it was no longer limited to the PTA, although the PTA was already perceived as a very active one. She had observed that immigrant and minority parents were not as likely to participate in the traditional PTA. Her perception was supported by other respondents from the school. Other community-based groups had become legitimate venues within which to share school information and to offer support for families. In fact, she noted that her principal “is very intent on making sure that the only parent forum isn’t the PTA. We have family nights and international night, which are standard, I think, across elementary schools but with a real desire to get out and get people in and make kids hear the value- that we want their parents to come.”

Ultimately, Ms. James seemed to believe her school was “fairly balanced in handling the business of teaching every single day and making sure that kids progress and learn and feel confident about what their abilities are. It’s not all about performance in the four days of testing.”
I also interviewed fourth grade teacher Ms. Wright, whose only teaching experience had occurred after NCLB was passed. She felt, however, that NCLB had more flaws than benefits. Nonetheless, she admitted that, with regard to building civic capacity, NCLB did seem to promote greater collaboration.

Although she did not have the benefit of pre-NCLB teaching experience to make comparisons, Ms. Wright felt that NCLB had affected her role in three significant ways. First, her performance was judged primarily by her class’s data; second, the material she taught did not strike her as being developmentally appropriate; and third, she often felt that she had to focus her teaching on what was being tested. To illustrate that this issue was not unique to Perkins, she spoke about how NCLB had impacted classroom practices at her previous school, which was a Title I school: “It does impact what we do on a daily basis, particularly the students that are struggling in either reading or math in a lot of ways ….” She indicated that the previous school’s response was to get rid of some parts of the curriculum. She stated that “they didn’t have science and social studies at all. They didn’t teach it at all because they took that time block to do more or to cram in more reading.” At Perkins Elementary, on the other hand, “we have a time block set aside for everything such as basic science and social studies. But we switch off with them. So you … end up doing a half a year’s social studies and a half year of science. Instead of when I was in school, we did social studies every day and science every day.”

Ms. Wright felt that her students were being short-changed academically, but this strategy was deemed a necessary tradeoff in the curriculum. She noted that these
curricular strategies created tensions with parents. Some parents had complained that the subject content had changed and had responded to this in vocal ways. “I guess since [none of the staff] really cares so much about science and social studies it trickles down into what we do for math and for our reading, where more attention is now focused. But that’s all based on what they’re going to see on [the test] later which is all based on No Child Left Behind.” From her view, it had been difficult to communicate this to parents, and tension had ensued. Some parents had complained that the curriculum was too fast and not deep enough.

In her current role, she worked primarily with ESOL students, special education students, and those that had behavioral challenges. Her assessment was that these groups had been particularly disadvantaged by the accelerated pace learning had taken. She argued that “a lot of the students and the teachers are starting in first grade (with the math curriculum) because they have to do things that are in a lot of ways developmentally inappropriate. They’re not ready for it.” Further, “It’s just . . . moving too quickly and they’re not getting the foundation, and then that means every single year they get farther and farther behind. And it’s the same kids that are being impacted – the same kids that theoretically are not supposed to be left behind are being left farther and farther behind because of what it is that we’re mandated to do.” She added:

With the group that I work with, the subgroups of No Child Left Behind, it really hurts those students and it hurts the school because so many of the kids, the kids that are behind and are struggling are the Special Ed, are the ESOL, are the African American kids, are the Hispanic kids, are everybody in poverty and so many of them count in two or three or even four of those subgroups, and they’re already so behind. So they fall farther and farther behind ....
Other demands affected Ms. Wright’s work, particularly because of the population she worked with, the ESOL and special education students. She indicated that “they [teachers] have so much paperwork to do to prepare for [NCLB testing] and all year round for these accommodations. So much that it literally takes their time away from seeing … students. So, the paperwork is overtaking their jobs.”

Despite these deep concerns, she felt that the push to continue to make AYP had resulted in the school taking more serious steps to reach out to the children in the “at risk” subgroups. One benefit of having to meet the tangible guidelines of NCLB was that the parental role was seen as crucial to administrators, and the school took steps to ensure that parents did not face any barriers to participation. As a native Spanish speaker, Ms. Wright was eager to be part of a pilot program in her school for making home visits, especially to parents who spoke Spanish as a first language. Home visits were intended to not only provide information, but to get firsthand information from parents about what their families needed to ensure that they could maintain an active level of participation in the mission of the school. She concluded, “I think the theory behind it [NCLB] everybody agrees with …. I think that for some people, it’s too much to think about and they leave teaching or they take on another position that isn’t a classroom teacher. As the classroom teacher, you definitely take on the most difficult of the positions with all of the things that you’re dealing with in No Child Left Behind.”
Parents' Interview

“I mean, assessment is good to know where the kids are, but I find it to be a little too much.” – Ms. Allen, parent

Because parents were solicited for interviews using a local listserv reserved for family related discussions, these parents were more likely to be engaged in a broader social network than just their own families. The fact that the community even had an email list-serve provided an indication of their organization and efforts to build community. However, this did not always mean they were savvy about what was happening in local schools. I interviewed two parents who were minority parents and active members of the PTA and a local community-based organization. The PTA leadership referred these parents to me. In general, they were highly informed and quite familiar with education jargon and testing information, and they provided some significant insights.  

I met with Ms. Allen, a parent who was heavily involved with a local community organization that educates parents, and her colleague, Ms. Shelby. They agreed to a joint interview, since they felt they shared many common views and knew each other well. When asked to assess the educational system, the parents responded that they were concerned that their local school was under too much pressure. They seemed to be aware that it had previously failed to make AYP and acknowledged that while assessment was a valuable tool for feedback, they were concerned on a personal level for their children’s experience.
Ms. Shelby noted that parents were leery that the school had “watered down” the more challenging magnet programs so that more children would have access to the resources. Her assessment was that many children were not being challenged and schools were seeking creative ways to address “tracking” since everyone needed to be well-prepared for the test while meeting achievement benchmarks. She applauded efforts to bring all students up to stricter standards but indicated that parents were dubious about more heterogeneous groupings in classes. She mentioned that her school did global screening for gifted and talented programs, but she was concerned that “they make the decision in second grade. Who’s on what track. To me it’s just [too] early. And unless you have parents who are pretty savvy and have you stay on track … and you have your children retested and that sort of thing … but parents who are not on top of things, their kids are not getting it.” She noted:

In the public school classroom there is such a range… and this thing with heterogeneous grouping. I don’t know how this thing is going to work, it’s just frightening to me when you think about that these are children’s lives and we’re trying to kinda figure this all out … as the kids are matriculating through schools and as the grown-ups are trying to tweak these things some kids are just being left without getting a very good education, I think.”

Public school choice also seemed to be a thorny issue with regard to addressing some of the challenges of meeting the various students’ needs as a community. Ms. Shelby shared that they did have access to many good programs within the county. However, she added:

I feel there is this sense that there is a limited amount of excellent education out there, ‘cause I think the magnet programs are fantastic. But there are only so many slots in the magnet programs. And the way it just creates this, I think,
unhealthy competition in young children, I think it’s very unhealthy, personally.

As minority parents, they felt that minority children, in general, were underrepresented in the more challenging programs, partly because their parents weren’t as savvy about how to make sure their children were included, not because of ability.

Finally, they shared similar concerns with the teachers about how the curriculum had shifted. Ms. Shelby felt that the pressure to move through the curriculum had resulted in students not having the critical skills they would need in later grades and in children not truly understanding the fundamentals. She added that she had the know-how and ability to supplement her children’s education outside of school, but asked, “What about the parents who can’t or don’t know how?” Ms. Allen noted:

I have to say I feel very strongly that the public school is under such pressure to meet testing standards, that that is all they do. And I have noticed when my second grader is doing her regular work, it’s the ‘bubble.’ I have never seen this in second grade before … obviously they are trying to prep them for getting ready for how to fill in the bubbles.

Their work with a local community organization with the mission of building a strong multicultural community seemed to have been inspired by these kinds of issues. Ms. Allen mentioned that the group had called on her to the point of annoying her. When she finally agreed to attend a meeting, she was amazed to learn new information about testing and school participation which she’d thought she already knew about. The organization tried to get parents from the various ethnic communities to attend the group’s meetings. I specifically discuss the work of the group Soundoff in a later section.
PTA member interview

The PTA president of Perkins Elementary School, Ms. Green, had been a long-standing member and described herself as an active community member. The forum she most often used to communicate with other parents was online communication. Other parents were able to follow her reports online regarding the school's efforts to continue to make adequate yearly progress. She was excited about the new principal who had come after the school had failed to make AYP. She credited him with changing the school through an increased focus on instruction and community support. “Parental support was strong, meetings were well attended, and parents readily offered help,” she reported.

In Ms. Green’s estimation, testing students and creating a unified community from one that was very ethnically diverse were the major priorities of Perkins; this had had a bittersweet effect on how active parents engaged with the school. She felt that No Child Left Behind had galvanized parents who were concerned about how the curriculum was changing (in their perception) for the worse. Ms. Green voiced concern about increased student workloads, test preparation, and what was viewed as a less holistic curriculum. The fear was that teachers would not challenge the children who needed it and school would be boring for them; further, the parents who participated in the PTA most vigorously seemed to be those whose children were in the more challenging programs the school offered.

She noted that “parents who are concerned about the changes in the curriculum put their resources to work before school and decided to supplement areas where they felt
the curriculum had gotten weaker.” Many of the parents who participated had the resources, education, and time to do so, she added. For example, parents felt strongly that the social studies curriculum was being sacrificed, so some parents spent mornings tutoring the children in additional social studies lessons before school and also sponsored a geography contest.

She noticed a difference in how the minority community participated. “They tended to vocalize participation as a group,” whereas majority parents utilized more social networks based on individual contacts. In the end, she felt that parents supported efforts to meet AYP as long as their own children weren’t being denied any of the resources they had grown accustomed to. Ms. Green talked about the challenges of diversity then segued into parental concerns about heterogeneous classrooms and the fear that students would be getting a watered-down curriculum with mixed classrooms. I sensed overtones of concerns about heterogeneous grouping and resources and their correlation with race and ethnicity, although Ms. Green never quite spoke in those terms. Since I’m African-American, my presence may have increased her sensitivity in discussing this tension around race and academic tracking; at any rate, these concerns remained unexpressed.

**Perkins Elementary Synthesis**

There were many layers of perspectives to consider in this case. First, there were remarkably sharp inconsistencies between the administrative viewpoint and those of teachers and parents in this rebounding school. As with other schools in the study, the teachers felt like their perspectives were the most accurate ones. Yet the teachers saw
themselves as simply instruments of the policy makers and as having little input in
decision-making.

Overall, the principal, Mr. Sheldon, was supportive of NCLB as a policy and, in
fact, felt that NCLB provided a floor and basic structure for expectations. Mr. Sheldon, as
one who had inherited the school during its failing performance, felt emboldened to
challenge the status quo. As someone who considered himself an agent of change, he
believed in the importance of accountability and embraced it fully. His perspective that
“NCLB provides a floor for achievement” suggested that he viewed its goals as reachable
and reasonable. Despite their concerns about NCLB, the instructors had altered their
teaching to reach data targets, and had been able to bring the students into compliance.

The concerns of the two teachers diverged, perhaps because of the different
populations they served. However, they expressed similar concerns about unintended and
undesirable consequences related to NCLB. They reported that parents, too, were wary
of sacrificing a curriculum for the sake of a “greater good,” i.e., ensuring that students
passed the state test. The special education teacher, Ms. Wright, expressed frustrations
that her colleague, the general education teacher, did not have, particularly around the
issue of how the various subgroups were performing. Ms. Wright said she believed that
students were being prepared to pass the test, but at the cost of a more developmentally
appropriate pace that would have provided a stronger foundation for later learning.
Instead, she felt the rapid pace resulted in narrower teaching and more data-driven
assessments for teachers. Meanwhile her counterpart, Ms. James had reservations about
whether students were still enjoying school under NCLB. Both teachers saw benefits to
NCLB that included increased “community engagement and nuanced approaches to engagement such as home visits and international night” between parents and community members. Ms. James utilized NCLB goals to help focus her teaching. Though the data were “bottom-line oriented,” they made student progress simpler to follow and discuss.

The two parents who participated in the study echoed these concerns about the shifting curriculum and data-driven teaching. This “unhealthy competition” struck one parent in particular as “repugnant and demoralizing,” although her own child was participating in accelerated programs. Both parents felt that the test was the driver for teaching. Ms. Allen offered that “while the adults are tinkering, some children are slipping through the cracks.” They feared that even accelerated students might be negatively impacted as the school attempted to bridge the achievement gap by creating more heterogeneous educational settings and testing the students on material covered years prior.

More tension lay in the perceived threat that resources would be diverted from accelerated programs and shared with less advantaged students as the school sought to strengthen overall performance through heterogeneous groups. This tension plagued parents, teachers, and administrators who all tried to think of a way to ensure that the neediest children got the attention they needed without sacrificing the children who were performing well and had the most vocal parents. While these matters simmered, the principal decided to stay the course that had brought the school from failing AYP by continuing to champion those students whose families might otherwise go unheard.
Countywide Participants

Montgomery County: Countywide PTA leadership

Montgomery County had a governance structure for the PTA that allowed for an overall county president. Ms. Patrick, the countywide president, made some interesting observations about NCLB, how parents can contribute to school achievement, and the gap in participation for minority parents. She had over a decade of experience with the PTA and found NCLB a welcome challenge to the persistent achievement gap in the county.

She stated that one of the top five areas of concern articulated by the PTA to the Board of Education was meeting the funding challenges to take care of students with additional needs such as those in “schools with high FARMs rates, Title I schools, and those needing to make AYP.” Recently, her role had been to articulate the need to keep the funding that schools and parents had allocated to meet these challenges. Cuts in funding due to the recession had affected the schools’ ability to retain crucial parent liaisons whose contributions to meeting AYP PTA members believed should have been valued just as much as the math and reading specialists. These liaisons had assisted and encouraged parents, particularly minority parents, to work with schools on student achievement goals.

In particular, she noted, “There was difficulty that some Hispanic parents faced because of cultural and economic reasons.” Meanwhile, more affluent African-American families, which she referred to as the “black intelligentsia” often chose to have
their children attend private schools when they could afford to. She felt that African-American parents who were well-off and well-educated sidestepped the public system for private schools, feeling that their children should not be put at risk of being treated unequally if they could afford to avoid it. In her role as PTA leader, she felt that the black intelligentsia did not participate as much as she had hoped and that their absence weakened the overall “minority voice.”

Though she herself was of European heritage, she said her relationships with non-white friends had opened her eyes to the disparities of expectations and treatment minorities faced within the school system and she felt she was sensitized to the issue. She understood why some of the African-American families who were better off financially responded the way they did, but she was convinced that their lack of participation limited parental influence in sensitizing the school to racial disparities. Hence, their “voice” was lost.

One unintended consequence of NCLB may have been that it deterred high schools from assisting students at risk of dropping out, she argued. Because graduation rates are one way in which high schools are held accountable under NCLB, she believed, “The bottom10 percent are easier to have drop out of school than help to graduate.” She argued that immigrant parents, primarily in the Latino community, had less control over their children who were at high risk of dropping out, “because they work long hours and have limited English.”

During our interview, Ms. Patrick shared the training handouts that she used with school-based PTA leadership to heighten their awareness of cultural differences that
could act as barriers to recruiting minority parents. In her presentation, she pointed to a survey that indicated the preferences minority parents had for phone calls rather than emails and acting as a group to voice concerns versus approaching the school individually. These differences, she insisted, had been confirmed over time and by the parents themselves. She shared these preferences in hopes that parents within the county’s multicultural community would be made to feel validated and wanted by their school’s PTA.

**Community-based organizations in Montgomery County**

Two community groups in Montgomery County, Soundoff and the Roundtable, discussed their school-partnership roles for addressing student achievement. These two organizations were chosen because several respondents referred to them. The Roundtable was the largest business group involved in community services. It was not clear how many groups like this existed overall in the county; these two seemed to be mentioned most often on school websites and by respondents.

**Soundoff Interview**

Soundoff is a community-based organization whose mission was to foster inclusive, multicultural engagement in the local community’s civic life. However, it had become an organization associated primarily with minority parents. One of its areas of greatest focus was education. Ms. Allen and Ms. Shelby, both employees of Soundoff, described the process of trying to attract all types of parents who simply wanted more information about schools and about how to help their children. According to their
account, white parents engaged with the school largely through their own social networking, while minority parents gravitated towards the organization and its goals. Soundoff became a space where minority parents felt safe to air their concerns. A good deal of their work focused on helping these parents learn how to partner with the school and feel comfortable while participating in a way that made them feel culturally included. Parent volunteers recruited other parents, inviting them to meetings scheduled at the beginning of the academic year.

The meetings began in the fall and continued in a series of classes. Ms. Allen and Ms. Shelby described the Soundoff meetings as “initially filled with parents who [felt] shy and somewhat intimidated.” In the beginning of the year, to ease discomfort and remove barriers for attendance, the group provided dinner and childcare to create an environment where parents felt comfortable speaking. Their efforts were successful and they reported that “parents often return time and time again.” The sessions prepared parents for the academic year and gave them an expectation of what the school would provide, and how they could partner with the school and their child.

A large part of this education was familiarizing parents with what schools test for and why. Other topics included how parents could assist their children at home. They were educated about the importance of meeting adequate yearly progress and the state exam for their schools. The group had found that parents responded well to the data when it was presented at Soundoff meetings. The goal was to have parents understand why it was important to focus on their children’s performance and how they could help the school.
According to the respondents, the organization believed that minority parents, especially immigrant parents, had different cultural needs and expectations for interacting with schools. To further enhance participation in the meetings, the languages that were most representative of the school population were used in the documents shared by the organization. Interpreters for at least four different language groups also attended the meeting. The organization’s mission, according to the respondents, was to make parents aware of how important their participation was to the school and how they could contribute in ways that were culturally appropriate and authentic for them.

**County Roundtable**

Ms. Smith, the director of a local business group, was interviewed because of the group’s significant ties to the school system as a central business roundtable. Ms. Smith indicated that the group contributed to areas in which the school teams were lacking expertise and/or experience, as well as contributing resources and information about life after high school. Most of the programmatic activities currently implemented by the group involved high school students; as a business community, they had limited involvement with elementary schools. In addition, members of the organization who sat on the boards of various Fortune 500 companies provided management consulting services to the school district. The director indicated that the role of the Roundtable vis-à-vis the school district had become better defined over the years. None of their funding came from the school district, so they could remain autonomous.

"The organization does not have as much influence at the individual level as we would like," she indicated. Most of their contact was through the superintendent or
principal. The timing of the partnership was interesting because the school-business relationship had begun to evolve in 2003 after NCLB had been implemented. However, Ms. Smith was not familiar with NCLB and had no specific knowledge of how schools were using programs to address AYP. Though Roundtable sponsored a mentoring program, the director was not convinced that that their involvement had anything to do with No Child Left Behind. This was a concerning finding, since Roundtable was the most prominent business group in the district and the only recognized school-business alliance. Unfortunately the organization exhibited little or no knowledge of NCLB.

**Countywide Interview Synthesis, Montgomery County**

The community groups that served the larger school area reported that their goal was to ensure that schools filled funding gaps and at-risk students were not neglected. However, their perspectives differed because one was a business-based support structure and the others, Soundoff and the countywide PTA, were parent-focused.

The three respondents from Soundoff and the PTA argued that subgroup status had played a major role in their analyses of how information and resources should be utilized. Both the countywide PTA leader and the Soundoff parents argued that minority parents needed more information and personalized encouragement to participate in school-based activities. All three of the parents interviewed also shared concerns for students whose parents were not as savvy at ensuring that their children could keep up.

Soundoff had been created to serve the niche of minority parents. However, though all parents were welcome, the fact that it had become a magnet for minority
parents served to confirm sentiments the countywide PTA leader held, that minority parents were different. Ms. Patrick from the PTA argued that minority parents expected to be communicated with differently—in more direct, personal ways—and preferred to participate in groups like Soundoff when interacting with the school. The PTA did not meet this community’s expectations in the same way, because the minority parents did not have the same sense of ownership and were not able to be as open and candid about their concerns to PTA members, due to language barriers or minority status.
A School failing to make AYP

Case 4: Oaktown Elementary, Prince George’s County

Oaktown is located in Prince George’s County, which has a relatively lower wealth base than Montgomery County. The school had never been able to make adequate yearly progress; it was “under improvement,” a status which denoted at least three years of consecutively failing to make AYP. The school is 59% African-American, 26% Hispanic and 11% Asian. Approximately 27% of the students qualify for special education services and 22% speak limited English. Approximately 14% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch.

![Oaktown Elementary](image.png)

Table 8: Student Demographics- Oaktown. Data from www.pgcps.gov
**Principal Interview**

Ms. Buscom, the principal for the last three years, described her role as that of a turnaround specialist. She had chosen to work with schools that were “under improvement” and had repeatedly failed to make AYP. Ms. Buscom estimated that, upon her arrival, approximately 20% of the students had been performing at grade level and now 50% were doing so. The AYP scores for previous years confirmed this.

When asked about her role as a turnaround specialist and how that had affected her approach to each school, she replied: “Every community I have found is different. You may have a blueprint, but usually you have to gather your data all over again and start over again in terms of building trust, building credibility and moving the school forward.” This attitude had brought her through five different schools that had been identified as needing improvement. Much of her approach focused on building internal and external relationships. She did not think this approach should be driven by NCLB, but NCLB offered the leverage to insist on it. She expanded on this thought:

In order to achieve the goals set forth by No Child Left Behind which in many ways is what the schools are supposed to be doing anyway even if they didn’t have No Child Left Behind, you have to first of all learn your community, learn your school, learn your students, learn about the strengths of your staff and begin to build on this as a learning community where there’s a common goal, there’s a common vision, everyone is feeling valued and when they’re asked for their opinions they see that it’s not just to ask for opinions, but they see that, oh, my contribution was valued. I accept that challenge because it’s my passion. I basically have always considered parents and community our partners.
Given the difficult circumstances she faced coming into schools that had failed to meet AYP for years, she was sympathetic to the teachers who had to endure the upheaval. “I actually believe in accountability. I’m a hard worker, and I believe in accountability. But then I think that you have to have a safety net for everybody…. When you’re at a school that’s failing, the pressure on you is ten times more than the pressure on a school that’s been making AYP or being seen as a school that’s successful. You know, it’s ‘oh, you have poor teachers, the principal’s not a leader, the parents are not cooperative’. Everyone gets that blight, and this comes with – all the qualitative stuff that comes with not having achieved.” Her strategic response had been to engender a strong sense of community among the staff that had chosen to stay and with parents, first of all. “I’m not talking about fuzzy, soft, type of relationships. I’m talking about building relationships based upon credibility, that’s based upon collaboration, that’s based on respect for each other’s values and opinions, that’s built upon willing to disagree but not letting the disagreement get in the way of moving forward to achieving the goal.”

She acknowledged that there had been massive staff turnover, some of which she felt was healthy. “When I came in[to] this particular situation, the principal had retired. The secretary retired. There were people that were already disgruntled; so over half of the staff left.” She had let the remaining teachers know that there would be increased monitoring of everyone including students, and high expectations for turning the school around. With these conditions made clear, she had begun to focus her attention on professional development of the staff.
Parents had also been brought into the fold in intentional ways. Not only were parents a part of the school improvement team, but surveys had been conducted to solicit their feedback about school and staff concerns. The PTO was given the task of galvanizing parents: “The next piece is there was not much participation with PTO meetings and parent meetings. So I met with the PTO and I said, okay, I do know that a lot of times the PTO has their mission as [to] how they want to move, and then we have the school mission and we have to merge the two into one.” PTO functions became centered on academically oriented programs and then, she claimed, “Parents began seeing evidence. They began rallying around."

She acknowledged the necessity of focusing on unique subgroups and their different learning needs. “Our African-American population is the one and especially our males are the ones that we have to really zero in on …. So we have to look at what we’re not doing – not the kids. It’s what we’re not doing as teachers.” For example, she asked teachers to include teaching techniques that engendered a sense of competition to appeal to the boys. “These strategies appeal to boys, they are naturally competitive,” she commented.

Community partnerships were in an early stage of development because the existing relationships centered on providing specific materials once a year and were not necessarily crystallized or tied to reform goals. The principal talked about the school’s partnership with two churches. The churches provided primarily economic relief for families. “They’ll give us backpacks with school supplies every year … so we’re beginning to build that partnership, too …. They haven’t served on any of our student
improvement teams, but we do let them know what our student improvement goals are.”
This current arrangement could not be characterized as building strong civic capacity, but rather they were in the earlier stages of the process, establishing relationships for support as a precursor to creating critical support.

**Teachers, Oaktown Elementary**

I was unable to schedule interviews with teachers at Oaktown because no one responded to the posted flyers. However, the principal gave me permission to come to the school at the end of the school year in order to solicit teacher participation. I arrived and personally approached two teachers who agreed to meet with me at the end of the day. One teacher taught special education and the other teacher was a general education, third grade teacher. The impromptu nature of the meetings meant that the interviews were relatively short compared to some others; however, they proved valuable. Both teachers were middle-aged African-American women.

**Teacher 1--Oaktown Elementary**

Ms. Stokes, a special education teacher, expressed a desire to participate in the study because she wished to express her frustration with the way the law was currently written. She argued that special education students in particular faced an insurmountable task. The major challenges were limited resources and the prevalence of unrealistic expectations for students who were classified as comprehensive special education program students. She argued that although there had been an increase in the materials provided for these students, the increase did not satisfy the identified need. When asked about what non-governmental resources she was able to utilize to meet the challenges,
she indicated that she did not utilize community resources and that the district was the primary source. Ms. Stokes believed that efforts to reach out to the community for needed resources had not intensified with the passage of No Child Left Behind.

Asked in what ways she felt that [NCLB] impacted her relationship with parents, she said, “Well, I have to teach students to pass standardized tests instead of focusing on individual goals. Parents have expressed dissatisfaction with testing.” She felt that she was forced to defend NCLB to parents even though she did not agree with it, so as to appear to be in agreement with what the school was mandated to do. She added that parents had expressed their concerns to her that their child’s individual needs were going unmet. Ms. Stokes argued that teachers were expected to be flexible as the curriculum changed and the pace of teaching increased, but she realized the increased pace meant that they often didn’t have the time needed to cover everything the way they would prefer. Were there any upsides to NCLB? If anything, she thought that “the cohesive atmosphere within the school has strengthened as staff and parents agree on the idea that NCLB is failing the students.” Although she stated that teachers had to defend NCLB, it sounded as though staff and parents had openly attributed negative factors to NCLB that were not shared in this interview.

Teacher 2 Interview--Oaktown Elementary

The general education teacher, Ms. Barry, responded to the same questions regarding her greatest challenges and concerns for increasing student achievement. She indicated that her chief concern was “keeping students at the top of her priority list while working with the NCLB mandate.” She explained that this tension had not been as
prevalent at the beginning of her career (i.e., before NCLB) “when state driven assessments allowed for more teacher input.” Ms. Barry now believed that assessment had become more important than the learning process. Yet, she insisted that her school community continued to be "dedicated to student success, ever-changing and deeply spiritual."

Ms. Barry’s assessment was that community resources had become more available to Oaktown as a result of NCLB. Non-school resources in her repertoire included inviting role models from the community to speak to her students, using local sites for real-life experiences to share with her students, providing instructional content, and having frequent meetings with parents to introduce teaching strategies. Overall, her relationships with the larger parent community were more "strained" she said “because parents rejected what they considered ‘over testing’.” Despite this, she saw herself as more accountable, a benefit of the clear expectations, and the fact that the curriculum now "drives instruction and her students." With expectations clarified, instructors had a clear mission and she felt that she knew what was expected of her; nonetheless, she believed the goals of NCLB remained elusive.

**Parent Interview—Oaktown Elementary**

Securing access to parents proved to be challenging because the PTO never responded to requests for interviews. However, I had an impromptu meeting with Silvia, a mother who spoke primarily Spanish. I was able to translate the questions for her as well as have her read them. She indicated that she felt comfortable reading English, but would prefer to speak in Spanish.
Silvia expressed that she was happy with her child’s school overall and felt that her relationship with her child’s teacher was a good one. However, she was visibly irritated when asked about her school experience. The most important concern Silvia had with her child's school was an impending boundary change which meant that her child would be sent to a different school. She was very unhappy that the school community was going to be splitting and changing from what she was comfortable with. Oaktown Elementary was convenient to her home and she was very upset that her child’s new school would be located farther away. Further, Silvia relied completely on the teachers for all of her daughter’s academic needs and shared all her concerns about her daughter with them. Silvia attended the evening programs at the school for her own education and also availed herself of the tutoring services. Most of her information about the school came from the school's newsletter and she said that she did not utilize any other community resources for academic support outside of the school. She expressed no criticisms of the curriculum or her child’s experience, perhaps in part because she was focused on the school change her child was scheduled to make. She indicated that she wanted to protest the impending move and left the interview upset.

**Oaktown Elementary synthesis**

Oaktown Elementary had made strides in recent years towards the goal of having most of its students meet proficiency standards. As in other previously studied cases, the degree of enthusiasm for NCLB emanating from the school leadership, parents and teachers differed dramatically. In this case, the principal’s expression of empathy for the
teachers for whom NCLB can be demoralizing created a greater impression of alignment between her perception of NCLB and that of the teachers.

As Ms. Buscom pointed out, her tenure had begun with several teacher retirements and a massive staff turnover. By default, the teachers who remained might have been more committed to her vision and methodology for turning the school around. The teachers who had remained and served as respondents expressed frustration with how their teaching had to change, but they did not blame her leadership style. Rather the differences in teacher perception between the general and special education teachers may have occurred because of the populations the teachers were responsible for. For example, the special education teacher felt that her students were destined for failure and made worse off by the turn teaching had taken after NCLB. The general education teacher also felt the goal was unattainable, but she believed that she and her students benefited from the greater accountability required by NCLB.

Unlike previous parents in the study, Silvia’s concerns were more immediate and pragmatic and focused around the instability and inconvenience that splitting the school would cause. Both she and her child utilized the school’s academic resources, to the exclusion of any other community services. She felt frustrated at the thought of reintegrating into a new community and traveling farther for her child’s school. She was understandably uncritical of the school which she saw as a source of support that was being stripped away. Though she did not mention any concerns about pedagogical or curricular changes, her suggestion that she planned to voice her resistance to the move suggested that she was loyal enough to the institution to consider fighting to stay there.
It is unclear how these factors contributed to the sense of cohesion the first teacher mentioned. On one hand, the interviewed staff and parent were aware that their school community faced dismantling due to the boundary change after they had made positive progress together. The principal espoused community building as her central aim and claimed to have seen an increase in parental involvement and the beginnings of community alliances. Inspection of the school newsletter gave evidence of parental support for various activities as well as identifying some local sponsors. For the most part, building internal cohesion had taken priority over creating solid alliances and partnerships. The school also had a PTO, although none of the leaders responded to my inquiries. Based on the principal’s characterization of the PTO, their role appeared to be that of supporting the principal’s agenda. The transition of some students to a new school might take its toll on the strength of the community that had been built; however, the principal remained confident that focusing on relationships would keep Oaktown on a promising course.

**Prince George’s County: Community-wide participation**

*Davies Interview*

The school reform group known as Davies indicated that they had a unique role partly because the county had no PTA charter. The county’s school system had an overall lackluster reputation, garnering criticism over the years for low student achievement.
I spoke with the president, Cathy, a European immigrant whose children had already successfully completed high school in the county. She remained invested in educational outcomes because of her own experience and personal commitment to quality education for all students. Cathy stated that the focus of Davies was on the overall political dynamics of education in the county. In her estimation, the Davies group was one of the savvier and better organized school advocacy parent groups in Prince George’s County. The group advocated on behalf of public school students and parents by managing an email list where parents could share concerns, by sending opinion letters to the board of education, and by regularly keeping abreast of school policy changes.

The Davies group was concerned that NLCB had impacted schools negatively in several qualitative ways. The district had made changes to the school day that the leaders of Davies found troubling. She cited changes such as reduced recess, changes in the curriculum, and stricter attendance policies that had some unintended consequences. For example, the stricter attendance policies had prevented some students from visiting colleges because these absences would have affected the school’s AYP standing. In some cases, additional school days had been added to make up for days missed for legitimate academic endeavors. Davies’ president felt that NCLB dictated policies and procedures that might not always benefit the schools and their students. In most cases, the feedback to Davies came from parents and educators who were concerned about trends they attributed to NCLB.

She observed that while “high functioning” schools had managed to keep their PTOs active; the countywide PTA had been “abolished.” She worried that as a result
parental awareness about how NCLB had impacted school policies might have been limited or colored by the school’s administration. Further, schools that lacked a PTA chapter might also suffer from decreased levels of parental engagement in school and community partnerships. Thus her primary concern was that this act had limited parental involvement. She attributed the fact that the group had remained relevant and active to the presence of a local university. This university supplied the community with many educated residents who could not afford to put their children in private schools and who were committed to the idea of building a strong local community. This enthusiastic constituency, coupled with Davies’s ability to create organized responses, acted as a power base for Davies.

**Countywide education outreach office Interview**

The countywide outreach office acts as the arm of the school district concerned with increasing parental involvement in public schools. As part of these efforts, the office collects data about parental attendance at various school meetings and events. Mrs. Brown, a representative of the countywide education outreach center in Prince George’s County spoke briefly with me about their efforts to reach out to community members.

Mrs. Brown did not grant me an extended interview, but gave me a basic sense of the office’s operations. She suggested that I review their website to become more informed about their outreach efforts. Her manner seemed guarded when I asked her about NCLB. Mrs. Brown responded that their work was in no way shaped by NCLB. In fact, she insisted that meeting adequate yearly progress goals had “nothing to do with the
level of outreach done by the office,” although they are an arm of the county government. Rather, she stated that “they always engaged parents and No Child Left Behind did not result in any increase in outreach.”

A major report produced by the outreach office included the results of a parent survey on parent participation at school-related events at both the county and school level. The response rate was low, with only several hundred participants in a district with tens of thousands of students. However, it was unclear how many surveys were sent out. Over 80% of the respondents had children in elementary school.

In the survey, parents were asked to assess how this particular office performed outreach services, which included training parent liaisons. Questions covered issues such as perceptions of how parent liaisons were performing, how much classroom observation they did, and how many school-taught learning strategies were used at home to help their children. Further demographic data was collected about each family that responded. Mrs. Brown was not forthcoming about the specific outreach services offered through the office, though the office’s existence suggested at least a theoretical commitment to community outreach.

**Community-wide synthesis, Prince George’s County**

In general, the identification of groups explicitly engaged in school reform or activism was considerably more difficult to identify in Prince George’s County. Without a centralized active PTA (the most obvious source of this information), the search led to many dead ends. Also, the activity of Davies, the school reform group, seemed to
derive its strength from the large number of university families who utilized the local schools.

Though Davies aimed to serve the entire county, Oaktown’s location outside of the immediate university neighborhood and seemed to create a geographic and social distance. Davies also relied on schools with a “very active PTOs” to bridge the social network gap with Davies, according to its president. Since Oaktown’s PTO did not seem very active, this may also contribute to the lack of relationship between the two organizations—since neither organization seemed to be aware of the other. Though in the adjacent town, the demographic profile of the university neighborhood appeared to be more diverse than the area around Oaktown, owing to the University’s diversity.

The role of the outreach office appeared to be largely ceremonial. The staff member did not elaborate on any particular role it played, other than monitoring parental participation. It is possible that it had an impact, but what kind remains unclear.
Beyond the Four Cases

In an effort to expand the knowledge base of how parents understood NCLB, I also spoke with parents who lived within the boundaries of the school communities but did not have children attending the case schools. This comparison group added depth and some point of comparison to the study participants who were affiliated with the cases. I interviewed four parents, a central office administrator and a principal (she indicated that while she wanted to participate but said “due to testing, the faculty was not responding to requests to participate”.)

In some areas, the PTA sent out request for parents to participate. These parents who were included in this round of interviews responded to the requests to participate but their schools were not selected for the overall study. But since they were nearby schools, I thought their feedback could be helpful in comparing the perspectives of parents. There may have been a self-selecting bias in favor of more active parents in this group of participants because they volunteered to share information about their experiences with their children’s schools, rather than being from a school that was chosen randomly.

Non-case parent interviews

Parent #1 was an upper middle-class business owner. She and her husband ran a successful business that demanded a lot of their time, so she began the interview by saying that because she had a fairly large family and worked, she was not as involved as she would like to be in her child’s school. Her child attended a magnet program in a
diverse elementary school. She was unclear about the AYP status of her child’s school, which in fact was in rebound status, the school having failed to meet AYP.

To streamline her communications with the school, she communicated primarily with the teacher about any concerns she had. She mentioned that aside from talking to other parents and the teacher, her only point of reference as to her child’s experience was how her child felt about school. In general her concerns were similar to those of the other parents I had met; she was concerned that her children might not be enjoying school so much as just preparing for exams. She indicated that her second-grader seemed to be losing interest in subjects he had liked before because he was “burned out.”

Her knowledge about state tests was similar to that of several other parents in the case schools. Though she was aware of the school’s need to pass the states tests, she was not aware of how her school was currently doing with regard to making AYP or reaching academic goals; however, she knew the school was concerned about test performance because of a previous failure to meet a threshold. Parent #1 was not clear on what any of this meant for the school. She identified the school’s primary concern at this time as the student state test scores, but she did not know their overall significance nor was she personally concerned about the scores.

Parent #2 was from a middle-class family and his child attended a magnet school program for French immersion. He was very pleased with the school and felt as though they tried very well to incorporate parents, not only as partners, but also into the classroom. Parent #2 mentioned that he was an active member of the PTA and very involved in his child’s school.
Like parent #1, his knowledge of NCLB and state testing was also somewhat limited. He indicated he knew his child’s school was not making AYP because of his role on the PTA. He was not familiar with what that meant for the school, but he was aware that there was a failure in the category of English as a Second Language. He said that despite this label, he felt as though they had a great school and the official AYP designation had no personal meaning for him. He said he had found out the school’s AYP status in a letter sent to all parents indicating that the school had not made adequate yearly progress. The letter, however, was not clear that this was something that parents should be concerned about and he personally chose to focus on how his individual child was doing. He said that, aside from the letter, the school did not otherwise discuss adequate yearly progress or No Child Left Behind.

“I tell my children, I don't care about the test; this is a test for the school and not for you,” he said. He did not want them worrying about testing; rather he wanted them to enjoy school and learning.

Parent #3 had formerly served as a teacher in her school district and currently had a daughter in elementary school. She felt as though her daughter’s school provided many opportunities to be involved, especially for parents of at-risk students, through a partnership with a local community organization that helped teach family literacy. She felt that it was a very good program, although she herself did not participate in it. If she had a concern, she talked to the teacher or assistant principal, depending on whom she felt could be most helpful. She described her relationship with her child's teacher as very good and said she really enjoyed it. She said her child had some learning disabilities;
however, because she was a former teacher, she did not avail herself of the additional resources that the school offered because she didn’t think she needed them. She was aware of the AYP letter notification, but found it was very difficult to read and understand. Even though she was a former teacher, she said she had to ask for assistance in reading the letter and chart. When she was teaching, she said her principal instructed them that the school “must be run like a corporation and test scores would be their bottom line.” She felt as though all of the pressure rested on teachers to make sure that students passed. When I asked her if parents were included in the process, she said, "Not really, because teachers were also responsible for making sure those parents were involved." So in essence, she felt as though everything rested on teachers and added that this became a major factor in her choosing not to return to teaching. She said, "It's just not me. Although I know it needs to be done."

**Parent #4:** The fourth parent I spoke to indicated that her child had been placed into a highly gifted magnet program. According to her, the major issues facing her child’s school were related to teaching tolerance and the state test. Parent #4’s description of her relationship with her child’s school suggested that it had been primarily hands off, “since it was going well.” She said that her social network of other friends and parents would provide outside additional support if the school ever needed help. She indicated that the student test scores were a central part of the discussion, but not adequate yearly progress or NCLB. She recalled that in an earlier grade when her daughter was not in the gifted center, she had felt as though teachers left the accelerated children to themselves in an effort to bring other children forward in order to prepare for the state test. Therefore, she thought the heterogeneous grouping did not benefit the more
accelerated children. “Teachers are completely teaching to the test …. The way the test answers are done is that it goes from structure to idea, rather than idea to structure, which really shortchanges the kids.”

When she and other parents who were concerned about changes to the curriculum spoke to the teachers about the dearth of science in the curriculum, the teachers responded, “We are frustrated, too, but we have to get the kids ready for the test.” She indicated that now there was a state science test as well, so she did not understand their response. She indicated that she did not know what AYP was, nor if her child’s school had made AYP. When giving her overall sense of how the school was performing, she felt certain that the school was doing well.

**Non-case principal interview**

Although, for what appeared to be logistical reasons, Ms. Abbott’s school was not able to participate fully in the study, she was happy to give an extended interview. Ms. Abbott was principal of a Title I school in Prince George’s County that was making AYP and had been nationally recognized for its achievements.

Ms. Abbott said that her current challenges were caused by the economic recession affecting the country as well as continued pressure to meet AYP. Her approach to meeting AYP was similar to that stated by other principals: “When you talk about having to meet AYP requirements, I think it has been very helpful because it pulled us together in a way that I think we never had before. It forced us all to say how do we do this as a community? How do we best service our children because not only do we want
to make AYP, we *must* make AYP.” This pressure focused their energies and compelled her to focus on her larger community.

And so yes, it put a lot of pressure on us. But what it did for us is that it made us work together as a school community and as a community and I mean everyone whether you’re talking about the county council, you’re talking about parents. It made us all work together …. It made us communicate with our parents more because we know that we must make AYP.

For Ms. Abbott, the pressure had its positive and negative aspects. At first, she had accepted it as inevitable, but having publicly available accountability data had allowed her to wield an incentive over her staff and students. She stated, “I think the accountability piece has pushed us all to just do more, whether it’s me, whether it’s the teachers, whether it’s the parents, it’s pushed us all to do more because the Worldwide Web is for everybody to see. And all you have to do is put in the name of our school, and everybody will know how we’re doing.” Further, she felt that students were being taken more seriously: “For those children who are non-English speaking or limited English speaking, for children who are special ed. I think that sometimes we let things go before, whereas now that’s just not going to happen.”

While she credited the heightened accountability due to NCLB with focusing her school, she nonetheless acknowledged that some of the goals of NCLB were unrealistic:

I think that it made us accountable in a way that we never had before. We all know that the goal is unrealistic. We’re not going to make 100 proficient in 2013-2014. We know that. But we also know that we can get very close. Like this school is 80 percent at this point. So we may get somewhere well in the 90s. But we’re not going to be 100 percent either. I don’t know that anybody is. But I do like the fact that it made us accountable.”
Sometimes she felt conflicted about the pressure her school was under and wondered how much pressure her students felt. She shared an instance of a teacher who went overboard in his efforts to prepare students for the upcoming state test. “You do try to balance and you do get nervous sometimes. Am I giving them too much? Am I working them too hard? A teacher called me over the weekend, and he talked about giving them a test today. And I said absolutely not. You just gave them a test on last Thursday. They do not need another test today …. You’re going to stress them out.” Despite her admonition to the teacher, she felt that reality meant pushing her students to succeed to a degree she was not always comfortable with and having to convince parents to support these efforts.

Local business support had been utilized to spark excitement about the tests and to provide incentives to the students. For example, “they’ll give things out to the kids like coupons, the popcorn machine, other little gift cards. We’ll give out gift cards from the community.” In addition to rewarding the children for good test results, the school and its business partners were planning ways to continue to fund enriching activities down the road. “I think we feel the pressures of the economic situation, and there are all kinds of worries about that and what are the funds that we’re going to receive next year? And are the funds going to be cut- so on and so forth. How is this Stimulus Package going to affect us? …. They’re talking about consolidating some of the schools because of the economy right now.”

Since Ms. Abbott’s school was a Title I school, they received supplemental funds from the federal government for programs such as those to enhance parental participation. With these funds, “we make sure that we have parent meetings every
month, and we can use that to give items to the parents that they need like bilingual dictionaries or flash cards for students, those types of things.” However, she was concerned about how the economy would impact these efforts. For now, they were most concerned about continuing to build their capacity to meet these challenges.

**Non-case participant synthesis**

Several common themes were apparent among all the participant groups in the schools. First, the parents did not really factor the role of AYP into their assessment of the quality of their child’s school, focusing instead on their individual child’s experience. Administrators, however, emphasized the effect of NCLB in helping them focus on meeting all students’ needs. The differing feedback from parents and administrators showed the tensions between parents and administrators in they felt the students’ academic lives were being impacted by school level changes. Parents and administrators reflected opposing perspectives as to the value and relevance of testing for the purposes of meeting an external system of accountability.

Although the parents didn’t necessarily see NCLB as the cause for their complaints, they tended to be more critical of how schools were emotionally or socially affecting students than were the administrators. For example, in the proceeding several parents expressed concern about testing being the most prominent part of their child’s school experience and made the assumption that it was making school stressful and lacking in enough depth of learning. The administrators that were interviewed were overwhelmingly in support of NCLB, although expressing concern about how her teachers felt about needing to focus on the test. The principal felt that the overall goal of
meeting AYP involved framing the legislation to create leverage and incentives to create maximum learning standards for all students. These tensions over how the schools should prepare students meant that parents sometimes questioned the shape the curriculum was taking, whereas the two administrators felt that ensuring that students were able to make adequate yearly progress could lead to improved instructional quality for all students.

In the next and final chapter I discuss the significance of these findings, their implications for building civic capacity in these communities, and research on the implementation of federal educational policy on the local level.

**Senior Administrator, Prince George’s County**

The central office administrator of Prince George’s County, Mr. Jefferson, had a rich history of service in the District office. As an avid supporter of NCLB, he was eager to share his perspective on the impact of the reform.

When asked to describe the challenges confronting him as a major central office administrator, he referenced the country’s recession as the most influential event for his administration:

So our primary challenge right now is funding. And as the foreclosure issue throughout counties feeds directly into what counties and state governments use for school funding, the recordation taxes collected around mortgages is one of the primary drivers of that. So in a county where most of your tax base is based on residential dwellings, then we’re having – the impact is affecting us greater than it is in some other places.

The economic downturn affected decisions about how funds that were unexpectedly
limited would impact decision-making on spending in light of meeting achievement goals. “And this impact is very important as we think about making reductions …. We [must] decide what adds the greatest value … maintaining a focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning which will have a greater impact on more kids than trying to maintain current class sizes and not kicking it up by two kids.”

Typically, the district was able to draw on several sources to fund its programs and operations, such as the state and county governments and philanthropic organizations. However, the economic climate had severed the pipeline of donations from philanthropic organizations. To address this shortfall, the superintendent suggested “It’s appropriate for us to continue to think about state revenue sources, county revenue sources and then foundational sources that are more substantial … than what we’ve had in the past.” In light of the pressure to meet the goals of NCLB, I inquired about how funds would be targeted to meet AYP goals. Mr. Jefferson responded, “We differentiate support based on need, the needs such as factors of poverty, factors of non-English speaking and factors of race …. We differentiate funding, but its all core supported. So it comes out of that operating revenue and it’s in support of NCLB but it is not based on NCLB that we have those monies available.”

Mr. Jefferson’s perspective supported the notion that NCLB served as an engine for reform and a starting point for increasing access to a more rigorous academic program for all students. He argued that seeing AYP as the benchmark to reach erroneously suggested that the standards were rigorous.
“I think that if you think about NCLB and you think about, okay, I want my school to reach AYP, in many cases those targets are so low for the diversity of the students for a school achieving those targets, we really haven’t done anything to improve a child’s ability to get into a college or a university or into a job that is above the poverty threshold upon graduation. And so I think the whole notion of NCLB should be used as a catalyst for…making all students have access to more rigorous and quality programming. Then by that virtue all students will then be able to meet those standards because they’re very minimal standards at best.

In an effort to inspire principals and teachers who felt that NCLB had led to changes for the worse, he cautioned that they were not framing their thinking about NCLB in an empowering way. He added, “I think it’s how we craft the conversation about AYP. And so I don’t say because of NCLB we have this or we have that, or we can’t do this because of NLCB. I say because of NCLB we are paying attention to every subgroup. Because of NCLB, we have to ensure that all kids know how to read, all kids know how to do mathematics, and that has not always been the case.” Thus, by emphasizing to teachers how NCLB had focused attention on the subgroups, he hoped to inspire teachers to focus on these positive aspects of NCLB.

Informed that a couple of principals had declined to participate because they felt that meeting AYP consumed all their time, he responded, “I had the same kind of conversation with a group of principals this morning. So by approaching it with that philosophy, with standardizing everyone to a minimum expectation, the floor has actually become the ceiling.” Mr. Jefferson, aware of the resistance some administrators felt, described this reality as a reason to politically reframe discussions of NCLB and meeting AYP. He added,
So what you just described is exactly what I’m competing against. And that’s why I said so my conversation can’t be because of AYP. My conversation is I expect every school to meet AYP because it’s a minimum standard. And so that’s what -- but principals, the translation for principals has become I’ve got to make AYP, and I want the translation for principals to become I’ve got to make sure all my kids are reading at grade level.

In addition to supporting more rigorous academic standards, the superintendent also supported the “highly qualified teacher” and choice components. First, he wanted to ensure that the choice component of NCLB remained viable so that parents felt more empowered to place their children wherever they felt was most appropriate.

“Unfortunately some of the kids in the most impacted areas have the fewest choices. And so this notion of choice I think is something that I’d like to keep out in front of parents so that they actually self-select into schools that they think work for their child and choke out those that don’t. Teachers also need to remain accountable.”

Mr. Jefferson focused his reframing efforts on the principals, because he felt that the principals’ views helped determine their teachers’ perception of their roles in meeting NCLB. He elaborated, “I would think that it [teachers’ views] depends highly on the leadership. I think some teachers think we test too much, and so I think they feel if they can blame that on AYP, they will.” Further in a county that had many Title I schools, he felt that teacher staffing had improved as a result of NCLB. “There’ve been some other types of positives that have come out of this for us. One is that we have more highly qualified teachers working in our most impacted schools now (since NCLB mandates that teachers be highly qualified), and a couple of years ago we had schools where no teacher in the building was highly qualified … particularly in Title I schools, and now we have
moved to a situation where 80 percent of the teachers in the Title I [schools] are designated as highly qualified.”

For Mr. Jefferson, NCLB had provided a platform for leveraging resources and attention for improved instruction for all students. Several areas were crucial in meeting his reform agenda. First, he needed to continue to focus on marshaling resources to meet the economic crisis that had drained the tax base that the school relied on. But he also saw himself as a champion of NCLB who was reframing the whole question of its value. He admitted that the principals under his leadership did not always share in this vision. Principal buy-in was vital in shaping teachers’ perceptions not only about their ability to help students meet AYP, but to see it as a minimum academic standard. Further, he argued that parents’ use of school choice would “choke out” ineffective schools and allow parents to choose the schools that were most appropriate for their children.
Chapter 5: Discussion

In chapter five, I discuss the ways in which the findings reflect on the fulfillment of the legislation section 1118.E (see appendix), the major themes of the study’s findings, and the implications for building civic capacity in these school communities. Before analyzing the cases, however, it is important to review the study’s limitations to know how the findings may have been shaped.

When studying a relatively entrenched policy such as NCLB/ESEA with families of elementary age students, it was important to find parents who had experience with the policy for at least one year in order to be able to ascertain any evolution in building civic capacity. Because elementary schools were used, parents were at an early stage in their school participation process, while the policy itself was almost a decade old. Parents were encouraged to speak to the “civic capacity history” within their own experience. Sometimes this meant that parents reflected on the experience of older children who were beyond elementary school or on their limited numbers of years of experience at their elementary school.

The mandate for ‘Building capacity for involvement’

At the outset, I sought to determine the impact of the legislation below on how schools shaped their engagement efforts and how communities responded. Please note that sections 1-7 and 14 are areas where schools shall provide a particular service and parts 8-13 are areas in which schools may provide services. I will address each area separately based on the broader findings of the study. First, I look at Section 1118, numbers E1-E5, below:
Section 1118: E of NCLB/ESEA

(e) BUILDING CAPACITY FOR INVOLVEMENT - To ensure effective involvement of parents and to support a partnership among the school involved, parents, and the community to improve student academic achievement, each school and local educational agency assisted under this part —

(1) shall provide assistance to parents of children served by the school or local educational agency, as appropriate, in understanding such topics as the State's academic content standards and State student academic achievement standards, State and local academic assessments, the requirements of this part, and how to monitor a child's progress and work with educators to improve the achievement of their children;

(2) shall provide materials and training to help parents to work with their children to improve their children's achievement, such as literacy training and using technology, as appropriate, to foster parental involvement;

(3) shall educate teachers, pupil services personnel, principals, and other staff, with the assistance of parents, in the value and utility of contributions of parents, and in how to reach out to, communicate with, and work with parents as equal partners, implement and coordinate parent programs, and build ties between parents and the school;

(4) shall, to the extent feasible and appropriate, coordinate and integrate parent involvement programs and activities with Head Start, Reading First, Early Reading First, Even Start, the Home Instruction Programs for Preschool Youngsters, the Parents as Teachers Program, and public preschool and other programs, and conduct other activities, such as parent resource centers, that encourage and support parents in more fully participating in the education of their children;

(5) shall ensure that information related to school and parent programs, meetings, and other activities is sent to the parents of participating children in a format and, to the extent practicable, in a language the parents can understand;

Sections E1-5 essentially asked schools to provide parents with information about the state assessments and to help them monitor their children’s progress as it pertained to the assessments. Also, parents should be trained in the use of materials that would help
them improve their children’s achievement. At the school level, schools were expected to educate staff members about the importance of parental involvement while making the necessary ties to do so. Further, any other programs such as Head Start would be incorporated. Communication of these activities would be shared via all language formats needed by parents.

In my study of the four case school communities, all schools indicated that they shared the school’s AYP status via mail, as mandated. However, based on the information shared by the respondents, the practice of instructing parents about the content and nature of the assessments actively occurred only at Perkins Elementary, the school rebounding from failing to make AYP. In general, schools hosted traditional curriculum nights, but I did not discern that the schools made overt efforts to talk about testing content.

Next, concerning the mandate that schools “shall provide materials and training to help parents to work with their children to improve their children's achievement,” none of the four case schools described training parents to work with their children; however, all schools mentioned sending home materials that encouraged parents to provide certain resources or environments for children to help them succeed.

With regard to the mandate that schools “coordinate and integrate parent involvement programs,” Newton Elementary, as a Title I school, utilized resources from Title I to promote parent involvement activities, for example, using parent coordinators to promote attendance at school events, such as curriculum nights. However, the greatest collaboration effort appeared to be the Soundoff community group’s outreach efforts to
parents of Perkins Elementary. The collaboration was not necessarily school-specific or sponsored; however, the teachers and principal were aware of and supportive of the activities of Soundoff in engaging minority parents.

Finally, section five mandated that schools “shall ensure that information related to school and parent programs, meetings, and other activities is sent to the parents of participating children in a format and, to the extent practicable, in a language the parents can understand.” In general, all schools made an effort to ensure that materials were available in Spanish as well as English. Although Perkins had the largest multicultural population, the school only reported using Spanish and English. Soundoff, however, provided translators and materials in Amharic and French as well.

Sections E6-13 described actions that schools may take to promote building capacity.

(6) may involve parents in the development of training for teachers, principals, and other educators to improve the effectiveness of such training;

(7) may provide necessary literacy training from funds received under this part if the local educational agency has exhausted all other reasonably available sources of funding for such training;

(8) may pay reasonable and necessary expenses associated with local parental involvement activities, including transportation and child care costs, to enable parents to participate in school-related meetings and training sessions;

(9) may train parents to enhance the involvement of other parents;

(10) may arrange school meetings at a variety of times, or conduct in-home conferences between teachers or other educators, who work directly with participating children, with parents who are unable to attend such conferences at school, in order to maximize parental involvement and participation;
(11) may adopt and implement model approaches to improving parental involvement;

(12) may establish a district-wide parent advisory council to provide advice on all matters related to parental involvement in programs supported under this section;

(13) may develop appropriate roles for community-based organizations and businesses in parent involvement activities; and

(14) shall provide such other reasonable support for parental involvement activities under this section as parents may request.

Based on interview findings, it appeared as though Perkins Elementary school had implemented sections 10 and 13, respectively. With regard to section E10, which spoke of creating opportunities for conferences outside of school, the principal and one teacher at Perkins described how they were using home visits as a way for teachers to reach out to parents who were not attending school events or who seemed like they needed additional outreach. Perkins’s principal also acknowledged that Soundoff played a unique and appreciated role for its parents. That endorsement suggested that there was a role for community organizations beyond the role developed specifically by the schools. Otherwise, the activities mentioned in sections 6-13 were not evident in the comments from respondents in the other three case school communities.

Given how the comments from the respondents aligned with these mandates and recommendations, one can conclude that only one out of the four schools showed evidence of being guided by the NCLB recommendations of how to build capacity for involvement.
Major Themes

For clarity and review, I will describe the most salient themes from the study in four major areas: leadership responses, classroom practice, the role of community-based organizations, and parental responses.

Theme: Principals’ leadership styles vary with AYP status

Principals had the daunting task of providing leadership to their school community by way of providing training for teachers, interfacing with community members, and being at the forefront of resource allocation to meet achievement goals. With regard to NCLB/ESEA, out of the four case schools, the principals were evenly divided between those who embraced the goals of NCLB/ESEA and those who were critical of the law and saw it as burdensome.

Pro-NCLB

The two principals who were enthusiastic about NCLB/ESEA shared common perceptions and leadership styles. The principals who were proponents of NCLB/ESEA were the principals of the schools that were either previously failing to meet AYP or were actively failing to meet AYP. I first discuss how the principals of both Perkins Elementary (a rebounding school) and Oaktown Elementary (currently failing to meet AYP) offered positive critiques of NCLB/ESEA despite the pressures their schools faced to build capacity in response to failing to meet AYP. Of note, both principals started their jobs after the schools fell short of meeting AYP. NCLB provided a window of opportunity to create capacity and new perspectives. A principal who was hired to step
into this role would be expected, at a minimum, to be committed to bringing the school into compliance with NCLB/ESEA.

Similar leadership perspectives guided Mr. Sheldon of Perkins and Ms. Buscom of Oaktown, both leaders of schools that had failed to make AYP in the past. Oaktown was in fact, struggling to make AYP. Both school leaders embraced NCLB/ESEA as a focusing event that had resulted in much-needed additional resources and attention to the needs of all students. The following matrix demonstrates a side by side comparison of where their policy and leadership perspectives overlapped in favor of increased accountability, community building and greater resource equity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ms. Buscom- Oaktown Elementary</th>
<th>Mr. Sheldon- Perkins Elementary</th>
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<tr>
<td>“It’s a challenge because in order to achieve the goals set forth by No Child Left Behind which in many ways is what the schools are supposed to be doing anyway- even if they didn’t have No Child Left Behind- you have to first of all learn your community….”</td>
<td>“I see the grassroots communities, my parents businesses and students as a part of my school community … even reaching out to universities has been important for creating partnerships….”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I used my resources. You can’t do it by yourself. You have to establish relationships.”</td>
<td>“We have 6-8 parents at a time involved in our school improvement process. My challenge is making sure it’s representative of our school population and in the school all parents feel represented.”</td>
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<td>“And so I tell my staff if you don’t want to work hard and consistently monitor your progress and expect that I’m going to be monitoring you, you need to go somewhere else. This is important work.”</td>
<td>“I appreciate their concerns and participation, but as the principal I have to advocate for all students. Now we are making progress and every group is moving up.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“But then challenges are good because sometimes it gives you another lens to look through as you’re gathering your data. It’s all about gathering data every second and adjusting how you do business based upon data.”</td>
<td>“Data simplifies the sharing of weaknesses and strengths….”</td>
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Table 9: Similarities between leadership and perspective of principals in schools that failed to make AYP previously or currently
Mixed Reviews of NCLB

The schools that had never failed to make AYP, Ashley and Newton Elementary Schools, were less approving of the effects of NCLB. Ashley Elementary school’s principal focused her attention on maintaining progress in the key area of ESL, an area where she feared the school might fail to make AYP. This inspired renewed outreach to low-income immigrant students in the schools, but, according to the principal, this effort was PTA-led.

According to the principal of Newton Elementary, the school relied primarily on activities that had already existed through the school’s Title I requirements to meet goals for parental engagement. The principal noted that the fear of failing to make AYP “always loomed”; however, the school had made AYP every year thus far. Many of the responses by the two principals suggested that their leadership styles were driven by fear of failure to meet AYP and they responded in ways that were more critical of NCLB/ESEA.
Table 10: Similarities of principal perspectives in schools making AYP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ashley Elementary Principal</th>
<th>Newton Elementary Principal</th>
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<td>“When I see a new student I can’t help but think of what subgroup they will fall in… although I don’t like to immediately think of students this way, it has become the reality of my work.”</td>
<td>“As the principal, we are the ones that have the biggest challenges because we get the sanction if we do not make AYP.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The goal to have these students become proficient in the same time frame, she argues, is “unrealistic.”</td>
<td>“We have to go the same distance but a lot faster.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There are many days where I wonder what it would be like to be the head of a private school instead without all of these restrictions and rules.”</td>
<td>“We can only hire only highly-qualified teachers and finding these people in a crunch is difficult.”</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Theme: Sanctions fuel capacity building

In this study, how schools chose to increase their internal and external capacity was often dictated by their AYP status and their local community resources. This contrast was particularly evident with Oaktown Elementary and Newton Elementary, which were both Title I schools.

Under the Title I guidelines that existed prior to NCLB/ESEA, schools designated as Title I schools were mandated to enact programming to engage parents. Newton Elementary, as a Title I school, already had parental involvement and outreach guidelines that determined much of the parent coordinator’s role. However, though Newton shared the same Title I status as Oaktown Elementary, its physical location and school structure were quite different. Newton Elementary was located in a small pocket of low-income residents in a relatively well-off county. The grades covered were kindergarten through
second grade, so the school population and breadth of curriculum were relatively small. Oaktown Elementary School was located in a moderate-to-low income community in Prince George’s County and continued through the fifth grade, which meant there was a greater breadth of curriculum to cover. Oaktown also actually administered the state tests on site. How might these differences affect the school performance?

First, I considered how the structure of Newton might give it an advantage over Oaktown, though both were Title I schools. Parents of very young children might be more engaged since their children were less able to manage the needs of attending schools and completing assignments on their own. Therefore, a school such as Newton, which only went from grades K-2 might be better able to marshal parental support.

Also, the PTA president for Newton suggested that the school’s high level of poverty helped the PTA to garner resources from local sources, because compared to the surrounding area the school’s level of poverty was glaring. The contrasting wealth of the overall county also offered more resources from which the school could secure funding.

Oaktown Elementary School, on the other hand, seemed to have a weaker civic capacity history. The county PTA had been disbanded, so the school had to rely on creating and maintaining its own PTO. The school website contained many obsolete phone numbers and email addresses for the school’s PTO, which suggested a lack of organization and also that parents may have had a difficult time reaching the parent group. The principal emphasized the need for her administration to solicit parental feedback and conducted surveys to ensure that parents felt that the administration was
being responsive to parent needs and interests. The principal indicated that she utilized the help of the PTO in introducing more academic content to their programming. The PTO was also given the task of advertising the academic evenings created by the administration to ensure their success. In addition to inviting parents to school-sponsored events, the PTO seemed to be involved in fundraising. Since no one from the PTO responded to my request for an interview, I was unable to get further information about this activity.

In the absence of strong external partnerships and under pressure to perform, Oaktown’s principal focused her energies on ensuring the school’s internal coherence. Her charge became “building a common goal” and creating substantial relationships. Even if this meant losing staff who did not want to “work hard and be monitored,” she pursued the goal of creating alignment in the belief that students could indeed achieve and eventually meet the goals of AYP. Language about creating common goals and relationships punctuated many of Ms. Buscom’s responses to interview questions.

In contrast to this, the schools that were meeting AYP goals emphasized the need for greater parental involvement rather than creating internal cohesion. Only the principals and teachers in the schools that were either failing to make AYP or rebounding from previously failing focused on themes of alignment and collaboration across all sectors.

16 Evidence of fundraising came from an online PTO newsletter that thanked some area businesses. It was not clear who had initiated contact with the businesses or the nature of their contributions.
Theme: Teachers are reluctant agents

Teachers in three of the four schools characterized their roles as hands-on nurses, while principals were likened to distant, highly paid doctors who didn’t see the patients’ suffering. While most of the teachers were critical of NCLB/ESEA, they all indicated a reluctant resolve to support the wishes of their principals, and, at minimum, to improve student performance in their classrooms. For example, Ms. Munoz from Perkins Elementary complained that her teaching was reduced to “data points,” but she felt compelled to ensure that the data improved in a way that would be recognized by her principal. Even though her motivation seemed to come primarily from a moral imperative that students who were most needy should not be left behind, the data determined how and what she taught, even if she felt it did not benefit these students. Her colleague at Perkins agreed that there was a narrowing of the curriculum, but felt there was a lack of any reasonable alternative to ensure that the same levels of accountability would be met.

Teachers at Ashley, Oaktown, Perkins and Newton also had in common that they felt obligated to publicly espouse belief in the use of state testing that they felt narrowed the curriculum, burdened students, and at times caused parents to question the school’s focus. The teachers from all of the schools indicated that the testing requirements had become a source of tension between themselves and parents.
Theme: Parental input did not affect the school response to NCLB efforts

I found that the greatest degree of contention over resources appeared to be in the racially diverse, middle-income elementary school, Perkins Elementary. This school’s many involved and anxious parents (as described by the principal of Perkins) were greatly concerned with classroom level operations, curricula and school-wide achievement goals. In no other school were parents so willing to participate in the study; they responded immediately to the email request for interviews. Further, both PTA leaders and non-PTA parents were willing to offer their opinions. In light of this level of engagement, the principal was able to ensure that parents were “well represented on the school improvement team.” Further, parents openly spoke of their sense of the scarcity of resources and good programs. Vogel et al. concluded from their literature review that tracking might have increased in response to having to meet the NCLB/ESEA standards. Perkins, however, did the opposite and responded to the pressures of parental anxiety and meeting AYP by increasing access for all students to a rigorous curriculum. Instead of increased tracking, this took the form of heterogeneous classroom groups, which the principal credited with improving the performance of students who had previously been underperforming.

Parents appeared to have only limited influence on school-level responses to NCLB and increasing achievement. In the case of Ashley and Newton Elementary where students were making AYP, the parents might not have felt justified in questioning the administration’s classroom level protocols. Oaktown Elementary School’s parents did not
seem organized enough to have a collective response to how they felt students were being instructed, although the school had been actively failing to make AYP for several years. Developing civic capacity fell on the shoulders of the administration.

Community-based groups seemed influential for Perkins Elementary School; however, their role seemed relatively peripheral for all other cases. I will examine this more in the next section.

**Theme: Parents bridge schools and community groups**

Overall, schools were willing to enlist the help of parents and community-based organizations to create resource partners. First, I will discuss the two schools, Ashley and Newton that were making AYP then compare them to the schools that were striving to make AYP.

Ashley Elementary School and Newton Elementary School did not emphasize community partnerships outside of fundraising efforts. Resources governed the relationships between the two schools and their partners; their reasons, however, may have been different. Ashley Elementary was located in a well-off community, with a relatively low proportion of low-income students. Responding to this, the principal centered her engagement goals on involving lower income parents who were a smaller, but vulnerable population. The PTA occupied the traditional role of supporting the school in its fundraising efforts.
Newton Elementary managed its community partnerships on the basis of its status as a Title I school situated in a relatively well-off county. The PTA again played an active role in managing fundraising from community organizations. However, because Newton was a Title I school, many programmatic features designed to create greater parental engagement remained housed within the institutional framework of the school. The school designed programs to bring the community into the school, but programs did not necessarily flow the other way from the community to the school.

The most robust example of community-based group involvement was observed at Perkins Elementary School, a rebounding school in a middle-class, highly diverse community, where parents and teachers grabbed the initiative to fix resource gaps. Their perception of competition for scarce resources elicited a great deal of close interest from the middle-class parents whose children attended this large minority school where almost 40% of the students qualified for free and reduced cost meals. One parent summed it up in her comment:

“I feel there is this sense that there is a limited amount of excellent education out there, ‘cause I think the magnet programs are fantastic. But there are only so many slots in the magnet programs. And the way it just creates this- I think, unhealthy competition in young children, I think it’s very unhealthy, personally.”

The minority parents from Perkins appeared to have coalesced into a large minority-based alliance that expressed itself through *Soundoff*. The middle-class, mostly majority parents relied on their social networks and personal capital to respond to the school’s curriculum and classroom practices.
In stark contrast, the administration at Oaktown Elementary was absorbed in creating internal coherence to raise grade-level student achievement above 50% proficiency. The school currently partnered with two churches, and the principal desired to increase the external outreach beyond this base. As a Title I school, Oaktown relied on internal programming to create greater internal capacity and parental engagement. The administration seemed to have usurped the role of the PTO, as shown by the principal’s statements: “The next piece is there was not much participation with PTO meetings and parent meetings. So I met with the PTO and I said, okay, ‘I do know that a lot of times the PTO has their mission as how they want to move, and then we have the school mission and we have to merge the two into one.’” I was unable to find evidence of the PTO’s role beyond the school because requests for interviews were frustrated by wrong addresses, phone numbers and emails. Nonetheless, the principal’s comments suggested that the PTO attempted programming.

The countywide groups had varying levels of engagement in achievement-related activities. Again, parental presence seemed to impact the nature of the partnership. For example, the business group Roundtable had little to no evidence of parental interactions, and the director of the Roundtable seemed uninformed about the role and nature of NCLB/ESEA. Its role seemed limited to requests to provide programming for high school students for workplace preparation. On the other hand, Davies of Prince George’s County was primarily a school reform group governed by parents. The president had a
good command of the issues that teachers, parents and students were facing and their role consisted of garnering community opinion to express to the school board.

**Parental Impact**

No Child Left Behind offered parents the option to choose different schools if their child’s school was failing, but the parents I encountered seemed unaware of this option or did not mention it. However, under the law, schools that were failing had to allow this option. Only one parent seemed aware of the possible sanction when she was asked if she knew about it. Another parent from that school was upset because the school was transferring students to another school because of boundary changes. She was even more committed to the school, it seemed, since they were now fighting to save their local school from being taken apart. Several prominent themes from parental interviews are discussed below.

**Parent Respondents**

**Theme: Parents’ and teachers’ perceptions are closer in alignment than other actors**

Both parent and teacher respondents shared similar concerns about the role of testing. In all schools, parents and teachers expressed tension over what they viewed as over-testing or a narrowing of the curriculum. Evidence of this surfaced in interviews from all case schools.

Ashley Elementary School’s PTA president observed that she perceived an “unbelievable amount of pressure, which then means pressure on the students too … it
does take some freedom away from teachers.” The parent, Rose, thought that teachers were forced to move at a pace that caused students to fall behind and that sometimes students’ struggles went unnoticed for a long time. Rose insisted that the children’s education was being compromised. At Perkins Elementary, the parents not only expressed concern about the curriculum, but created solutions in response. Perkins Elementary parents possessed a large measure of social capital and used it to buffer what they perceived as negative school-level changes. For example, parents responded to reduced time spent on the social studies curriculum by creating a before-school program which they taught and managed.

The teachers’ responses also supported the perception that the curriculum had narrowed. For example, Ms. Street of Perkins Elementary noted that “we have a time block set aside for everything such as basic science and social studies. But we switch off with them. So you only do – you end up doing a half a year’s social studies and a half year of science. Instead of when I was in school, we did social studies every day and science every day.” Teacher and parental concerns can be clearly contrasted if one studies some exchanges from the interviews.
### Teacher comment

“It’s just . . . it’s moving too quickly, and they’re not getting the foundation, and then that means every single year they get farther and farther behind.”

-Ms. Street, Perkins

“If the science curriculum were not taught, it would be a non-issue for the administrators because it is not being tested.”

-Ms. Otis, Newton

“there are parents as well as educators (my emphasis) who feel quite strongly that No Child Left Behind really is just about testing and ranking schools or not ranking but accepting schools based on a standardized test,”

-Ms. James, Perkins

### Parental comment

I have to say I feel very strongly that the public school is under such pressure to meet testing standards, that that is all they do.-Ms. Allen

“in the public school classroom there is such a range… and this thing with heterogeneous grouping, I don’t know how this thing is going to work,”

-Ms. Shelby

“Parents who are concerned about the changes in the curriculum put their resources to work before school and decided to supplement areas where they felt the curriculum had gotten weaker.”

-Kathy

### Table 11: Alignment- parent and teacher comments in comparison

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Parents have little awareness of or interest in AYP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent respondents downplayed the importance of testing for their children. Not surprisingly, parents wanted to ensure that their children were doing well individually, but there seemed to be little linkage of this individual performance to concern about the school’s AYP status. The parents at Perkins Elementary seemed to be the most informed about the role of testing for their school, since they were aware that the current principal (whose tenure was only several years long) had been brought in to replace the previous principal because they were failing to make AYP.</td>
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</table>
Even parents involved in the PTA accepted that parents in general were more concerned about their children’s experience than the role of accountability. Kathy, the PTA president for Perkins Elementary, applauded efforts to bring all students up to stricter standards but indicated that parents were dubious about more heterogeneous groupings in classes. The PTA president of Newton Elementary noted that “we do not focus on testing or NCLB or anything of that nature.” Further, tests were dismissed by some parents because they were “not an accurate reflection of the school or how students are doing because we have such a transient school …. But I think we have great schools under the circumstances.”

Conclusion

As has been noted, there were important limitations to be mindful of in drawing findings from the study:

- The study included a smaller number of cases than the original design weakening weakened the study’s overall internal and external validity;

- With the use of only elementary schools some parents may not be as familiar with AYP/NCLB because they may be newer to the school system;

- Because of staff turnover, an accurate accounting of civic capacity history is difficult to ascertain from school staff;
• Schools could choose to participate in the study and most chose not to, especially those actively ‘failing’ to make AYP;

• Dissimilar demographic and school participation rates between the two counties makes cross-county comparisons unlikely with regard to AYP status, demographics and school-community response.

Despite these limitations, there are observed patterns that can provide a better grounding for understanding civic capacity and for reflecting on the kinds of policy options that have the greatest likelihood of developing community- and school-based capacity to undertake sustained reform.

• The schools that were making AYP had different strategies based on available resources. The wealthier schools focused on their low income population of students who were struggling with language barriers or inadequate resources for additional academic support. The Title I schools, on the other hand, focused on engaging all parents and making events culturally attractive so that minority parents would participate.

• Subgroup identification and disaggregation creates targeted outreach for schools such as the two schools that partnered to provide programming for ELL students and their parents when they realized that the ELL population was most at risk for failing to make AYP.
• The school that rebounded made a significant effort to enlist community support across all sectors (Perkins). Therefore, broad-based community support seems to be helpful in improving student outcomes.

• Teachers and parents (who were aware of AYP) share concerns that NCLB has more objectionable consequences than benefits. Areas of concern include curriculum changes, emotional stress.

• Principals in the failing and rebounding schools tend to believe that NCLB created higher accountability for all students.

• A Title I school, or one that has many community resources, may have an advantage over a school that is not eligible for designation as a Title I school, but does not have an investment of community resources. Schools in the middle (not Title I, but not wealthy, like Oaktown) can struggle to build both internal and external capacity.

Ultimately, findings generated from this research suggest that NCLB can serve as a catalyst for broader collaboration of resources in areas with a strong civic capacity history and resources. Since the basis of this research is the theory that building civic capacity is essential to sustained school reform, these findings suggest that civic capacity is affected by administrators' needs to meet specific targets for the subgroups they serve.
It is important to note that it may be more difficult to enlist parents on the basis of improving AYP goals when many are not aware of the significance of testing to meet AYP. However, the parents who participated are motivated by the simple desire to ensure that their own child is achieving success in an academic sense, rather than seeing it as a part of a global objective to improve their school’s AYP standing. Further, some parents in the study expressed frustration with the perceived overuse of testing

Several results of this study were striking to me: (1) the degree to which parents were unaware of NCLB/ESEA or what might be at stake, (2) the degree to which relationships were altered in support of improving student achievement in the most diverse school in the study, and (3) the disparate perceptions of teachers and parents on the one hand and administrators on the other. In this study I considered how civic capacity building had taken place under this reauthorization of ESEA, using the definition of civic capacity laid out by Gutmore (2000) and Stone, et al (2001): “parents, local community members who are leaders, representatives from government, business, and other members of community-based organizations working collectively to meet a common challenge.”

From this study, I found that each school community performed quite differently although there were telling common themes. In general, there was agreement from administrators and teachers about the goal to increase student achievement. Parents and teachers also reported that there were clear changes at the classroom level, as a result. However, these alterations didn’t necessarily reflect an increase in partnership support.
Also, schools assumed that the goal of increasing student achievement to meet the standards set by NCLB was shared by all parents; however, the parents interviewed who were not a part of the PTA leadership seemed unaware that anything other than their own child’s school experience was at stake. Even parents who appeared to be well-educated and well-informed in general knew little about AYP or NCLB/ESEA. Therefore, it was not clear that the object of their interest was the same as the schools’. In a sense, it was as though schools told parents about the test (which determined AYP), but spared them the discussion of its link to AYP or potential sanctions unless the school failed to meet AYP and was in need of improvement. The causal path of performance scores and school sanctions or options seemed to be little understood. One parent whose child attended a non-case school indicated that she was a former teacher and still did not understand the letter that reported the school’s AYP status.

If the definition of the “common goal” were broadened from “making AYP” to “improving student achievement,” then there would be greater agreement, and in this respect, various groups were indeed coalescing for this broader common goal. I studied several areas to reach these conclusions: parental awareness depending on AYP status, the role of teachers as buffers, the politics of outreach, and the types of participation being encouraged.

Bryk et al. argued that change requires unitary politics and penetration to the level of the teachers. As shown with Perkins and Oaktown, minority schools and middle-class schools tended to have more adversarial politics when it came to developing this unitary
status. The differences in how parents networked at Perkins Elementary School reflected a divergence of their views. The wealthier parents had more resources for the extras they believed were needed, they approached teachers and administrators as equals (by suggesting what curricular changes needed to happen) and implemented those changes on their own time; they also had access to information through their own networks and often opted out of community-based organizations like Soundoff.

The use of data to foster school change mirrored the vision of the principals of the schools who needed to make AYP or face further sanctions. These findings echoed Stone et al.’s conclusion that, “education professionals see fewer problems than community and education activists” (page 101). In this case, however, the teachers’ reactions aligned with the “community and education activists.” As Mintrop’s study in Maryland and Kentucky had shown, I also found that the idea of sanctions did not motivate teachers; rather, their sense of moral purpose and internalized standards were the primary motivators. Also, the teachers were motivated by the use of data but not convinced that NCLB/ESEA was attainable. In my study teachers and parents seemed to share similar perceptions. One could argue from these findings that “elite views” were misaligned with many teachers and parents.

Vogel et al.’s review of the literature (2009) concluded that “much has not been studied” about how local actors on the ground were adapting to increased federal and state involvement in education. According to a review of the literature they suggested that schools’ reactions thus far could be grouped into three categories: (1) restructuring
institutional arrangements, (2) changing institutional resources, and (3) creating family community relationships. This kind of categorization was also evident in the results of this study. I, too, found that there were efforts to change instructional arrangements and to focus on family and community arrangements.

In the end, the concern should be whether building civic capacity with regard to No Child Left Behind is fulfilling the intended consequences of the law. For example, are students achieving? Are teachers feeling that the changes in the curriculum are in the best interest of students? Are parents and community members continuing to be engaged? According to the civic participation model of Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995), even if individuals in the community are motivated and have the capacity, there also must be opportunities to participate.

Elmore pointed out in ‘Reaching New Heights’ (2003) that there was often little agreement on expectations and that schools tended to blame parents and communities. However, my study did not demonstrate this. Rather, teachers’ and parents’ criticism of testing was aimed at the law or the practice of standardized testing itself. Principals who were critical of the law also blamed the structure and content of the legislation, not parents.

Once agreement was met, Elmore (2003) argued, there was a natural trajectory for building capacity. First, there was problem recognition, then lower-level changes, and finally, there might be stagnation leading to the development of internal capacity.
External capacity then became important; any barriers needed to be removed and limited resources needed to be supplemented through external support. At this point, transformation could happen in schools, leading to self-management. Some aspects of this progression held true in my study.

In addition, Oaktown Elementary exhibited the stagnation period that Elmore referenced. The principal, Ms. Buscom, echoed Fullan’s work, emphasizing the need to focus on building relationships. Fullan (2001) noted that when “parents, community, teachers and students have rapport then learning occurs. Schools use their internal collaborative strength to seek out relationships with the community.” Further, “schools must pursue two way capacity building in order to mobilize the resources of both the community and school.” He also pointed out that community resources did not come in helpful packages; rather, they were an amalgam of complex phenomena, “the work of the school is to figure out how to make use of it.”

**Implications**

In conclusion, NCLB/ESEA has greatly impacted the school communities studied. Schools that faced the greatest challenge maintaining AYP or faced challenges because of a gap in resources formed valuable relationships with local communities to meet their achievement goals.

This was evidenced by the schools that were rebounding from failing to making AYP and attempting to make AYP, Perkins and Oaktown. Perkins Elementary School
had well-organized parents who became part of the solution to a perceived narrowed curriculum and voiced their concerns about classroom changes and testing. The principal was able to turn to the community to replace the resources that had been made available when the school was failing to make AYP, but which were no longer supplied. The community responded with material support, even though it was evident that both parents and teachers remained critical of the accountability schema. Teachers likewise participated in newly created outreach programs that appealed to their moral interest in increasing parental engagement; however, they were not motivated by test scores.

At Oaktown Elementary, the “failing” school, the administration had been burdened by having to replace almost half the staff, a burden not experienced at Perkins. Further, the parental and community support at Oaktown seemed to be historically weaker. Thus, while the principal focused on creating greater internal capacity, there was no significant parental participation in the form of a PTO or parent group.

Finally, all of the teachers and parents (with the exception of one parent) argued that schools were narrowing the curriculum and teaching to the test. While their understanding of the accountability mechanism might differ, the parents and teachers I spoke to seemed to be forming important and more numerous alliances. However, teachers indicated that they felt obliged to publicly support the notion that testing would improve achievement, even if they felt otherwise. Parents who disagreed often expressed their tensions to teachers, who were generally their first point of contact. Whether
parents and teachers can overcome these tensions to enhance their relationships and cooperate in joint efforts to express their “voice” remains unknown.

Some aspects of the study would benefit from further research. First, it was very difficult to get cooperation from schools that were not making AYP; therefore, the stories of schools that are particularly troubled may be difficult to study. Second, increasing the number of cases would, of course, lead to a broader coverage of the variety of challenges and achievements schools have had in building civic capacity for school systems.

Finally, the power relationships, including the dichotomy of teacher and parents’ perceptions about testing versus the perception of the administrators, seemed fraught with tension. In the interview with the central office administrator, there seemed to be an additional layer of tension between principals in that county and the central office administration, teachers and parents—which could also benefit from more study. Given NCLB’s status as a federal mandate, the amount of discord may magnify with each new bureaucratic layer of interpretation and the process of implementation. As this was exemplified by the distrust between teachers and the administration, there lay an additional sense of distrust between the school leadership and the central office administration about how best to approach the issues closest to families. Teachers, who work closest with families than administrators, had stronger alignment in their perceptions of AYP with parents, versus school administration, seeing it as a mandate that weakened academic creativity and the ability to make school less about testing.
Endnotes

1 Principal of Daton Elementary School in county B

2 All names of persons and schools used are pseudonyms.

3 The lack of a formal relationship did not mean that schools did not keep PTAs; however, some were renamed “PTO’s” (parent-teacher organizations) and run with locally recognized bylaws. Some schools kept their chapters going in anticipation of a renewed, formal charter, according to this respondent.

4 Being in “improvement status” means that additional resources are often given to schools. They then have to find local means to maintain needed resources.

5 One such organization which I will call ‘Soundoff’ was also included in this study.

6 Some parent interviews included do bear this out in the study with only this particular school.

7 This statement was also confirmed by some other parents in the local community and this school.

8 The interview was conducted simultaneously because of scheduling concerns. The parents seemed to be in agreement on many issues, but care was taken to ensure that they answered questions individually.

9 I was not able to secure an interview until close to the time for the state test and at that time teachers and administrators were not being permitted to participate as she felt they were too busy with test preparation. Later attempts were denied because of an approaching school break.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Section 1118: E-G of NCLB/ESEA

(e) BUILDING CAPACITY FOR INVOLVEMENT - To ensure effective involvement of parents and to support a partnership among the school involved, parents, and the community to improve student academic achievement, each school and local educational agency assisted under this part —

(1) shall provide assistance to parents of children served by the school or local educational agency, as appropriate, in understanding such topics as the State's academic content standards and State student academic achievement standards, State and local academic assessments, the requirements of this part, and how to monitor a child's progress and work with educators to improve the achievement of their children;

(2) shall provide materials and training to help parents to work with their children to improve their children's achievement, such as literacy training and using technology, as appropriate, to foster parental involvement;

(3) shall educate teachers, pupil services personnel, principals, and other staff, with the assistance of parents, in the value and utility of contributions of parents, and in how to reach out to, communicate with, and work with parents as equal partners, implement and coordinate parent programs, and build ties between parents and the school;

(4) shall, to the extent feasible and appropriate, coordinate and integrate parent involvement programs and activities with Head Start, Reading First, Early Reading First, Even Start, the Home Instruction Programs for Preschool Youngsters, the Parents as Teachers Program, and public preschool and other programs, and conduct other activities, such as parent resource centers, that encourage and support parents in more fully participating in the education of their children;

(5) shall ensure that information related to school and parent programs, meetings, and other activities is sent to the parents of participating children in a format and, to the extent practicable, in a language the parents can understand;
(6) may involve parents in the development of training for teachers, principals, and other educators to improve the effectiveness of such training;

(7) may provide necessary literacy training from funds received under this part if the local educational agency has exhausted all other reasonably available sources of funding for such training;

(8) may pay reasonable and necessary expenses associated with local parental involvement activities, including transportation and child care costs, to enable parents to participate in school-related meetings and training sessions;

(9) may train parents to enhance the involvement of other parents;

(10) may arrange school meetings at a variety of times, or conduct in-home conferences between teachers or other educators, who work directly with participating children, with parents who are unable to attend such conferences at school, in order to maximize parental involvement and participation;

(11) may adopt and implement model approaches to improving parental involvement;

(12) may establish a districtwide parent advisory council to provide advice on all matters related to parental involvement in programs supported under this section;

(13) may develop appropriate roles for community-based organizations and businesses in parent involvement activities; and

(14) shall provide such other reasonable support for parental involvement activities under this section as parents may request.

(f) ACCESSIBILITY— In carrying out the parental involvement requirements of this part, local educational agencies and schools, to the extent practicable, shall provide full opportunities for the participation of parents with limited English proficiency, parents with disabilities, and parents of migratory children, including providing information and school reports required under section 1111 in a format and, to the extent practicable, in a language such parents understand.

(g) INFORMATION FROM PARENTAL INFORMATION AND RESOURCE CENTERS- In a State where a parental information and resource center is established to provide training, information, and support to parents and individuals who work with local parents, local educational agencies, and schools receiving assistance under this part, each local educational agency or school that
receives assistance under this part and is located in the State shall assist parents and parental organizations by informing such parents and organizations of the existence and purpose of such centers.

(h) REVIEW- The State educational agency shall review the local educational agency's parental involvement policies and practices to determine if the policies and practices meet the requirements of this section.
Appendix B

Interview Schedule

(All potential follow-up questions are italicized and are similar for each respondent, when the same question is asked (where appropriate), to allow for answer comparisons between respondent groups.)

A. Questions for Principals:

1. What challenges are you facing as an educational leader?
   What are some issues facing your students?
   What are some issues facing teachers and administrators?
   Do you feel that you have adequate state and local support?
   How has striving to make or maintain AYP affected your workload?

2. What resources do you use to meet these challenges?
   Are there financial resources to meet these challenges?
   Are parents supportive?
   Are there local groups that are being utilized to help your school meet AYP?
   Are there local partnerships with your school?

3. Who would you include in your definition of your school’s community?
   Would you include community-based organizations or businesses?
   Do you find interest among citizens without school-aged children?

4. Has the level of outreach from your school to this community changed within the last 5 years?
   Are there efforts on the school’s part to get local support to accomplish goals?
   Are there any new programs aimed at increasing participation from your community in school planning or activities?
   Has there been any investment in existing programs to increase participation?

5. Have offers of outreach to your school changed in volume or substance within the last five years? (If you have been in the post less than 5 years, since you have been here.)
   Do you find that community members are increasingly offering their services of assistance to your school?
   Has there been an increase in volunteer activity?

6. Has NCLB/ESEA played a role in the relationships your school has with the community at large?
   Has there been any response from parents?
   Have any offers of assistance been linked to helping your school make AYP?
   Are there are groups targeted for assistance as a result of AYP requirements?
7. How has this affected your role?

B. Questions for Teachers

1. What challenges have you faced as a teacher in recent years?
2. How do they differ from the beginning of your teaching career?
3. How do you define your school’s community?
4. What community resources do you use to meet these challenges?
5. Has the level of outreach from your school or to your school changed in recent years?
6. Has NCLB/ESEA played a role in the relationships your school has with the larger community?
7. How has NCLB/ESEA affected your role?

C. Questions for Superintendents

1. What challenges are you facing as an educational leader?
2. What resources do you use to meet these challenges?
3. How do you define your school’s community?
4. How is this community involved in helping to meet the district’s challenges?
5. Has the level of outreach towards the district’s schools been altered by these challenges?
6. Has there been outreach to this community at large to meet challenges?
7. Has NCLB/ESEA played a role in the relationships your school has within the larger community?
8. How has NCLB/ESEA affected your role?

D. Questions for PTA presidents or leaders

1. What challenges are you facing as an educational leader during these times?
2. What resources do you use to meet these challenges?
3. How do you define your school’s community?
4. What resources do you use to meet these challenges?
5. Has the level of outreach from your school or to your school changed in recent years?
6. How have parents responded to these challenges?
7. Has NCLB/ESEA played a role in the relationships your school has with the larger community?
8. How has NCLB/ESEA affected your role?

E. Questions for chamber of commerce leaders

1. What are the current priorities for the chamber of commerce?
2. How would you describe the chamber’s relationship to the district’s schools?
   Has this changed in recent years? Why or why not?
3. Are there formal relationships with any schools or the district?
Are these relationships newly established?
4. Are there any schools targeted for assistance or outreach?

Are there any groups in particular that are targeted? Why?
5. Have you been contacted by schools for assistance or to establish relationships?
6. Has NCLB/ESEA played a role in the chamber’s relationship with schools in your district?

F: Questions for Parents

1. What are the most important things going on with your child’s school?
2. What kind of relationship do you have with your child’s teachers?
3. Are there any groups that work with you or your child outside of school to help with your child’s schooling needs?
4. How do you find out what is going on with your child’s school?
5. Where do you go if you have concerns?
6. How do you find out about resources to help your child?
7. What resources do you use to help your child with school?
Appendix C

Ashley Elementary: All Charts from www.mcpsmaryland.gov

### Attendance Rate

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### Enrollment

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### Student Mobility

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% of classes NOT taught by:

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Other Supporting Facts

Special Services: Special Education Students - Elementary

Percent of Students

now 19.6%
Special Services: Limited English Proficient Students - Elementary

Percent of Students

\[ '99 \quad '00 \quad '01 \quad '02 \quad '03 \quad '04 \quad '05 \quad '06 \quad '07 \quad '08 \quad '09 \]

now 13.8%

Special Services: Free/Reduced Meal Students - Elementary

Percent of Students

\[ '00 \quad '01 \quad '02 \quad '03 \quad '04 \quad '05 \quad '06 \quad '07 \quad '08 \quad '09 \]

now 8.9%
Appendix D All Charts from www.mcpsmaryland.gov

Perkins Elementary

Attendance Rate

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Enrollment

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Student Mobility

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% of classes NOT taught by:

| Highly Qualified Teachers | 0.0 |

Special Services: Special Education Students - Elementary

now 9.8%
Special Services: Free/Reduced Meal Students - Elementary

now 36.7%

Special Services: Limited English Proficient Students - Elementary

now 9.2%
Appendix E  All Charts from www.mcpsmaryland.gov

Newton Elementary

Attendance Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Students</th>
<th>Subgroups</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elementary</strong></td>
<td>95.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am. Indian/ Nat. Alaskan</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>96.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pac. Islander</td>
<td>96.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>94.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Ed</td>
<td>94.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEP</td>
<td>95.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>504</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FARMS</td>
<td>95.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title I</td>
<td>95.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Enrollment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Subgroups</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>All</strong></td>
<td>393</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am. Indian/ Nat. Alaskan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pac. Islander</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>227</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student Mobility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Students</th>
<th>Subgroups</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elementary</strong></td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am. Indian/ Nat. Alaskan</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
African American   6.6
Asian/Pac. Islander 12.1
White   13.9
Hispanic  18.0
Special Ed   17.5
LEP   5.9
504   --
FARMS  15.9
Title I  14.3
Migrant   --

Teacher Qualifications

% with State certification:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard Professional</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Professional</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident Teacher</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional Teacher</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% of classes NOT taught by:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly Qualified Teachers</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Special Services: Special Education Students - Elementary

Percent of Students

'99 '00 '01 '02 '03 '04 '05 '06 '07

now 10.8%

Special Services: Free/Reduced Meal Students - Elementary

Percent of Students

'00 '01 '02 '03 '04 '05 '06 '07 '08 '09

now 79.4%
Special Services: Title I Students - Elementary

now 100%
Appendix F All Charts from www.mcpsmaryland.gov

Oaktown Elementary

Attendance Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Subgroups</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>93.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Enrollment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Subgroups</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>435</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am. Indian/ AK Native</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>259</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pac. Islander</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>116</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>256</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>179</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student Mobility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Subgroups</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am. Indian/ AK Native</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pac. Islander</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Ed</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEP</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>504</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FARMS</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title I</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident Teacher</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional Teacher</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% of classes NOT taught by:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly Qualified Teachers</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Special Services: Special Education Students - Elementary

Avg: 27.5%

Special Services: Free/Reduced Meal Students - Elementary

Avg: 56.6%
Special Services: Limited English Proficient Students - Elementary

Avg: 21.4%