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## **A Program Evaluation Of The Implementation Of School Improvement Policies Of The Every Student Succeeds Act In A Rural School District In Virginia**

Craig B. Reed

*William & Mary - School of Education*, [Hamptonpirate94@yahoo.com](mailto:Hamptonpirate94@yahoo.com)

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A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SCHOOL  
IMPROVEMENT POLICIES OF THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT IN A  
RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT IN VIRGINIA

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A Dissertation  
Presented to the  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

By  
Craig B. Reed  
Spring 2020

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Approved March 16, 2020

**Michael DiPaola, Ed.D.**

Committee Member

**James Stronge, Ph.D.**

Committee Member

**Margaret Constantino, Ph.D.**

Chairperson of Doctoral Committee

## DEDICATION

I would like to thank Kylor Reed, Jr., Mary Reed, and Melba Reed for all their support in pursuing my doctoral studies and encouraging me to be the best person and leader that I can be.

I also want to thank Katrice Pennington for being a source of encouragement and being my rock during this process.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	viii
List of Figures	ix
Abstract	x
Chapter 1: Introduction	2
Background	2
Program Description	7
Context	8
Description of the Program	8
Overview of the Evaluation Approach	11
Program Evaluation Model	11
Purpose of the Evaluation	14
Focus of the Evaluation	15
Evaluation Questions	15
Definition of Terms	16
Chapter 2: Review of Literature	19
Accountability Systems in Education	19
The Every Student Succeeds Act	23
Basic Principles	23

ESSA and Application of Accountability Measures	24
State Implementations of ESSA	28
Achievement Gaps and Potential Causes	32
Poverty	33
Limited Early Learning Opportunities	37
Re-segregation and Unequal Schooling	39
Lack of Access to Qualified Teachers	40
Lack of Access to a High Quality Curriculum	47
Dysfunctional Learning Environments	51
What Works in Closing Achievement Gaps	52
Leadership Matters	53
Culture of Equity	54
High Expectations	55
Focus on Improvement	56
School Improvement Plans	57
Principal Beliefs	60
Summary	62
Chapter 3: Methods	64
Participants	66
Data Sources	69
Document Review	70

Principal Interview	71
Data Collection	75
Effective School Plans	75
Interviews with Principals	75
Data Analysis	76
Research Question 1	76
Research Question 2	79
Research Question 3	80
Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations	82
Delimitations	82
Limitations	82
Assumptions	82
Ethical Considerations	83
Confidentiality	83
The IRB Process	83
Positionality	83
Chapter 4: Findings	85

Evaluation Question #1	88
Evaluation Question #2	98
Evaluation Question #3	104
Summary of Findings	108
Chapter 5: Recommendations	111
Discussion of Findings	111
Implications for Policy and Practice	115
Recommendations for Future Research	120
Summary	122
Appendices	125
Appendix A: Interview Protocol	125
Appendix B: Participant Informed Consent Form	128
References	129
Vita	138

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. <i>Title I vs. Non-Title I Schools, Teacher Quality Data Comparison</i>	42
Table 2. <i>Student Demographics for Participating Schools</i>	67
Table 3. <i>Outline of Schools' Gap Group Achievement in Reading</i>	68
Table 4. <i>Outline of Schools' Gap Group Achievement in Math</i>	69
Table 5. <i>Table of Specifications for Research Questions and Interview Questions</i>	76
Table 6. <i>Table of Specification for Research Questions, Data Sources and Analysis</i>	81
Table 7. <i>Table of Evidence of Identified Themes for Evaluation Question 1</i>	90
Table 8. <i>Table of Evidence of Identified Themes for Evaluation Question 2</i>	100
Table 9. <i>Table of Evidence of Identified Themes for Evaluation Question 3</i>	105
Table 10. <i>Findings and Related Recommendations</i>	116

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. <i>Logic Model of the Every Student Succeeds Act in Virginia</i>	13
Figure 2. <i>Distribution of Out of Field Teachers in the United States</i>	45

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the implementation of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) in Virginia and how this implementation impacts student achievement. Three research questions were the focus of this study. First, how is a local rural district implementing components of ESSA related to school improvement? Second, what are principals' beliefs about the potential benefits and liabilities of the implementation of ESSA regarding school improvement? Finally, what are the recommendations to principals regarding improving the implementation of ESSA to enhance the effectiveness of school improvement? This study supported the idea that entrepreneurial or creative thinking is essential in providing sustainable success for improvement in schools. A document review of school improvement plans found that schools contained elements of best practice and were in alignment with the requirements for school accountability under ESSA. Structured interviews were conducted to explore principal beliefs and perceptions of ESSA accountability and school improvement policies. Common themes identified from school improvement plans included recognition of gap groups, specific academic goals for gap groups, steps or initiatives to close gaps groups, implementation of social emotional learning, and steps to increase attendance. Common themes from principal interviews included principals identifying the benefits of evaluation measures beyond standardized testing,

participant understanding of ESSA and social emotional learning as an intervention.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background**

One of the most prevalent challenges in American education is the achievement of minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities (SWDs; Hyslop, 2003). While the achievement of students in the United States has consistently lagged behind students of other developed nations, the achievement of disenfranchised students such as minority, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs has been even lower. Additionally, the United States has the largest gaps between students of different social and economic backgrounds among developed nations (Darling-Hammond, 2015). These inequities in social economic backgrounds have contributed to gaps in achievement for students of color and students with low socioeconomic status (SES). As Darling-Hammond (2015) notes, the world is changing or has changed from an industrialized society. The needs and requirements of the workforce also have changed. Many of the jobs of the past have either been outsourced or have been replaced by automation. As such, the needs of the workforce have changed, currently demanding that students are critical thinkers, problem solvers, and communicators. However, inequities in the American educational system hinder

minority students, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs from meeting the challenging needs of the 21st century workforce.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress provides insight regarding the achievement gaps for minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs. By fourth grade, gaps in achievement become apparent. However, by the time students matriculate into 12th grade, the average African American or Hispanic student performs at an eighth-grade level compared to their White counterparts (Public Impact, 2018). While, the percentages of White students meeting ACT benchmarks are low (49%), the percentages of African American students are considerably lower 11% (Public Impact, 2018). These gaps have real consequences for students of color, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs. Not only do these disparities hinder students' access to Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment classes, but they ultimately hinder these students' college entrance rates. For example, in the United States, 72% of Asian students and 4% of White students earned Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate credits, while only 23% of African American students and 34% of Latino students did the same (Public Impact, 2018).

These inequities are exacerbated by the percentages of minorities who attend high poverty schools. Schools with lesser resources are often unable to provide the same opportunities as schools with higher resources. At the same time, 55% of African American and 54% of Latino students attend high poverty schools. However, even in these settings where more resources are available, these gaps still exist (Public Impact, 2018). These inequities lead to later gaps in college entrance and completion rates. In

2010, only 17% of African American youth and 11% of Hispanic youth between the ages of 25 and 29 had earned a college degree. This was a considerable difference when compared to 34% of White students in the same age bracket (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, there has been some evidence of closing the achievement gaps. Herrera, Zhou, and Petscher (2017) found slight closings of achievement gaps in some states in reading and math. Despite these decreases, the gaps in achievement between white and African American students still exceed more than 10 percentage points. These gaps are prevalent in academic success on standardized assessments, high school graduation rates, and college completion rates (Reardon, 2013). Historically, these groups of students have demonstrated lower student outcomes than White students, Asian students, middle class students, and general education students.

The achievement results for selected minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs, which have been distinctly lower than the general population of students in Virginia, are alarming. Consider the following recent statistics for gap groups on the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) assessments:

- 86% of White students passed the Reading SOL assessment compared to only 67% of African American and 67% of Hispanic students meeting proficiency;
- 84% of White students passed the Writing SOL assessment compared to only 64% of African American and 70% of Hispanic students meeting proficiency;
- 84% of White students passed the Math SOL assessment compared to only 64% of African American and 68% of Hispanic students meeting proficiency.

- 90% of Asian students passed a reading SOL. 92% of Asian students passed a math SOL (Virginia Department of Education, 2018).

The effort to close the achievement gap between “gap groups” and White, Asian and non-economically disadvantaged students has been an issue for several decades.

Moreover, there is an abundance of evidence that indicates that students, especially those in gap groups, will not be ready to compete in a global society unless their learning and achievement results improve (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

One of the key issues that federal education policy and funding has attempted to address in recent decades are these persistent achievement gaps. When comparing the United States (US) to other comparable nations, it should be noted that US schools are much more inclusive of economically disadvantaged students than other nations (Stronge & Xu, 2017). Studies since 2006 demonstrate some positive results regarding achievement and closing of achievement gaps (Stronge & Xu, 2017). While US students had lackluster Programs for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores, it should be considered that a higher proportion of economically disadvantaged students are part of the population of US students. For example, Finland reported only 4% of its students as economically disadvantaged, while the US had nearly 25%. There is evidence that the scores of economically disadvantaged students in the US have risen while the achievement of low-income students in other comparative nations has slid (Stronge & Xu, 2017). Still, gaps in achievement for students remain a prevalent problem in US schools. In 2009, low-SES students scored 30 points lower than the top three scoring nations on PISA assessments (Stronge & Xu, 2017).

The NCLB Act sought to address these disparities. Through mandates, sanctions, and consequences, NCLB's intentions included increasing achievement for minorities and economically disadvantaged students. As part of NCLB, schools that did not meet benchmarks were identified as needing improvement. Virginia's implementation of NCLB was intended not only to identify low achieving schools, but also to help these schools improve achievement and support the underserved populations within them (Hyslop, 2003).

Despite considerable effort and expenditures, NCLB fell short of its intentions. While 62.5% of identified schools exited improvement status in 2013, this was a result of numerous waivers. Waivers included modifications or amendments to NCLB that released schools from improvement status. Waivers were implemented as the result of states identifying too many schools for improvement. Thus, while waivers might have reduced the number of schools classified as needing improvement, it is questionable whether these waivers addressed the primary concern of achievement for minority, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs (N. Smith & Wright, 2017).

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) seeks to address the achievement issues that NCLB failed to meet. While NCLB focused on mandates, ESSA acknowledges contextual differences by providing flexibility to states to interpret various means of success. This flexibility also includes how schools would be identified as low achieving or needing improvement. The provisions in ESSA offer more flexibility to states regarding accountability. However, the problem of student achievement, particularly for the most disadvantaged students, remains prevalent (Reardon, 2013).

Numerous policy issues arise from ESSA. How can educational policy effectively address the issues of student achievement, school improvement, and achievement gaps of minority students, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs? What does this policy look like and how can it be structured to meet the needs of a diverse range of schools in the US? Moreover, can ESSA, with its additional flexibility, effectively address the issues of American achievement and the achievement of minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs?

The implementation of ESSA in Virginia presents an opportunity for policy makers to deploy an accountability system that will work not only to improve overall student achievement, but also to address the deficiencies of gap groups in schools and to address how instruction is delivered under ESSA regulations. While NCLB focused solely on standardized measures, the Virginia implementation of ESSA focuses on a number of factors outside of testing. Additionally, this current implementation also focuses on the achievement of gap groups. ESSA emphasizes the need for educators to teach content knowledge for the further purpose of developing students' deeper learning, higher order thinking, and critical thought (Thompson & Dow, 2017).

With a better accountability policy in place, there is an opportunity to reassess the teaching, learning and support provided to the most vulnerable students. It is also an opportunity to define how the lowest achieving schools are identified and how they are supported. However, these policy frameworks must be markedly different from previous policy attempts in order to raise achievement and instill equity regarding opportunity and achievement for all students. Ultimately, the implementation of ESSA in Virginia must

allow for multiple indicators, self-assessment, and site-based management to support achievement and a school climate for low achieving schools.

### **Program Description**

The goal of ESSA is to improve the achievement of groups of students that historically performed at lower rates as determined by standardized test scores. This study focused on the perceptions of principals in a rural district regarding the implementation of ESSA in Virginia. Specifically, this study sought to gain insight to principal beliefs about ESSA accountability and how this accountability system supports the increased achievement of gap groups. Finally, this study identified common suggestions from principals for improvement of Virginia's implementation of ESSA.

**Context.** During the 2018-19 school year, the implementation of ESSA in Virginia did not designate any schools as "accreditation denied." Rather, schools either received "fully accredited" or "accredited with conditions" designations. The schools that will be examined in this study include elementary and middle schools from a rural school district that is fully accredited but has low gap group achievement. While all of these schools were assigned "accredited" status for the 2018-19 school year, each had designations that did not meet state benchmarks for gap groups. A yellow designation indicates that a school has not met a benchmark in a designated area but is close. A red designation indicates that a school has not met a benchmark and far below the goal. The selected school district is predominantly White and each of the selected schools has low minority populations. Each of these schools had populations of SWDs that exceeded 10% during the 2018-29 school year.

The process of school improvement is intended to increase the achievement of minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs. As a district requirement, each school had to create a plan to address areas such as academic achievement and discipline.

**Description of the program.** While the implementation of NCLB focused solely on test scores, ESSA allows for flexibility and multiple measures toward accountability. Virginia's implementation allows for two additional indicators outside of standardized testing (Figure 1). First, school accreditation ratings are based on attendance. Second, middle schools and elementary schools can also receive credit for growth based on a previous SOL score in math or reading. A system of growth bands has been included in Virginia's implementation of ESSA, which includes students who demonstrated growth across two consecutive years (Virginia Department of Education, 2018).

Under ESSA, Virginia includes a focus on gap group achievement. School report cards not only report overall achievement, but also the achievement of gap groups such as African American, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs. The achievement for each of these school quality indicators is designated by three different levels. Level 1 (green) designates that a school has met or exceeded the benchmark or standard in an identified area, referred to as an indicator. Level 2 (yellow) designates that a school is near the standard or has made sufficient progress. Level 3 (red) indicates that a school is below the standard in an indicator (Virginia Department of Education, 2018).

These designations for school quality indicators are factored into whether a school is accredited. Schools with all quality indicators at a Level 1 or 2 will have the

designation of being *fully accredited*. Schools with one or more quality indicators at Level 3 are designated as *accredited with conditions*. Finally, schools that fail to adopt and implement a plan for Level 3 indicators are designated as *accreditation denied*.

Virginia's implementation of ESSA also requires that schools write plans to address areas of need that are identified in school quality indicators that fall into Level 2 or 3 categories (Virginia Department of Education, 2018). However, unlike NCLB, there is more flexibility within these plans.

Previously, NCLB school improvement processes in Virginia designated schools into two categories: *priority* or *focus* schools. The identification of priority schools was based on overall achievement in math and reading. The lowest 5% of Title I schools were identified as priority schools. Like priority schools, focus schools were identified by achievement in mathematics and reading. However, the identification of focus schools was based on the achievement of gap groups. In addition to receiving sanctions for not meeting benchmarks, these schools also receive additional funding designated to increase student achievement (Virginia Department of Education, 2018).

Regarding accountability and school improvement, Virginia's implementation of ESSA uses different designations of support that have similar purposes to those used under NCLB. While NCLB identified schools as priority or focus schools, ESSA identifies schools according to their needs for specific supports. There are three classifications of supports in the current school improvement system in Virginia: *comprehensive*, *targeted*, and *additional targeted* supports. Comprehensive support is designated to Title I schools based on the performance of all students. Targeted support

is designated to Title I and non-Title I schools that have low performing gap groups. This is similar to NCLB's focus schools; however, targeted support schools also include non-Title I schools. Finally, *additional targeted support* is designated for schools that have gap groups performing at extensively lower levels than other schools (Virginia Department of Education, 2018).

ESSA also seeks to address inequities that are the result of students being served by inexperienced, out of field, and ineffective teachers. Disproportionality of minority and economically disadvantaged students being served by inexperienced teachers, out of field teachers, and ineffective teachers has been cited as a cause for achievement gaps. To address this, Virginia has clearly defined the inexperienced teachers and out of field teachers. ESSA outlines the following definitions:

*Inexperienced Teacher*- a teacher in his or her first year of teaching.

*Out of Field Teacher*- a licensed teacher who is assigned to teach a class outside of the teacher's endorsement area.

*Ineffective Teacher*- a teacher that is both inexperienced and out of field.

### **Overview of the Evaluation Approach**

This program evaluation aligns with the pragmatic paradigm and use branch of program evaluation. As such, this evaluation is designed to be useful to stakeholders within a specific context. The evaluation questions and data collection plan are developed to help determine whether and how the program has been beneficial to specific stakeholders within a specific context. This study specifically focused on the processes

of school divisions and how elements of the Virginia ESSA plan were being implemented at the school level.

Creswell and Creswell (2017) define a qualitative approach as a study that explores the understanding and meaning of individuals or groups subscribing to a social human approach. This program evaluation will rely on qualitative data collected from key stakeholders in order to evaluate the implementation of school improvement policies under ESSA.

**Program evaluation model.** Stufflebeam's (2000) CIPP model provides a framework for this program evaluation. This model helps to examine the degree to which the contextually identified inputs and processes to achieve the desired outcomes of the program (Mertens & Wilson, 2018). A process evaluation, which identifies the middle portion of the CIPP model, can help to identify successes, challenges to and fidelity of implementation of the program for various stakeholders. The perspectives of various stakeholders on the benefit of the program can be evaluated using qualitative research methods. The logic model of the program under evaluation is represented in Figure 1.

**The Virginia Implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)**

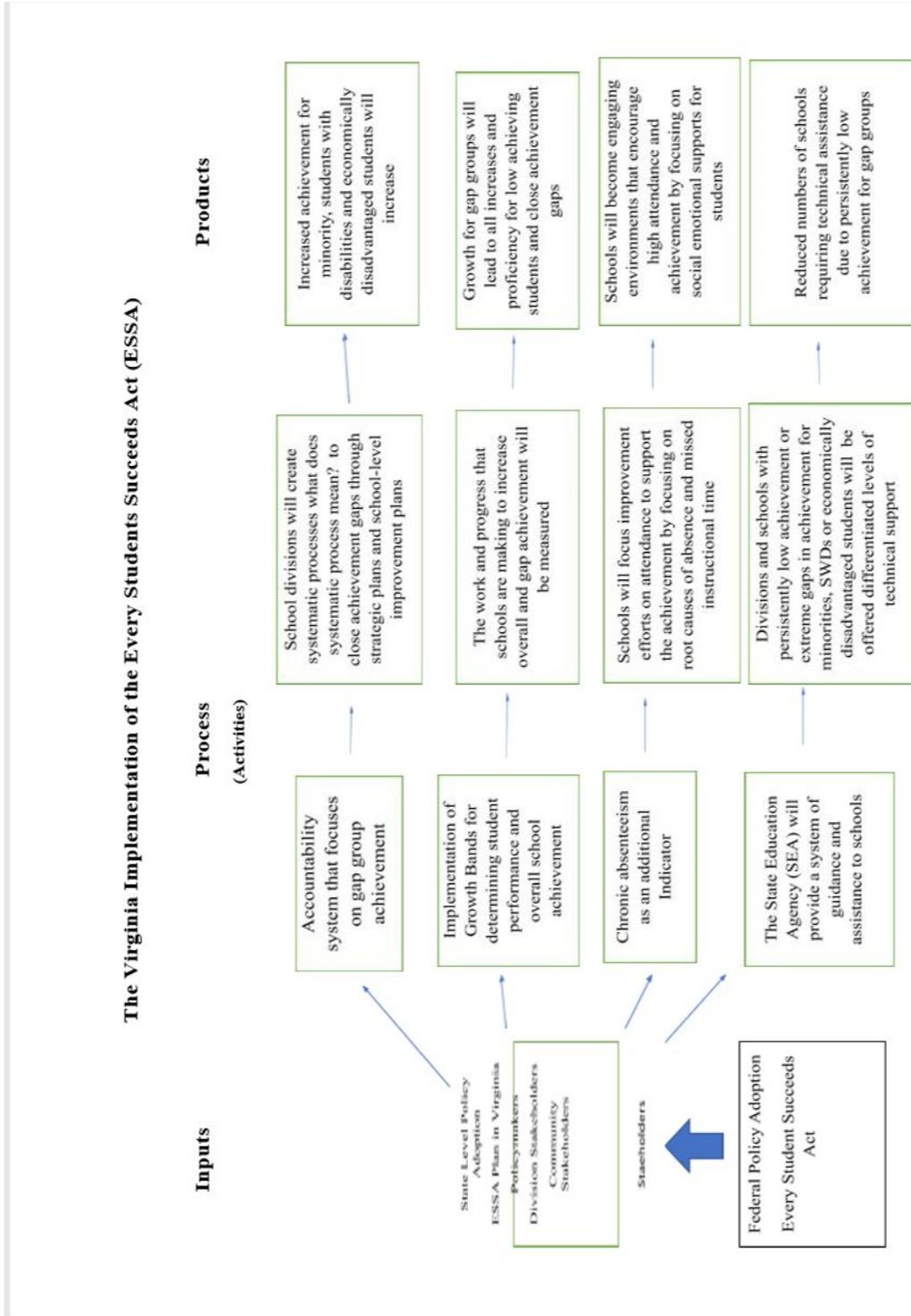


Figure 1. Logic Model of the Accountability Component

**Purpose of the evaluation.** The purpose of this formative program evaluation was to evaluate the implementation of the Virginia accountability program in a rural

school district and aimed to provide specific suggestions for effectiveness for the school improvement programs adopted as part of ESSA. Specifically, this study conducted a document analysis of written school improvement plans and investigated key stakeholder perceptions of improvement programs designed to support the increased achievement of at-risk students and gap groups in schools. The audience for this evaluation includes the following groups:

- *Policy Makers*- Although the intentions of school improvement promote equity for students, policy makers should recognize that school improvement is a complex process and understand that each school has a unique context.
- *Virginia Department of Education Leaders*- This study should allow state leaders to adjust the process of school improvement to support schools and sustainably increase student achievement.
- *District Leaders*- Superintendents, central office leaders, and specialists should better understand how to support schools that are in the process of school improvement.
- *Principals*- Building level leaders will have a better understanding of leadership styles that support increased achievement and sustainability in schools identified for comprehensive or targeted support.

This topic is important for several reasons. First, extensive federal dollars have been directed to NCLB initiatives and, more recently, ESSA. Secondly, many of the identified focus and priority schools contain high populations of low-SES and minority students. While the existing policies may not sufficiently support improvement efforts

for schools that include these populations, this study examined policy implementation that could improve student achievement and, specifically, achievement gaps in low achieving schools.

Finally, this study was important because school improvement should be a process for all schools. This includes schools that are statistically successful. As such, policy makers should consider practices or policies that can facilitate success for all schools and all students. Essentially, all school leaders should strive to improve their schools regardless of whether they have high populations of minorities, economically disadvantaged students, or SWDs. Moreover, principals and school leaders should strive to improve their schools even if they have not been identified for school improvement initiatives. Simply put, as agents of change, school leaders should work to improve their schools by constantly pushing for better student outcomes. This study analyzed how policy supports or stifles these efforts.

**Focus of the evaluation.** Creswell and Creswell (2017) describe the pragmatic paradigm as research that focuses on a problem and uses all methods available to understand the problem. In most cases, the pragmatic paradigm involves a mixed methods approach. This evaluation of the Virginia implementation of ESSA in a rural school division sought insights regarding principals' perceptions of various components of accountability provisions in ESSA and school improvement programs. The focus of this study was to understand the current implementation of ESSA at the school level and to evaluate the implementation of a policy designed to positively impact the outcomes of groups of students that have historically performed at a lower level than other students.

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. To what degree of fidelity do individual school improvement plans align with the components of ESSA relating to accountability and increasing the achievement of student groups, including minority students, low-SES students, Hispanic students, and SWDs?
2. What are principals' beliefs about the potential benefits and liabilities of the implementation of ESSA regarding school improvement, including increasing achievement for minority students, low-SES students, Hispanic students, and SWDs?
3. What are the recommendations from principals regarding improving the school level implementation of ESSA to support increased achievement for including minority students, low-SES students, Hispanic students, and SWDs?

### **Definitions of Terms**

**Achievement gap.** This term refers to disparities in academic achievement between gap groups—such as minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs—and White and non-economically disadvantaged students.

**Achievement gap groups.** Groups of students that have historically performed lower than other groups of students. This includes minority, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs.

**Additional targeted support.** An ESSA school improvement designation based on the performance of gap groups with extremely low pass rates.

**Comprehensive support.** An ESSA school improvement designation based on the performance of all students.

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).** A US law passed in December 2015 that governs K–12 public education policy. The law replaced its predecessor, the NCLB Act, and modified (but did not eliminate) provisions relating to the periodic standardized tests given to students (Close, Amrein-Beardsley, & Collins, 2018).

**Focus school.** NCLB designation for the lowest performing schools. Focus schools are identified by overall achievement in math and reading. However, the identification for focus schools is based on achievement of gap groups. The lowest performing 10% of Title I schools are identified as focus schools.

**No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).** A US law passed in 2002 authorizing several federal education programs that are administered by the states (Hyslop, 2003). The law was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Required states to test students in reading and math in Grades 3–8 and once in high school (Close et al., 2018).

**Priority schools.** NCLB designation for the lowest achieving schools. This included the lowest 5% of Title I schools in math and reading achievement.

**Standards of Learning.** Descriptions of the states' expectations for student learning and achievement in K-12 mathematics, English, science, history, technology, the fine arts, health and physical education, and driver's education (Virginia Department of Education, 2019b)

**Targeted support.** An ESSA school improvement designation based on the performance of gap groups. This can be assigned to Title I or non-Title I students.

**Title I.** A schoolwide designation applied to a school whose population of economically disadvantaged students that exceeds 40%. It provides funding to schools to support resources for students for the purpose of raising student achievement.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter provides an overview and synthesis of literature regarding the impact of policy on student achievement for African American students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities (SWDs). Specifically, this literature review focuses on themes of accountability, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), achievement gaps, what works, and principal beliefs. This literature review summarizes literature related to these topics and synthesizes the information, identifying common themes and ideas in each area.

#### **Accountability Systems in Education**

Accountability systems are closely linked to school improvement policies. In short, accountability systems are mechanisms for evaluating academic performance by schools and students (Cumming & Dickson, 2013). The requirements of accountability systems dictate which schools will be identified. Furthermore, accountability systems dictate the sanctions that identified schools will receive. Finally, accountability policies indicate how these schools will be supported. If policy is to address the issues of lagging achievement of minority, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs, then accountability systems are a critical factor.

One prevailing problem for public schools continues to be low academic achievement. This problem is further exacerbated by the low achievement of SWDs, minorities, and economically disadvantaged students. The implementation of ESSA accountability systems can address this issue.

A synthesis of literature suggests that effective accountability plans have several common aspects (Close et al., 2018; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; R. Smith & Lowery, 2017). School accountability must allow for multiple indicators for success (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). Furthermore, they must allow for self-reflection (Stetcher et al., 2004). And finally, they must allow for greater school autonomy. Accountability systems that focus on rewards and consequences have been shown to have detrimental effects on overall student achievement; moreover, punitive policies do not support success for the lowest achieving schools (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). Finally, using the single factor of high stakes test results does not give a clear picture of the diverse range of schools because test results do not consider the variables that exist among schools (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016).

Mathis and Trujillo (2016) propose that a framework of a successful accountability system allows for multiple measures of success. Multiple measures can be a first aspect of an effective accountability system. This process proposes that while high stakes testing can give some indication of learning and achievement, policy must consider other factors such as growth, attendance, parent engagement, and school climate.

A second factor of an effective accountability system could be including self-assessment or inspection teams as a means of measuring values. Considering that

self-assessment promotes reflection that typically leads to improvement, this could be a favorable method for evaluating schools. This self-review could also be coupled with a visiting team to evaluate the school (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016).

R. Smith and Lowery (2017) highlight the need for schools to focus on the achievement of minority students, economically disadvantaged students, SWDs, and English Language Learners. They emphasize that, although some schools have high overall student outcomes, often these pass rates or percentages mask the outcomes for disenfranchised groups of students. As a result, many schools achieve *accredited* or *A* ratings simply because of their overall pass rates, while the outcomes of gap groups remain low. This manifests in several ways. For example, some implementations of ESSA have accountability systems in which the overall pass rates of students carry most (if not all) of the weight. Other state implementations of ESSA combine the pass rates of gap groups into “super groups.” This allows schools to achieve a high rating if they have a high pass rate in one subgroup and a low pass rate in another (R. Smith & Lowery, 2017).

Smith and Lowery (2017) offer three considerations for state education agencies to consider when creating implementation policies of ESSA. First, state education agencies should make learning a priority. Second, the accountability system should report the progress for different groups of students. Finally, the accountability system should indicate which schools need to improve. This should also include schools that have high overall pass rates, but low percentages for gap groups (R. Smith & Lowery, 2017).

Martin, Sargrad, and Batel (2016) build on this notion of how state education agencies implement ESSA. They identify seven indicators that states use to measure achievement. These include accountability measures of core areas subjects such as math and reading, student growth indicators, and early warning indicators such as chronic absenteeism. Many states also use persistence indicators that include graduation rates. Many state education agencies focus on college and career readiness. Some have other indicators, such as access to the arts.

Martin et al. (2016) recommend three areas of focus for state education agencies when implementing ESSA. The state education agency should set a vision for what accountability looks like, be very purposeful in creating incentives, and create systems that paint an accurate picture of schools; they should not have unnecessary measures. Moreover, measures should be transparent for families to identify the priorities of the state (Martin et al., 2016).

Close et al. (2018) also describe how ESSA can be an opportunity for states to re-evaluate how assessments affect accountability. This policy analysis reviewed the ESSA plans of each state and the District of Columbia. The researchers found that many state education agencies continue to use high stakes tests as an indicator of school accountability. However, there is evidence of change as states begin to use other indicators of student success. This researchers had several recommendations for state education agencies regarding ESSA implementation: states should take advantage of decreased federal control by revising assessment policies; teacher evaluation systems should include multiple measures outside of high stakes tests; there should be ways to

identify areas of need to drive professional development; and states should identify ways to reduce achievement gaps.

Ultimately, a review of the literature regarding ESSA accountability suggests that it is imperative for state education agencies to use multiple measures of success outside of high stakes testing as a means of measuring school success. At the same time, it is important for the implementation of ESSA at the state level to focus on the achievement of historically underserved groups. More importantly, as an accountability system, the implementation of ESSA should be continuously transparent about the achievement of historically disenfranchised groups.

### **The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)**

**Basic principles.** ESSA allows for multiple indicators outside of standardized testing. The implementation of the ESSA attempts to give more flexibility to states regarding accountability. If a focus on high stakes testing and a system of awards and punishments were ineffective for NCLB, ESSA attempts to adequately address the issues of low achievement for students. While still requiring high stakes testing in all states, ESSA does allow for a greater need for flexibility. ESSA has several core principles:

- Advances equity by upholding critical protections for America's disadvantaged and high-need students.
- Requires that all students in America be taught to high academic standards that will prepare them to succeed in college and career.

- Ensures that vital information is provided to educators, families, students, and communities through annual statewide assessments that measure students' progress toward those high standards.
- Helps to support and grow local innovations—including evidence-based and place-based interventions developed by local leaders and educators
- Sustains and expands investments in increasing access to high-quality preschool.
- Maintains an expectation that there will be accountability and action to effect positive change in our lowest-performing schools, where groups of students are not making progress, and where graduation rates are low over extended periods of time.

Much of the literature regarding the implementation of ESSA offers guidelines regarding how state educational agencies should begin to implement this policy. These guidelines are beneficial in that they provide ideas about how school success can be measured. Most importantly, they provide insight regarding how ESSA can serve as a means for change regarding accountability (Fleischman, Scott, & Sargrad, 2016; Sampson & Horsford, 2017; Zinskie & Rea, 2016).

**ESSA and application of accountability measures.** Zinskie and Rea (2016) emphasize that flexibility is a major advantage for educators. Specifically, states can begin to design accountability systems that entail more than standardized testing and include multiple indicators. This includes the creation of assessments that truly reflect critical thought, effective communication and problem solving, and other skills that will

be essential for 21st century success. Ideally, ESSA creates an opportunity to plan these accountability systems with parents and community members to truly reflect achievement and areas of need for schools (Zinskie & Rea, 2016). The authors also point out that success for schools can mean more than just the percentage of students who pass a standardized test: states can broaden the definition of success by including SAT or ACT scores in accountability systems. In addition, growth can be factored into accountability systems (Zinskie & Rea, 2016). Non-cognitive indicators such as school climate, attendance, and chronic absenteeism can also be included in accountability systems. These additional elements can have a profound effect on overall student learning and, in particular, achievement of gap groups.

Zinskie and Rea (2016) also point out that ESSA requires states to report the achievement of minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs. While this is similar to NCLB, states are now encouraged to report these data in ways that may highlight specific achievement gaps between groups of students. Although this reporting might not be flattering for many schools, it highlights inequities and forces schools and districts to address social and emotional challenges between groups (Zinskie & Rea, 2016). Factors such as poverty present a number of social emotional challenges for students. These challenges are commonly a cause for lower achievement for economically disadvantaged students. The emphasis on gap group achievement may lead schools to addressing many of the social emotional challenges of economically disadvantaged and minority students.

ESSA also requires schools to take an evidence-based approach to interventions to serve students who are not successful. The current policy is very specific in identifying evidence-based interventions. Zinskie and Rea (2016) cite ESSA's definition of evidence-based as an intervention that demonstrates a statistically significant effect on improving relevant outcomes based on strong evidence from an experimental study, moderate evidence from a quasi-experimental study, or promising evidence from a correlational study, with statistical controls for selection bias (Zinskie & Rea, 2016). Zinskie and Rea also emphasize that it is important that each school or district consider their unique context when selecting interventions.

Fleischman et al. (2016) also wrote on the subject of evidence-based interventions. Focusing on ESSA's very specific definition of evidence-based, they identify a contrast between NCLB's definition of scientifically based interventions. Fleischman et al. point out that the NCLB definition made it difficult for schools to make decisions about interventions. Although schools consistently said that interventions were failing, companies and consultants that produced and provided interventions continuously indicated that they were successful and scientifically based (Fleischman et al., 2016). While the application of scientific evidence to educational interventions was fairly new to instructional interventions at the time of NCLB's implementation, it was based on randomized control trials or quasi experimental designs. Because of this very narrow definition, many interventions were labelled as effective, while still not yielding results for students. In many cases, consulting agencies or companies were identifying interventions as effective; however, they had not produced significant results. As a

result, this was misleading and schools with the most challenges often purchased and utilized these interventions with the end result of having little impact on student achievement and gaps groups.

Fleischman et al. (2016) focused on ESSA's tiered approach to evidence-based interventions. Tier 1 includes interventions that have strong evidence, Tier 2 refers to interventions that have moderate evidence, and Tier 3 refers to promising evidence. This approach offers another opportunity to ensure that all students have access to a quality education. It also raises the bar for what is labelled as effective and safeguards against fads or whims that are often thrown at educational leaders and school districts.

Sampson and Horsford (2017) also identified opportunities for change with ESSA. ESSA could allow for greater community involvement and advocacy in determining the direction of schools. In a qualitative study of four school districts in the Mountain West region of the US, Sampson and Horsford looked for models of community advocacy groups. Sampson and Horsford argued that ESSA creates a unique window for school boards and elected officials to work with community advocacy groups to shape the direction of schools. The authors ultimately found that community groups were able to address issues of inequities for ethnic groups as well as disfranchised economically disadvantaged students (Sampson & Horsford, 2017).

Saultz, White, McEachin, Fusarelli, and Fusarelli (2017) offer a further window of opportunity regarding how schools equitably distribute teachers among historically underserved students. This policy analysis compares previous policies such as NCLB and identifies how ESSA addresses the inequities caused by minority and economically

disadvantaged students' lack of access to qualified teachers. The authors recognize that on a consistent basis, minority and economically disadvantaged students are more likely to receive teachers who are not certified or have less experience. At the same time the authors recognized that leaders can improve instruction and ensure that the most vulnerable students have access to a quality education. NCLB required teachers to be *Highly Qualified*, meeting minimal standards, but ESSA requires that state educational agencies create plans to address the most vulnerable students receiving fewer effective teachers. This has also led to school districts addressing inequities in teacher distribution (Saultz et al., 2017)

Gayl (2017) identifies several areas of consideration for states to consider in implementing ESSA, focusing on the opportunities to focus on social emotional learning. Gayl proposes that states should communicate a well well-rounded vision of what school success looks like. School success should not be limited to standardized tests. Instead state education agencies should consider craft a definition of learning and also consider the challenges and requirements of the 21st century. These considerations should be included in the overall vision of school success for schools (Gayl, 2017). This provides an opportunity for state and local educational leaders' learning will be measured and evaluated in schools. Gayl also emphasized the importance of states including professional development for social emotional learning. Similar to core area academics, states should also have interventions that focus on social emotional learning. Moreover, data regarding social emotional learning should be transparent to the public in the same manner as academic data (Gayl, 2017).

Ultimately, the literature indicates that ESSA is an opportunity. While NCLB focused on mandates and standardized testing, ESSA creates a window for educators to re-think learning and teaching. It is an opportunity for educators to think about what designates success or effectiveness regarding schools. But more importantly, it is an opportunity to think about the best practices and strategies that will serve the most underserved and vulnerable learners.

**State implementation of ESSA.** States are taking a variety of approaches to the implementation of ESSA. However, there are some common areas regarding assessments, how the lowest achieving schools are identified, and how to support these schools. Kostyo, Cardichon, and Darling-Hammond (2018) identified several aspects that states should consider in closing the achievement gap for minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs:

1. Reduce rates of student suspension. This can be done through replacing zero-tolerance discipline policies, which have proven ineffective in improving student performance, with interventions to improve student engagement, such as restorative justice practices.
2. Build a positive school climate, which is associated with higher student achievement and educational attainment for all groups of students. This should include giving special attention to the most vulnerable students and promoting social and emotional learning.
3. Reduce rates of chronic absenteeism. This can be done by creating early interventions and supporting attendance when needed.

4. Implement an extended-year graduation rate (i.e., 5–7 years) alongside the traditional 4-year rate. This could encourage high schools to work with and bring back students who, for a variety of reasons, could not graduate in 4 years.
5. Expand access to a college- and career-ready curriculum. Doing so could open a pathway to the future and help students reach their potential, thereby graduating young people who can think critically, solve complex problems, communicate, and collaborate with peers effectively, and be self-directed in their learning. (Kostyo et al., 2018)

ESSA allows for indicators outside of standardized testing to define school effectiveness. States have created several additional indicators since the implementation of the policy. However, because of flexibility, these indicators look different from state to state. Because ESSA allows for flexibility with states, an analysis of state implementation plans indicates a variety of indicators to raise achievement for minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs. Five indicators are identified outside of standardized testing (Kostyo et al., 2018).

First, several states now use suspension rates as a measure in accountability. Suspension can be a major factor related to student achievement. There is significant evidence to suggest disproportionality in the percentages and numbers of referrals for African American students, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs. Six states use suspension rates as an indicator in their accountability systems. Three of these states also use expulsion as an indicator. Twenty other states use these data as a means of

continuous school improvement (Kostyo et al., 2018). This is a significant indicator outside of standardized testing. Regarding student achievement, attendance is a critical factor. Simply put, students cannot learn if they are not in school. Absences caused by attendance are equally a component regarding student achievement. As such, attendance can be a critical factor in improving achievement for gap groups.

A second indicator outside of testing is school climate. Like school suspension rates, school climate can have an impact on student achievement (Jones & Shindler, 2016). Eight states use student surveys as a measure of school climate. Of these eight, six are using these data for school improvement efforts. In the case of state ESSA plans, 16 states have plans for improving climate for identified schools in improvement. Eleven states also provide resources for schools to improve social emotional learning, and five of these have specific strategies to support social emotional learning in schools targeted for improvement (Kostyo et al., 2018).

Chronic absenteeism is a further indicator some states use in ESSA plans. Without question, attendance is a major factor related to student achievement and learning (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). When considering the achievement of minority, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs, regular attendance becomes even more critical (Kostyo et al., 2018).

Finally, many states are including graduation and how students are prepared for college and career readiness as an alternative indicator. Thirty-five states use the percentage of students that graduate in 4 years. Other states also include a 5-year graduation rate or a measure for 6-year graduation rates. These indicators acknowledge

schools for working with students even if they do not graduate in 4 years (Kostyo et al., 2018). In addition, 39 states measure college and career readiness. This includes completion of career and technical education certifications and Advanced Placement classes.

Hough, Penner, and Witte (2016) give an example of an implementation of ESSA. Citing the CORE school districts in California (Fresno, Oakland, Long Beach, and Los Angeles), a system that capitalizes on the comprehensive nature and flexibility of ESSA is depicted. The CORE system uses multiple measures to assess school effectiveness and success. This includes chronic absenteeism, school culture and climate, and student social emotional skills. The identification of the lowest achieving schools is also a component. In contrast to NCLB, the CORE implementation of ESSA focuses on a “flashlight not a hammer” approach. This means that the goal is to identify areas of need for schools, but not to punish them for having those needs. This is highlighted by comprehensive support that meets the needs of individual schools (Hough et al., 2016).

The emergence of ESSA has provided an opportunity for states to measure success of schools using means other than standardized testing. Because there is flexibility, states can consider what really matters in terms of learning and how they consider students’ preparation for the 21st century. A review of the current literature suggests that states are using this opportunity to define success in a number of ways that measure school effectiveness outside of standardized testing.

### **Achievement Gaps and Potential Causes**

A synthesis of the literature regarding ESSA indicates that there are opportunities to address the achievement gaps that have consistently plagued American education (Fleischman et al., 2016; Sampson & Horsford, 2017; Saultz et al., 2017; Zinskie & Rea, 2016). The literature also contrasts efforts of NCLB in giving schools freedom to indicate other measures outside of standardized testing. Additionally, much of the work suggests that this is an opportunity for educators to be innovative in their thinking regarding instruction and education (Sampson & Horsford, 2017). Finally, the literature promotes the notion that there is a window for change in how schools promote learning and how the most disenfranchised students are served (Gayl, 2017).

Zinskie and Rea (2016) illustrate the opportunity to truly address achievement gaps for students. ESSA allows for schools to highlight the achievement of minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs. At the same time, they identify the challenges for educators in addressing these inequities. Six points are identified: increased flexibility, a broader definition of success, non-cognitive indicators, expands reporting for gap groups, stresses evidence-based research, creates a culture of continuous improvement. While these factors may be beneficial in giving a more holistic view of schools' progress outside testing, school districts' lack of expertise regarding research could be a possible challenge. Specifically, school districts are expected to evaluate research-based practices and studies. While large school districts may have the capability for this, smaller school districts may lack the resources to sufficiently evaluate research-based practices. Although flexibility presents opportunities outside of testing,

this may allow school districts to not fully serve gap groups and ensure that they have an understanding of critical concepts and skills needed for the 21st century.

Darling-Hammond (2015) outlines the reasons and foundations for achievement gaps in US schools. These include poverty, limited learning opportunities, re-segregation and unequal schooling, lack of access to qualified teachers, lack of access to a quality curriculum, and dysfunctional learning environments

**Poverty.** Poverty is probably the most influential cause of achievement gaps. Darling-Hammond (2015) cites that the US has the largest poverty rate among industrialized nations. Lacour and Tissington (2011) support this notion through a meta-analysis of studies that identified trends of poverty and how they correlate to student achievement. Lacour and Tissington (2011) organize the analysis into several categories: achievement of low-income students, effects of welfare income, effects of mother's education level, federal and state policies, and family and community. This review of research suggests that students who attend schools with high populations of economically disadvantaged students have lower achievement than schools that do not have high populations of economically disadvantaged students. In addition, students from low-SES backgrounds are more likely to have discipline problems than non-economically disadvantaged students (Lacour & Tissington, 2011). A synthesis of this research suggests that poverty is a factor for both White students and students of color (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Lacour & Tissington, 2011). However, poverty seems to exacerbate achievement gaps for minority students and SWDs in a much more detrimental manner (Lacour and Tissington, 2011).

On the other hand, this review emphasizes that there is an abundance of research that supports the idea that when impoverished communities have a strong value of education, this can have a beneficial effect on student achievement. In addition, classroom strategies such as including frequent assessments in instruction can have an impact and on the achievement of economically disadvantaged students. As such, the review of research suggests that it is critical that policy address poverty. This includes policy that addresses low income students' access to more experienced teachers. Moreover, the review of research suggests that policy should address class sizes for low income students (Lacour & Tissington, 2011).

Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss (2010) present several frameworks that identify the challenges school leaders face when implementing change in low achieving schools. First, schools that have high percentages of economically disadvantaged students tend to have higher populations of students who are below grade level in math and reading. Students who are impoverished are also more likely to have social and emotional challenges. While these challenges themselves can be identified as a cause for low achievement, the bigger deficiency is that the schools and staffs that serve them are often ill equipped to deal with the challenges of student populations with high percentages of poverty (Leithwood et al., 2010). While there is some evidence that economically disadvantaged students perform better in environments where most students come from higher-SES backgrounds, this is not always the case (Leithwood et al., 2010). Instead, in many cases, low income students exist in schools in which most students are economically disadvantaged (Leithwood et al., 2010)

Paschall, Gershoff, and Kuhfeld (2018) extend on the notion of poverty as a factor contributing to achievement gaps. This research utilized time varying effect modeling. This is a descriptive analysis that estimates the intercept of a construct as a flexible function of time, with month-to-month achievement data from a large, longitudinal dataset (Paschall et al., 2018). Paschall et al. recognize achievement gaps regarding ethnicity and posit that these gaps have slowed and are closing. At the same time, gaps related to socioeconomic status still tend to be a significant obstacle for schools. Gaps related to socioeconomic status tend to widen as students matriculate through school. Although most educators recognize that income and socioeconomic status are factors in academic achievement and creating achievement gaps, Paschall et al. found very little evidence to explain how this develops from the time students begin school and into the later secondary grades. As such, they sought to identify whether achievement gaps widen because of an intersectionality of race and ethnicity and poverty. They found that while the achievement gap between poor and non-poor White students remained stable, the gaps between poor and non-poor African American and Hispanic students were sizable and even grew over time. The researchers concluded that there was no closing of the achievement gap between poor and non-poor students (Paschall et al., 2018).

Gordon and Cui (2018) present findings similar to Paschall et al. (2018). Gordon and Cui recognized achievement gaps exist between African American and White students. However, they examined how achievement gaps are caused by poverty and the effect ethnicity has on creating achievement gaps (Carter, 2008). Gordon and Cui applied critical race theory in their study, which proposes that there is a racial hierarchy

in culture in which the majority culture will always prevail (Carter, 2008). The 12,886 participants in this study came from 80 high schools and 52 middle schools from across the US. The study did not exclude poverty as a factor in low achievement for minorities and economically disadvantaged students. Gordon and Cui (2018) examined poverty's differential effects for White and African American adolescents. They found that White students who live in poverty in communities of majority- African American students do not face the same level of discrimination as African American students who live in poverty in majority-White communities. The researchers posit that when low income African American students who lived in low-income communities moved to higher income communities, low achievement was still a factor. These findings confirm the notion that poverty is a factor regarding student achievement. However, the findings also suggested that Black adolescents in low-poverty communities are at a greater disadvantage than White adolescents in high-poverty communities. This was based on theory that regardless of social economics, African American students are exposed to factors such low expectations and bias that lead to lower achievement. (Gordon & Cui, 2018).

A report for Public Impact (2018) further extends the notion of poverty as a factor in creating achievement gaps, even in schools that have lower percentages of economically disadvantaged students. While the majority of literature focuses on achievement gaps in high-poverty schools, gaps for economically disadvantaged students seem to be high in schools with lower percentages of economically disadvantaged students. Public Impact presents a framework for addressing achievement gaps for gap

groups in high achieving, low poverty schools. Educational leaders must take more significant and complete approaches to close gaps related to socioeconomic status in low- to moderate-poverty level schools (Public Impact, 2018). The report's authors identified a framework to address achievement gaps for students in low-poverty schools. First, schools must have a commitment to equity. Second, they must engage with the community. Finally, they must embrace accountability for progress.

As Darling-Hammond (2015) indicated, poverty can have a profound effect on students and schools. Specifically, while schools in other countries can focus on educating students, American schools are faced with the challenges of hunger, health care, homelessness, and extensive gaps in readiness (Darling-Hammond, 2015). Many researchers have recognized that race and ethnicity are factors in creating achievement gaps. But a more prevalent factor could be socioeconomic status. It seems that poverty exacerbates or increases achievement gaps for minority students. It is critical that policymakers recognize poverty as a major cause of achievement gaps and direct schools in supporting students who have the unique challenges of being economically disadvantaged. Schools must also be held accountable for the achievement of economically disadvantaged students.

**Limited early learning opportunities.** Darling-Hammond (2015) found that 30-40% of students entering kindergarten have social and emotional challenges and lack the language skills necessary for academic success. These initial deficiencies become more apparent as students' progress through the early years of schooling and into the secondary years.

There is substantial evidence that illustrates the benefits for students who participate in pre-kindergarten learning. Lipsey, Hofer, Dong, Farran, and Bilbrey (2013) described the benefits of students who participated in Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Program. This randomized control study involved students who were enrolled in the program and students who were not enrolled. The researchers concluded that the enrolled students had significant advantages regarding language development and mathematics readiness in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade, in contrast to students who had not participated in the program. Andrews, Jargowsky, and Kuhne (2012) found similar results. In a study very similar study, Andrews et al. (2012) evaluated the effectiveness of the Texas Targeted Pre-Kindergarten Program. The ELL students who lacked language skills demonstrated high achievement on Spanish language math tests. Even though this program was characterized by limited resources and teachers with fewer years of experience, it still resulted in high gains for Spanish speaking ELL students in math and language.

However, despite this evidence, many economically disadvantaged students and students of color are unable to access pre-kindergarten programs. As a result, as early as kindergarten students from middle- and high-income households have a major advantage over students who are economically disadvantaged. These advantages create major gaps and inequities that persist throughout students' time in school (Darling-Hammond, 2015). This synthesis suggests that a lack of access to early childhood learning is a key factor in causing gaps and inequities in learning for at-risk groups. Early childhood learning supports the success of students in elementary years and has an impact on learning in

secondary years. However, poverty hinders access to such programs, providing additional obstacles for students who struggle.

**Re-segregation and unequal schooling.** Darling-Hammond (2015) connects poverty and lack of access to early childhood programs to a current form of segregation in the US. While considerable efforts were made to address racial segregation during the civil rights movement, these efforts were abandoned during the late 1980s and early 1990s. As a result, Darling-Hammond (2015) describes a form of segregation in US schools that involves not only ethnicity, but also socioeconomic status. In essence, minority students and economically disadvantaged students do not attend the schools of middle-class students and high-income students. And in many cases, these middle- and high-income schools, which tend to be primarily White, have considerably more resources and funding than the schools of minority and economically disadvantaged students (Darling-Hammond, 2015). The primary reason for these inequities is funding. In many cases, high-income and suburban areas have higher property values than urban or low-income (including rural) localities. Because local governments—and specifically local property taxes—are a primary source of funding for schools, this has a strong impact on school funding. As such, schools located in high-income areas tend to have higher tax bases and thus better funding than schools that do not have this advantage (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

Reardon (2016) supports this notion by indicating that poverty is the most influential factor in causing gaps in achievement. In a quantitative study, the achievement data of students who attended low-income urban schools were aggregated

for analysis. The achievement of these students was considerably lower than that of students who were in higher income areas (Reardon, 2016). The authors propose that in the state of California that were multiple categories of schooling that indicated that ELL students received an inferior education to English language speaking students. Gandara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, and Callahan (2003) offer a similar view to segregation. The researchers cited *Williams v. the State of California* (2004) as a basis for their study. In this case, a lawsuit was filed on behalf of California students who argued that the state offered inequitable educational access based on wealth and language status. Gandara et al. (2003) prepared a study as a background to that case. The researchers reviewed the conditions for English Language Learners in the state of California. The researchers found several specific categories in which schools that had high populations of Spanish speaking English Language Learners were inferior. These categories included exposure to less qualified teachers, less challenging curricula, inferior facilities, and even more segregation for English speaking peers (Gandara et al., 2003). While this case identified segregation for ELL students, it also indicated a type of segregation for Hispanic students and economically disadvantaged students.

The segregation of students is a major factor in causing achievement gaps for students. This suggests that policymakers should not only seek to end this type of segregation, but also seek to make all schools equitable through funding and learning opportunities.

**Lack of access to qualified teachers.** Stronge (2018) provides a framework for defining teacher effectiveness: professional knowledge, instructional planning,

instructional delivery, assessments, learning environment, and professionalism. Professional knowledge includes a teacher's education and understanding of content as well as pedagogical knowledge to relay that content. Instructional planning relates to a teacher's ability to identify objectives and lessons. Third, instructional delivery involves a teacher's use of instructional strategies to relay content. Assessment refers to how a teacher gathers information or data to measure student understanding and to adjust instruction. Learning environment relates to a teacher's classroom management as well as conditions in the classroom that affect learning. Finally, professionalism refers to a teacher's professional goals and general attitudes toward teaching (Stronge, 2018). However, students of color and economically disadvantaged students are less likely to have access to teachers who are efficient in these areas (Berliner, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2015; Desimone & Long, 2010; Peske & Haycock, 2006). Instead, in the US, there is significant evidence that the neediest students typically are taught by less effective teachers. Darling-Hammond (2015) cites a lack of access to effective teachers as a further cause of achievement gaps. Effectiveness refers to holding a relevant teaching certification, having a strong background in content and pedagogy, and having experience as a teacher. These factors contrast with ineffective teachers, who in many cases lack content knowledge, have fewer years of experience, and do not meet the requirements of certification. Often, these ineffective teachers are trained in programs that meet minimal requirements and typically last as little as a year to sometimes even weeks (Darling-Hammond, 2015). This lack of experience and training tends to yield lower results for students. Moreover, ineffective teachers are commonly assigned to

teach minority and economically disadvantaged students. Out-of-field teachers were low in all categories. High-minority schools had higher numbers of out-of-field teachers and inexperienced teachers than low-minority schools. Table 1 outlines levels of disproportionality of out-of-field, inexperienced, and ineffective (both out-of-field and inexperienced) teachers assigned to Title I schools, non-Title I schools, high-minority schools, and low-minority schools. In addition, Table 1 indicates a pattern of higher numbers of inexperienced teachers being assigned to Title I schools than non-Title I Schools (Virginia Department of Education, 2019a).

Table 1

*Title I vs. Non-Title I Schools, Teacher Quality Data Comparison*

Category	Out-of-Field	Inexperienced	Ineffective
Title I Schools (Low-Income)	1.5	5.7	.2
Non-Title I Schools (Not Low-Income)	1.8	4.5	.3
Difference (gap)	-.3	1.2	-.1
High-Minority Title I schools (highest quartile)	2.1	5.4	.4
Low-Minority Non-Title I Schools (lowest quartile)	1.1	4.1	.3
Difference (gap)	1.0	1.3	.1

*Note.* *Out of Field* refers to teachers who are teaching a subject outside of and endorsement area. *Inexperienced* refers to teachers in their first year of teaching. *Ineffective* teachers are both out of field and inexperienced (Virginia Department of Education, 2019b).

Alternative certification programs are a factor in the quality of education for all students; however, they also contribute to inequities. While countries such as Finland

and Singapore strongly invest in teacher preparation programs to ensure that all students have equal access to effective teachers, the US often relies on alternative preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, 2015). Although the intent of these teacher preparation programs is to address teacher shortages by quickly and expediently preparing individuals for the classroom, the programs often produce teachers who lack content knowledge and the pedagogical skill to effectively relay content. Moreover, in many cases these teachers have a limited understanding of classroom management strategies that are critical to the domain of learning environment (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

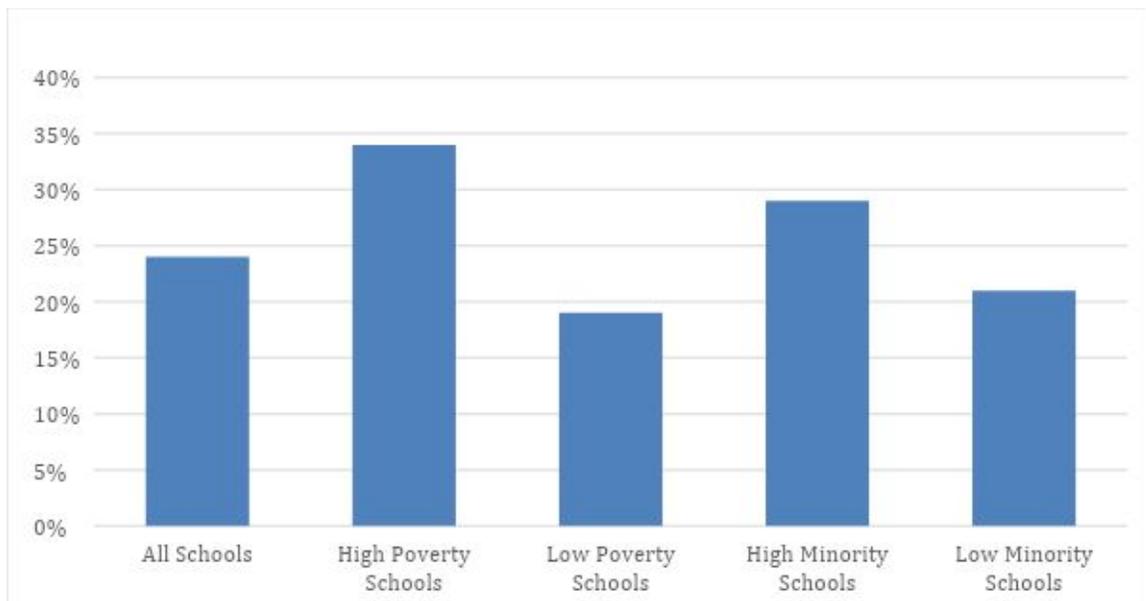
Teachers who complete such alternative training programs are commonly assigned to challenged learners that include minorities and economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs (Darling-Hammond, 2015). The detrimental effects of having such teachers exacerbates the achievement gap. Even more detrimental are the school cultures that develop when high concentrations of economically disadvantaged students are paired with challenged learners and ineffective teachers. For schools with high populations of minority students, this combination creates cultures that are negative and unfavorable to most students. Because many teachers who completed alternative certification programs lack the experience and skill to support students, particularly challenged students, these teachers commonly develop low expectations of the students they serve (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

Desimone and Long (2010) examined how schools contribute to achievement gaps when less-effective teachers are assigned to minority and economically disadvantaged students, specifically at the elementary level. Content knowledge,

experience, certification, and reform-oriented instruction are presented as a framework for effective teaching. The researchers identified that novice and less-effective teachers were assigned to low-achieving students who were generally students of color and economically disadvantaged students. High-achieving students were taught by teachers with more experience and stronger pedagogical skill. Desimone and Long (2010) focused on three research questions. First, what is the distribution of teacher and teaching quality during the first year of kindergarten? Second, to what extent do teacher quality, time spent on instruction, and type of instruction predict growth in student achievement in kindergarten and first grade? Finally, what extent do teacher and teaching quality narrow the Black–White and low-/high-SES achievement gap? The researchers included 19,000 kindergartners and first graders as a sample. A multi-level growth model was used to measure the achievement of the kindergarten and first grade students. Desimone and Long (2010) did not find significant statistical evidence that there was difference between the quality of teachers for students. However, the study did suggest that there is a difference in the types of instruction. Specifically, in the area of mathematics, economically disadvantaged students were taught lower level, basic instruction that focused on procedures. Non-economically-disadvantaged students were exposed to high end advanced mathematical instruction. Desimone and Long (2010) suggest that this leads to gaps in achievement in later years.

Peske and Haycock (2006) recognized that, in general, schools rarely pair the most challenged students with the strongest teachers. A synthesis of several studies included in this journal article to draw conclusions about the ineffective teachers are

distributed among the most challenged students and the effects of this practice. For instance, while out-of-field teachers only made up 24% of the general teaching population, they made up 34% of the population in high-poverty schools in the United States. In schools with high populations of minority students, less-effective teachers made up 29% of the staff. Figure 2 represents the distribution of teachers across the nation who are teaching outside their field (Jerald & Ingersoll, 2002).



*Figure 2.* Distribution of out of field teachers in the United States. Figure denotes the distribution of out of field teachers to schools regarding poverty and ethnicity.

In the specific case of mathematics, almost half of the classes in high-poverty and high-minority schools were taught by teachers that did not have a college degree in math or a related field. In middle school, these statistics were more discouraging, with 70% of students taught by teachers who did not have a background in mathematics or a related field (Peske & Haycock, 2006). These inequities make it more difficult for economically

disadvantaged and minority students to receive quality instruction in comparison to non-economically disadvantaged and White students.

Four critical areas should be considered regarding teacher quality. Teacher academic knowledge or level of literacy and vocabulary skill could reduce achievement gaps for economically disadvantaged students and students of color (Peske & Haycock, 2006). Second, teachers' content mastery is particularly critical in the secondary grades; this includes teachers' understanding of content in mathematics, English, history, or science. Experience, including the number of years that a teacher has taught, is another factor. Finally, a teacher's understanding of pedagogical skill or strategies to relay content is a crucial element in teacher quality. However, minority and economically disadvantaged students are often assigned teachers who are lacking in these areas (Peske & Haycock, 2006). Ultimately, policymakers should address inequities in teacher quality. While Title I policies focus on the notion that economically disadvantaged students need more, these policies do little to address inequities related to teacher quality. This includes policy that directly encourages effective teachers to work at low achieving schools (Peske & Haycock, 2006).

This synthesis of literature demonstrates the importance of teacher quality and presents various frameworks to define effective teaching. Although these frameworks are each slightly different, they all emphasize content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and instructional delivery as key components to effective teaching. Unfortunately, much of the research suggests that students of color and minority students do not have access to effective teachers. Instead, in many cases, the least effective teachers are assigned to the

neediest students. Many of these teachers are the products of alternative certification programs that do not fully prepare them with the critical foundations of skills that students need. As a result, these disenfranchised groups of students are at an extreme disadvantage compared to students who are not economically disadvantaged, further hindering them from learning the skills necessary to be successful in the 21st century.

Policymakers should encourage higher preparation and standards for teachers. There is considerable research that suggests that alternative programs produce teachers who are less effective than teachers who are enrolled in traditional programs (Berliner, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2015; Jerald & Ingersoll, 2002; Peske & Haycock, 2006). Although such teachers are detrimental to all students, there are even more detrimental effects on economically disadvantaged students. If policy is to close achievement gaps, it must address the issue of teacher quality and the large percentages of ineffective teachers who are assigned to minority and economically disadvantaged students.

**Lack of access to a high-quality curriculum.** A further cause of achievement gaps is unequal schooling related to the taught curriculum. Darling-Hammond (2015) has suggested that in addition to poverty, limited early learning, and a lack of access to qualified teachers, students of color and economically disadvantaged students also are taught curricula that are not as rigorous as those used with non-economically disadvantaged and White students. Darling-Hammond cites several studies that support the notion that schools with high populations of minority and economically disadvantaged students are exposed to less rigor and often have fewer resources to support high achievement and deeper learning. In addition, students of color and

economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs are commonly underrepresented in Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment classes. As a result, these students have a disadvantage in terms of success beyond high school in undergraduate programs (Darling-Hammond, 2015). Lack of access to rigorous or high-quality curriculum is caused in some cases by educators' beliefs that low income students and minority students cannot be successful when engaged in rigorous activities (Darling-Hammond, 2015). However, much literature in this area contradicts this notion (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Elliot, Kurz, Tindal, Stevens, & Yel, 2014; Palumbo & Kramer-Vida, 2012). Low-SES students and minorities can be successful when engaged in high quality curricula. Innovative curricula are needed to support economically disadvantaged students in reaching success with high rigor activities (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2015; Elliot et al., 2014; Palumbo & Kramer-Vida, 2012; ). These curricula must be tailored to the unique challenges of gap groups, while also pushing for higher levels of rigor.

Palumbo and Kramer-Vida (2012) support this notion. This review of literature was categorized into four areas: successful schools that serve the academically disadvantaged, programs to support the disadvantaged, a different focus for disadvantaged students, and how schools can help disadvantaged students. Specifically, in the category for "a different focus for disadvantaged students," they identify that economically disadvantaged students and minority students needed a different curriculum to compensate for academic disadvantage. The researchers have suggested that curricula must address cultural differences while still pushing for higher order thinking and rigor.

These curricula must also include a wide array of teaching strategies to support students (Palumbo & Kramer-Vida, 2012).

Beecher and Sweeny (2008) present an example of a unique curriculum to serve gap groups and close the achievement gap. A mixed methodology was used that spanned eight years. The methods included interviews as well as document review of the school improvement plan. Finally, the test scores of gap groups were measured. Studying an elementary school that had a high population of economically disadvantaged students, the researchers observed that the school took an approach of enrichment and gifted education for all students. This approach required input from all teachers and a very strong shared school vision. To facilitate this, the school implemented a unique curriculum that addressed the specific needs of their students. Teachers created differentiated lesson plans that focused on students' specific needs. The implementation of this curriculum resulted in increased scores for African American students and SWDs.

The C-STEM (Communications & Science, Technology, Math, and Engineering) program is another example of how a different curricular approach that includes rigor can close the achievement gap for students. The C-STEM originated at the University of California. The program trains teachers to implement a technology centered curriculum to extend learning and to specifically meeting the needs of students that are not at proficiency (Kuchey & Flick, 2017). The C-STEM program involves embedding technology to provide alternative experiences to students who typically do not perform academically. The goal is to provide formal computing education for all students through math classes. A further goal of the C-STEM program is to close the achievement gap.

The implementation of this program also yielded high results for the control group identified in this study (Kuchey & Flick, 2017).

Elliott et al. (2014) describe how curriculum can raise achievement for SWDs when it meets the specific needs of this group. Elliott et al. recognize that offering curriculum standards in the same manner with the same time constraints schools have traditionally followed yields the same low achievement results for SWDs. Citing an approach that included differentiation and additional time for low achieving general education students and SWDs, higher pass rates occurred for these groups of historically low achieving students. The purpose of this study was to document instructional processes for SWDs and general education students and examine the relationship between these processes and student achievement.

Elliott et al. (2014) used an online teacher log to document instructional practices used in the classroom. The study used easy curriculum based measurement to measure student achievement. The researchers included three research questions:

- Do students with and without disabilities who received instruction in the same general education classrooms have an equal opportunity to learn mathematics?
- What is the predictive relationship among five instructional variables or Opportunities to Learn and within year academic growth on interim assessments?
- What is the predictive relationship among five instructional Opportunities to Learn variables and students' end-of-year mathematics achievement? (Elliott et al., 2014)

The researchers included 67 teachers and 255 students (134 were identified as SWDs) in the study. They found that SWDs had higher academic achievement when additional instructional time was given. However, this instructional time had to include differentiated instruction and small group instruction to support learning (Elliott et al., 2014). If one of the key causes of achievement gaps is a lack of access to quality curriculum, then educators must re-think present curricular practices. The curriculum to close achievement gaps must consider the unique circumstances of minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs. While recognizing these unique circumstances, these curricula must also have a continuous push for rigor and the higher order thinking to which mid- and high-SES students have access.

**Dysfunctional learning environments.** Schools continue to reflect the values of the early 20th century (Darling-Hammond, 2015). These bureaucratic organizations were organized by grade levels and by departments to prepare students for the workforce of the early 1900s. Much like a conveyor belt, teachers transmit bits and pieces of information to students from grade to grade. Often in these environments, teachers work in isolation, rarely collaborating to meet the full needs of students. Such environments can be cold and un-nurturing for students (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

McPartland and Braddock (2009) present a framework of learning environments to support economically disadvantaged students. Four barriers are identified that hinder success for students of color: opportunities for success, relevance of schoolwork, a caring and supportive environment, and help with personal problems. There are critical components in creating learning environments that support students of color and

economically disadvantaged students. Early prevention must be a component in a learning environment for students of color, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs. McPartland and Braddock cite programs such as Reading Recovery and Success for All that provide the necessary foundation for minority and economically disadvantaged students. Second, learning environments must provide support for students when it is needed. Remedial programs are essential in supporting at-risk students. Gap groups such as African American students, SWDs, and economically disadvantaged students all are plagued by high rates of grade-level failure. Schools must identify alternatives other than failure to address these students when they do not show proficiency (McPartland & Braddock, 2009). McPartland and Braddock also cite human caring and support as critical to creating a learning environment that supports challenged students. While elementary and middle schools are effective at supporting students, high schools often struggle with this because of the large number of students. Programs that facilitate smaller environments within the larger environment are needed to make high schools more supportive and caring for at-risk students (McPartland & Braddock, 2009).

Ultimately, when considering the needs of African American students, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs, schools must provide nurturing environments to support their multiple needs beyond academics. When considering the challenges that exist for disenfranchised students, schools must work to specifically address the needs of challenged students to truly close the achievement gap. Policy should also be created that measures schools' efforts to address the social and emotional needs of students.

## What Works in Closing Achievement Gaps

Stronge and Xu (2017) have presented a framework for what successful schools do to support students in meeting the challenges and needs of the 21st century. Based on the practices of successful schools in Asia, Finland, and Canada, six characteristics define successful schools:

- *Put money where it counts:* The US spends more per student than most nations. The issue is less about funding and more about how money is spent.
- *Allow students to fail:* Students should be allowed to experiment. They should also be allowed to fail (i.e., experiment with course-taking and educational experiences) to learn from their experiences rather than being forced to take lock-step educational courses and programs.
- *Accountability:* Accountability must be fair and accurate regarding teachers' abilities.
- *Too much accountability is problematic:* Standardized testing as a sole means of school effectiveness can be detrimental.
- *Stop overworking teachers:* Instead of focusing on extending school days and after school programs, schools should focus on improving instruction during the normal day. This can be promoted by giving teachers more time to collaborate.
- *Figure out what works and stick with it:* Instead of engaging in multiple initiatives, schools should have a targeted focus on one or two initiatives.

(Stronge & Xu, 2017)

Stronge and Xu suggest that leadership in challenged schools must be focused and have a specific purpose. Schools with high populations of disenfranchised students must identify goals and targets and efforts must consistently focus on these efforts. This is critical in increasing the achievement of low performing schools.

**Leadership matters.** Leithwood et al. (2010) present a framework for effective leadership to improve schools that have historically low performance. First, effective leaders create a shared sense of purpose. These leaders engage their staffs in creating a shared vision and work with teachers to create short- and long-term goals regarding the vision. Moreover, leaders are consistent and persistent in communicating and reinforcing goals. Effective leaders also build capacity among staff. Effective turnaround leaders know their staff and their abilities. Moreover, they work with teachers to move them forward. They are committed to growing their staff so that they can serve at maximum capacity (Leithwood et al., 2010). Effective turnaround leaders are also devoted to redesigning their schools. Specifically, they work to transform the instructional programs in their schools. Part of this means reinforcing norms and structures that encourage collaboration. This redesign also involves creating norms that increase parent engagement. The allocation of resources in relation to school vision and goals is also critical (Leithwood et al., 2010). Finally, the most important aspect of effective leadership includes an improvement of the school instructional program. Recruiting teachers and principals that can address the needs of challenged learners is critical. Teaching and learning must be monitored to ensure that students get the best learning experiences possible. This includes frequent assessments to gauge student learning and

to adjust instruction, appropriate resources to support teachers in improvement, and sharing of information regarding progress towards goals and data to improve the instructional program. Effective school leaders frequently shared data and discussed the progress of the school (Leithwood et al., 2010).

**Culture of equity.** A report for Public Impact (2018) identifies steps that schools should take to close achievement gaps. Three components were identified: outstanding student learning, a culture of equity, and securing healthy learners. Outstanding learning refers to ensuring that all learners have access to strong principals and teachers, a relevant and rigorous curriculum, and high-yield effective teaching strategies. A culture of equity refers to addressing challenges of inequity. The culture of equity also refers to making sure that students are engaged in a culturally responsive curriculum (Public Impact, 2018). Finally, securing healthy learners refers to schools addressing the social emotional needs of students. This includes addressing the social emotional needs of all students, schools strategically identifying specific groups of students who have experienced trauma and meeting the basic needs of students by providing breakfast and other meals. These steps are critical in closing the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students. Finally, schools should provide guidance for families to support their children at home (Public Impact, 2018).

**High expectations.** Hayes (2008) provides a further framework to outline specifically how high-poverty schools can work to increase student achievement. Hayes presents a review of research that outlines characteristics or steps that high poverty schools must take to increase student achievement. First, high-poverty schools must have

high expectations of success for all students. Faculty and staff must have a sense of efficacy and have a “no excuses” approach to students’ learning. This aspect also involves principals setting high expectations for all students regardless of socioeconomic status. These high expectations create a trickle-down effect that permeates teachers’ and parents’ beliefs in students’ abilities to be successful. A second aspect of Hayes’s (2008) framework was frequent use of assessments to measure student progress. While standardized tests are a summative measure of students’ success, high-poverty/high-achieving schools used formative assessments frequently to gauge student learning and adjust instruction. The studies in this review of research indicated that this was critical in identifying areas of needs for students so that teachers could meet these needs (Hayes, 2008). Following this was support for struggling students. Characteristically, high-poverty/high-achieving schools have additional support systems for students who are identified as needing additional support. These schools included measures for identifying students so that supports could be provided. High-poverty/high-achieving schools in Hayes’s (2008) study also fostered collaboration, putting structures in place for teachers to collaborate and establishing norms to specifically encourage teachers to analyze and respond to data. Effective leadership was also identified as a characteristic of high-poverty/high-achieving schools. Principals were critical in identifying goals, rallying their staffs around goals, and establishing high expectations for all students. Finally, high-poverty/high-achieving engaged parents. These schools considered the unique challenges of their context and met the needs of parents as well as students (Hayes, 2008).

**Focus on improvement.** Reeves (2003) presented an additional outline of the characteristics of successful high-poverty schools. Reeves presented a further review of collected research of *90/90/90 schools*. The term 90/90/90 schools refers to schools that consist of 90% economically disadvantaged students and 90% minority students, where 90% of students meet academic standards. Reeves identified five characteristics of these schools. First, these schools had a strong focus on academic achievement. There were regular meetings to identify goals and monitor progress toward meeting those goals. This aspect also related to a culture of recognizing improvement. Students or groups of students who showed improvement were valued. These schools emphasized academic achievement to teachers, students, and the community. Second, these schools had curriculum choices. Interestingly, these schools did not just focus on the core areas of math, writing and reading. Instead, they focused on all curricular areas. These schools created ways to connect disciplines such as history and English into interdisciplinary units and activities (Reeves, 2003). Similar to findings from Hayes (2008), Reeves also identified that successful 90/90/90 schools formatively assessed students frequently. These schools often used writing as a form of assessment to push for higher order thinking. However, assessments were very purposefully used to gain an understanding of student understanding. The data that came from these assessments were used to adjust instruction and provide interventions for students who were not successful. Finally, again mirroring findings from Hayes (2008), 90/90/90 schools set up structures for teachers to collaborate. In particular, collaboration was used to grade assessments so that consistent norms of expectations were established for writing assignments and projects.

The literature suggests that schools that have high percentages of economically disadvantaged, minority students, and SWDs can be successful. A synthesis of the literature identifies some common characteristics. First, schools must have high expectations for all students to increase the achievement of gap groups. Second, the literature suggests that these schools characteristically utilize formative assessments and use the data that come from these assessments to provide interventions and adjust instruction. And finally, these schools have a culture of collaboration for the ultimate purpose of improving instruction for challenged learners.

### **School Improvement Plans**

A synthesis of the literature suggests that school improvement plans (SIPs) can have an impact on student achievement and specifically have an impact on the achievement of gap groups and potentially close achievement gaps. In order to close achievement gaps, the literature and research suggests that SIPs must have common characteristics. First, they must have specific goal measurable goals. Second, these goals respond to school data. And finally, SIPs must include initiatives to monitor the implementation of school initiatives.

Huber and Conway (2015) reinforce that school improvement plans can have an affect student achievement and close achievement gaps. Huber and Conway's research sought to identify if the quality of school improvement plans can impact student achievement. The sample included the SIPs low performing schools from kindergarten to eighth grade. The researchers included 108 SIPs in the sample. The SIPs were measured by the following components: comprehensive needs assessments; inquiry process;

specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely (SMART) goals; design; and evaluation. SIPs could receive a score of 30 to 90 (Huber & Conway, 2015). In this particular study, 67% of the SIPs received a score below 50, indicating that they were not of high quality. However, the 20 highest scoring SIPs also had the higher achievement. The lowest 20 scores had the lower achievement. Huber and Conway conclude from these results that schools should seek to develop high quality SIPs. Moreover, SIPs should specifically work to include steps to increase gap group achievement (Huber & Conway, 2015).

Caputo and Rastelli (2014) present similar findings. This study sought to identify if schools with higher quality SIPs yielded higher student achievement. Caputo and Rastelli also focused on teacher involvement in the planning process. The study used a foundation of research that supports the notion that SIPs are critical in planning and supporting higher outcomes for students. The literature in this study also supports the notion that SIPs must be intentional and specific to targeted areas of need. While SIPs differ, common characteristics include an analysis of problems, cause of problems, establishment of measurable goals, strategies to address problems, and monitoring of the implementation of strategies.

The research focused on professional development that included teachers in the school planning process. The authors found that even though the majority of students in the schools included in the study were low SES, schools that had high quality plans with specific initiatives to close achievement gaps showed increased achievement in math (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014).

Fernandez (2011) extends on this research by analyzing SIPs in Clark County, Nevada. Clark County is identified as one of the largest school divisions in the country, which includes urban, suburban and even rural settings. Recognizing that simply mandating the creation of SIPs in a school does not guarantee quality or increased student achievement, this study utilized a rubric of 17 components including specific goals, measurable goals, professional development of the plan, and monitoring of the plan. This study suggested that schools with high quality SIPs yield growth in student achievement, even when schools have higher populations of economically disadvantaged students (Fernandez, 2011).

Cleveland and Sink (2017) extend the literature regarding SIPs by suggesting that climate and student wellbeing be included in school initiatives. School climate is defined as the experience, quality, and patterns that students receive in school, Cleveland and Sink cite literature to suggest that school climate can not only have an impact on student well-being and life satisfaction, but achievement as well. When considering this, school climate initiatives or programs that support student wellbeing should be integral in school planning. This is particularly the case for gap groups or challenged populations.

A synthesis of the literature suggests that mandating SIPs is not enough to support the improvement of schools or student achievement. Instead, SIPs must have a high level of quality. High quality SIPs recognize school context including the presence of gap groups and their respective challenges. Moreover, they respond to data with specific initiatives to address deficiencies. Moreover, they include processes and procedures to monitor these initiatives. When considering gap group achievement, SIPS must be

targeted in identifying goals to increase gap group achievement must have specific initiatives to close gap group achievement.

### **Principal Beliefs and School Improvement**

Principals are a critical component of a school's success (Versland & Erickson, 2017). Moreover, principals bear the responsibility for setting the tone, climate, and steps that a school will take to reach goals. Most importantly, principals develop others and share leadership with others (Miller & Lee, 2014). In short, principals play a vital role in the progress of a school and have a strong impact on student achievement. In the context of school improvement, the role of the principal is even more critical.

Versland and Erikson (2017) conducted a case study to examine how principal efficacy affected teacher beliefs and the overall achievement of a rural middle school students. This qualitative study examined the influence of principals on a school that had high levels of economically disadvantaged students. The researchers used a principal efficacy instrument to identify principals with high efficacy. Of the 41 principals who were scored, a principal from a high achieving school with high levels of economically disadvantaged students was selected for this study. This case study indicated that principals had a high impact on the achievement of students in this challenging setting.

A review of literature also examines principal perceptions of school improvement policies. Torres, Zellner, and Erlandson (2008) conducted a mixed methods study to gauge how Texas principals viewed the effectiveness of school improvement policies regarding academic outcomes, staff morale, and student involvement. This study included a quantitative Likert scale survey as well as an open-ended questionnaire. The

researchers explored how site-based management, professional development, and accountability affected school morale, achievement, and parent involvement. Torres et al. (2008) found that while site-based management and professional development had favorable results on organizations, principals perceived that accountability measures had detrimental impacts (Torres et al., 2008). This suggests that school improvement must focus on more than just high stakes testing outcomes.

Miller and Lee (2014) further examined principal beliefs regarding school improvement. The researchers conducted interviews of eight principals and asked questions about barriers to school improvement. The results of this survey identified 181 barriers. However, only 31% of the barriers were considered real or authentic. The other 69% were imagined barriers. *Real barriers* included immovable statutes, policies, or managerial directives. *Imagined barriers* included items that were rigid, but could be circumvented or removed (Miller & Lee, 2014). Three themes came from the interviews: teacher quality, resource allocation, and instructional innovations. Regarding teacher quality, 48% of barriers principals perceived were real. This included forced placements by administrators outside of the building, labor agreements that protected grossly negligent teachers and policies that did not allow hiring outside of the district. In the area of resource allocation, 31% of barriers principals perceived were real. For example, many schools apply for grants, but because of the federal limitations of grant, often the cost of compliance to the grant outweighed its value. Regarding instructional innovation barriers, 22% of what principals perceived were real. Social promotion was one barrier. When considering competency-based learning, if a student was below grade level, this

was definite hindrance. Also, state accountability that focused on standardized test scores were also a real barrier. Miller and Lee (2014) concluded that in many cases, principals must think more creatively to deal with some of the barriers that they perceive to be challenges. In the case of imagined barriers, principals must think of ways to circumvent these obstacles particularly because they are not as permanent as the real barriers. On the other hand, some challenges could hinder school improvement and need to be addressed by district or even state policies.

Principals play a vital role in the success of schools and an even more important role in the process of school improvement. A principal's beliefs about student achievement are important. This is particularly true in the context of schools with high percentages of minority, economically disadvantaged students, SWDs, and English Language Learners. A principal's efficacy regarding the success of these groups serves as the foundation for how teachers and staff view the possibilities for success of these groups. A synthesis of literature reveals that principals must think creatively to address internal and external barriers to school success.

### **Summary**

The problem of achievement gaps for minority students, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs is complex. These achievement gaps have numerous causes including poverty, lack of access to effective teachers, and dysfunctional learning environments. Unfortunately, these elements are a prevalent part of US school culture and continue to create achievement gaps.

Policymakers can help address the issue of achievement gaps for groups of students that have historically underperformed. However, policy must extend beyond punitive measures based on standardized test results. Instead, policymakers must recognize the unique contexts and challenges of schools and look for multiple measures of success beyond standardized test results. Additionally, policymakers must recognize the causes of achievement gaps and include specific points to address these gaps. Finally, the efficacy and perceptions of principals is critical in addressing achievement gaps. The perceptions and beliefs of principals is essential to the evaluation of processes and outcomes of policies designed to address student and school performance.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

This chapter describes the setting and sample utilized to answer the research questions as well as the methods. Methods refer to the steps that were taken to gather and analyze data. This includes the selection of participants and data sources, how data were obtained and analyzed. This program evaluation was intended to review the implementation of the accountability components of the ESSA policy in a single rural school district in Virginia. This study examined the following research questions:

1. To what degree of fidelity do individual school improvement plans align with the components of ESSA relating to accountability and increasing the achievement of student groups, including minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?
2. What are principals' beliefs about the potential benefits and liabilities of the implementation of ESSA regarding school improvement, including increasing achievement for minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?
3. What are the recommendations from principals regarding improving the school level implementation of ESSA to support increased achievement for including minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?

A pragmatic worldview can be defined as focusing on the research problem or

question instead of methods and uses all means to understand the problem. The pragmatic view focuses on what works regarding a program or research problem. In many cases, mixed methods research uses the pragmatic worldview (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). While this study was qualitative in design, the pragmatic worldview relates to this study because the primary goal was to identify effective policies regarding closing achievement gaps and how schools implement this policy.

Qualitative methods were used to examine the guiding research questions. Creswell and Creswell (2017) describe qualitative methods as an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Qualitative methods have eight characteristics. Qualitative studies often take place in a natural setting or data were collected in the setting where the problem exists. Next, the researcher is the primary instrument. In other words, it is the researcher who collects the data. Qualitative designs also rely on multiple sources of data, such as interviews and observations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In addition, qualitative designs are characterized by inductive and deductive patterns. Qualitative researchers look for patterns and then attempt to see if further proof can be found to support these patterns. Qualitative design also focuses on participants' meanings; these designs are emergent, meaning that the meanings cannot be prescribed. In some cases, the research focus could actually shift. Reflexivity is a further aspect of qualitative designs: researchers must examine their own beliefs and biases when considering the interpretation of data. Finally, qualitative research takes a holistic approach to give a full picture of the problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

## **Participants**

The school district selected for this study is rural and consists of eight schools with an overall enrollment of approximately 5400 students. Five of the participant schools were elementary schools, two were middle schools, and one was a high school. The student enrollment demographics of this school district at the time of the study was as follows: 80% White; 6.6% African American; 6.5% two or more races; 5.6% Hispanic; and 0.2% Native American. Of the total enrollment, 37.5% of students were identified as economically disadvantaged; SWDs account for 13.4% of students. Each school in the study was designated as *accredited* under ESSA. While none of these schools received targeted or comprehensive support at the time of the study, each had low achievement for gap groups. Each school had an economically disadvantaged student population that exceeded 30% and a low minority student population. Table 2 represents student demographics for each of the participating schools.

Table 2

*Student Demographics for Participating Schools*

School	Enrollment	% of Students by Group			
		Caucasian	African American	Economically Disadvantaged	SWDs
ES1	606	75.6%	7.4%	39.9%	14.4%
ES2	437	86%	3.7%	39.1%	16.2%
ES3	514	79.6%	6%	32.9%	14.8%
ES4	619	77.7%	6.1%	32.5%	11.3%
ES5	315	79%	5.4%	38.4%	11.7%
SS1	593	81.6%	6.1%	36.3%	13.8%
SS2	551	78.4%	7.6%	44.8%	12.7%
SS3	1773	82.2%	7.4%	34.4	13%

*Note.* ES = Elementary School; MS = Middle School; HS = High School; SWDs = Students with Disabilities

While each of the schools met overall benchmarks in reading, none of the schools met the benchmarks for African American students or SWDs. The pass rates for SWDs were the lowest and presented the largest achievement gap. School ES4 had the lowest pass rates for SWDs and economically disadvantaged students. Table 3 represented achievement scores in reading by demographic category for each of the participating schools.

Table 3

*Schools' Gap Group Achievement in Reading*

School	Total	% Passing SOL by Group		
		African American	Economically Disadvantaged	SWDs
ES1	80%	62%	72%	46%
ES2	88%	TS	82%	70%
ES3	88%	75%	80%	68%
ES4	87%	89%	84%	74%
ES5	73%	TS	66%	52%
SS1	81%	62%	73%	43%
SS2	78%	58%	67%	40%
SS3	91%	78%	85%	71%

*Note.* ES = Elementary School; MS = Middle School; HS = High School; SOL = Standards of Learning exam; SWDs = Students with Disabilities; TS = population too small

The achievement gaps in math were not as wide. However, there were still clear deficits in achievement for each of the gap groups. Similar to reading, SWDs at each school had the lowest pass rates compared to non-disabled peers. Table 4 represents the math achievement scores for each participating school.

Table 4

*Schools' Gap Group Achievement in Math*

School	% Passing SOL by Group			
	Total	African American	Economically Disadvantaged	SWDs
ES1	80%	80%	72%	23%
ES2	92%	TS	87%	78%
ES3	91%	77%	86%	58%
ES4	93%	89%	88%	59%
ES5	73%	TS	69%	24%
SS1	82%	74%	76%	44%
SS2	78%	63%	71%	33%
SS3	80%	69%	71%	47%

*Note.* ES = Elementary School; MS = Middle School; HS = High School; SOL = Standards of Learning exam; SWDs = Students with Disabilities; TS = population too small

**Categories regarding gap groups.** The Virginia Department of Education provides guidance for identifying levels of achievement gaps. Achievement gaps in this study were categorized into these four groups for the respective achievement gaps for African American students, SWDs, and economically disadvantaged students in math and reading. The gaps for each subgroup were categorized according to differences in performance as Small, Medium, Large, and Too Small to Measure (TS). If a school had an achievement gap with a difference of 1% to 5%, then they were categorized as Small. Schools that had a difference between 6% and 10%, were categorized as medium. If a school had more than a 10% difference in achievement in gap groups, they were categorized as Large. Finally, if the population was designated as Too Small by the Virginia Department of Education they were categorized as TS.

**Data Sources**

Mertler (2016) identified four sources of collecting research in qualitative studies

in the field of research: observations, interviews, journals, existing documents and records, and reflective teaching. Observations occur when the researcher carefully watches and systematically records what he or she hears and sees. Interviews are conversations between the researcher or practitioner and participants. Journals are narrative accounts of qualitative data or information collected. Documents and records include existing data or anything collected for a reason other than the action research. Reflective teaching refers to the methods in which teachers actually change processes after research is completed. This refers to peer observations or video taping of lessons. It also includes the steps that researchers will take when findings are completed in a study.

The qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because multiple measures were used, relying heavily on policy documents and the perceptions of policy implementers. Measures appropriate for a qualitative design were used to collect and analyze data. A document review was conducted to evaluate the extent to which the local school district policy in a rural school district in Virginia is aligned with the intended outcomes in ESSA. Common themes were identified from each of the schools. To answer the second and third questions, structured interviews were conducted of principals of the identified schools. Interviews included questions regarding principal beliefs and perceptions of ESSA accountability and school improvement policies. Common themes were identified from these interviews.

**Document review.** A document review of school improvement plans was conducted. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In the case of this study, document analysis

was an effective source of data as it is valuable in program evaluations. Specifically, the goal was to look for evidence of initiatives or strategies that were meant to close achievement gaps for minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs.

The documents reviewed were the Effective School Plans (ESPs) for the selected schools. ESPs were written outlines in the selected school district that describe how schools will meet identified goals. These included academic goals related to SOL pass rates and other goals, such as reducing disciplinary infractions and improving attendance and school climate.

In this school division, goals were established by the superintendent and the assistant superintendent. For each goal, there were specific actions or steps were created that describe how the goal will be met. Each step also included what resources are needed, the time frame in which changes would be implemented, and who would be responsible for implementation. The ESPs were active, dynamic documents and were monitored each month. Goals were adjusted at the beginning of each school year based on the previous year's academic, attendance, and discipline data. The ESPs for each selected school were obtained from the principal.

**Principal interviews.** The second data source was interviews with principals of the selected schools. Mertler (2016) defines interviews as conversations between the researcher and participants in the study in which the researcher poses questions to the participant. There are three distinct types of interviews. A structured interview is an interview that consists of pre-determined questions. A semi-structured interview has predetermined questions; however, the researcher has the option to ask additional

questions. Finally, open-ended interviews include broad prompts with the intent of gathering a variety of information from the participant (Mertler, 2016).

A semi-structured interview protocol was selected for this study. The interview protocol (Appendix A) was created to insure an effective interview process. Creswell and Creswell (2017) describe an interview protocol as a plan for conducting interviews with subjects. This was beneficial because, although several questions were predetermined, the semi-structured nature of the protocol gave me the option of probing more fully if necessary. Additional probing or questions were necessary if the answers did not fully answer questions about principal perceptions about the Virginia implementation of ESSA. Further questioning was also needed if the evaluator needed clarification on initiatives regarding the closing of achievement gaps.

The purpose of this study was to identify how elements of ESSA being implemented at the school level. In the specific context of this policy, the goal of the interview was to identify how schools are responding to achievement gaps for students of color, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs. A review of the literature also indicated that principal beliefs and perceptions are critical to setting direction and achieving success in a school. As such, questions were included to identify principals' perceptions of ESSA. Interview Questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 7 and 8 were created to ascertain principals' perceptions of the Virginia implementation of ESSA. Another purpose was to ascertain which steps or strategies schools are specifically using to close achievement gaps. Interview Questions 3 and 6 were created to identify steps, actions, or initiatives that principals are taking to close achievement gaps. Questions 9 and 10 were intended to

gather information about principal perceptions of the Virginia implementation of ESSA as well as perceived liabilities and advantages. Finally, Question 11 allowed principals to give recommendations regarding the implementation of ESSA in Virginia. The interview included the following questions and prompts:

1. Tell me what you know about the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).
2. How have you learned about it?
3. Tell me what you know about the current Virginia system of accountability.
4. What do you know about the differences between the previous accountability system and the current school accountability system?
5. Has the implementation of the current accountability system influenced the school improvement process at your school? If so, in what ways?
6. What factors do you perceive to contribute to achievement gaps for African American students, SWDs, and economically disadvantaged students in your school?
7. Describe how the use of growth bands has affected the overall reporting of achievement for your school.
8. Has the use of growth bands in reporting gap group achievement impacted your choice of interventions?
9. Describe specific initiatives or interventions that are being implemented in your school to increase achievement for minority students, low-SES students and SWDs and to close achievement gaps.

10. Tell me about initiatives in your school that support minority, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs access to more rigorous learning?
11. What has been the evidence of increased achievement at your school?
12. What do you perceive to be the benefits of the current accountability system over the short term? Long term?
13. Do you perceive there to be any challenges to the implementation of the current accountability system?
14. What changes or recommendations would you make to the current school practices related to school improvement accountability policy to address the improved achievement of African American students, economically disadvantaged students and SWDs?
15. Do you feel prepared to implement the current accountability system at your school?
  - a. Why or why not?
  - b. What type(s) of support would assist you in implementing and responding to the expectations in the current accountability system at your school?

The research questions were used to determine if the principals have given significant information. Specifically, the interview was intended to help me understand how principals are implementing ESSA by closing the achievement gap. It was intended that the interview would yield principals' opinions of the benefits and detriments of

ESSA. Finally, the interview should produce principal suggestions to improve the existing policy.

***Interview field test.*** It was important that the interview questions gathered responses that adequately answered the research questions. To ensure this process, a field test was conducted. Two high school principals that had extensive knowledge and experience in school improvement processes under NCLB and ESSA reviewed the interview protocol and provide feedback. In addition, a policy actor familiar with the Virginia implementation of ESSA and the accountability system reviewed the logic model and associated research methods.

### **Data Collection**

The collection of these qualitative data was conducted during the fall of 2019 and winter of 2020. Prior to beginning research, and with dissertation committee approval, the proposal was submitted to the William & Mary Internal Review Board for approval of the research. Following this, permission was requested from each principal of the schools included in this study. Permission was solicited from the school district.

**Effective school plans (ESP).** The ESP documents were requested from each school. The ESPs were provided by the principal of each respective school included in this study.

**Interviews with principals.** Interviews lasted approximately one hour and took place at the principals' schools or at the central office. Interviews were conducted in a private setting away from other faculty and staff. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Dedoose. The interview protocol began with the interviewer recording

basic information about the principal and the school. Next, the interviewer introduced himself and the purpose of the study. Following this, the interviewer asked an opening question. Next, the interviewer asked the 11 questions. During the interview, the interviewer used the following probes, if further information was needed:

- “Will you tell me more?”
- “I need more detail.”
- “Will you explain your response more?”

The interview was concluded by thanking the interviewee and insuring confidentiality. I assured the interviewee by stating that the responses and answers to the questions on the interview protocol would remain confidential and the names of participants and schools would not be revealed. Table 5 represented the alignment of evaluation questions with associated interview questions. The questions were adjusted based on the responses of these principals.

Table 5

*Table of Specifications for Research Questions and Interview Questions*

Research Question	Interview Questions
1. To what degree of fidelity do individual school improvement plans align with the components of ESSA relating to accountability and increasing the achievement of student groups, including minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
2. What are principals’ beliefs about the potential benefits and liabilities of the implementation of ESSA regarding school improvement, including increasing achievement for minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?	12, 13, 15
3. What are the recommendations from principals regarding improving the school level implementation of ESSA to support increased achievement for including minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?	14

*Note.* ESSA = [define here]; SES = [define here]; SWDs = [define here]

## **Data Analysis**

**Research Question 1.** Saldaña (2015) identifies themes as outcomes of codes that are categorized. Thematic analysis includes gathering data from documents and identifying emerging themes. This study utilized thematic analysis. Several codes were pre-identified in this study: school context, steps to address gap group achievement, collaboration, and use of formative assessments. Emergent codes were analyzed and integrated with the analysis of the pre-determined codes.

The first research question examined how the selected schools were implementing components of ESSA. This required a document review of the ESPs for each school. Creswell and Creswell (2017) provided a framework for analyzing data that would be followed in this document review. This included organizing and preparing data, reading and reviewing data, coding data, generating categories, themes and descriptions. This framework was used as a guide for data analysis in this document review. The organization and preparation of data analysis involved viewing the ESPs and labelling them as either School ES1(Elementary School 1), ES2 (Elementary School 2), SS1 (Secondary School 1), and so forth. Reading and reviewing data involved making a general sense of the information and reflecting on its overall meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this phase of data analysis, I reviewed each ESP and began to look for emerging themes.

Next, coding was the process of organizing data by bracketing chunks and writing a word representing each category (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this phase, each

school's ESP was reviewed, and a series of categories were created. Typically, five to seven themes or categories should be created for qualitative studies. Themes can be identified as major findings in a document review. There are three approaches to coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). First, a researcher can use emerging codes or codes that are found as the research is being conducted. Second, the researcher can use pre-determined (or a priori) codes and assign the codes to data. And finally, there can be a combination of emerging and pre-determined themes. A combination of pre-determined and emerging codes was used.

Several codes were pre-determined based on a review of relevant literature. The first code is *school context*. Policymakers should consider the unique context of each school (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). Previous NCLB policies utilized a blanket approach to school improvement that did not recognize the unique context of each school. These policies proved detrimental to schools and did little to address achievement gaps. This emerging theme relates to an acknowledgement of the school's unique context. Specifically, I searched for examples of the school's demographics, community, and environment. Moreover, this includes data in the ESP that identify steps a school will take to address unique contextual challenges.

The second code included steps that identify how to address gap group achievement. A review of literature identifies several causes of achievement gaps. This includes poverty, lack of access to qualified teachers, and unequal schooling (Darling-Hammond, 2015). A review of literature also proposes several ways schools with high populations of minorities and economically disadvantaged students have closed

achievement gaps. Since each of the schools in this study had either yellow or red designations for African American, economically disadvantaged students, or SWDs, this analysis looked for specific plans to provide support for these identified groups. This included lesson strategies and interventions.

A third pre-determined code was evidence of collaboration. Several sources outlined collaboration as a characteristic of effective schools (Hayes, 2008). Moreover, collaboration among teachers is critical in not only improving instruction, but also closing achievement gaps.

The final pre-determined code was schools' use of formative assessments to gauge learning. A frequent use of assessments was identified as a key factor in successful turnaround schools and effective schools (Leithwood et al., 2010). The use of frequent assessments to gauge student progress as well as how to identify areas of need for instructional adjustment were key in serving challenged students and closing achievement gaps.

These codes were combined with the emerging codes. Emerging codes were significant in qualitative studies. While a researcher can identify multiple pre-determined codes in a study, interviews and document reviews may lead to additional codes that the researcher may not have identified. This is critical in allowing the researcher to address additional ideas and points that may emerge while interviewing or reviewing documents (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This also related to the pragmatic paradigm as that I had additional flexibility to examine further topics.

**Research Question 2.** A similar process was conducted for the analysis of the data collected to answer Research Question 2: “What are principals’ beliefs about the potential benefits and liabilities of the implementation of ESSA regarding school improvement, including increasing achievement for minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?” Interviews were used to collect data. Predetermined codes were a focus for initial analysis of responses to these questions.

The first predetermined code was growth bands. A synthesis of the literature suggests that multiple factors should be included in policies that measure the effectiveness of schools. Previous researchers have emphasized that standardized test scores should not be a sole factor in determining a school’s success. Factors such as school climate and family engagement should be included in school accountability policies (Martin et al., 2016). In Virginia’s implementation of ESSA, progress is measured by specific growth bands. As such, a predetermined code was the extent to which principals identify growth bands as beneficial.

A second predetermined code was standardized testing. A synthesis of literature proposes that using standardized testing as measure of student understanding and overall school success can be detrimental to schools (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). While Virginia’s implementation of ESSA provides growth bands and measures outside of testing, SOL assessments continue to dominate the current accountability system. This is particularly the case for math and reading.

**Research Question 3.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data related to principal perceptions of the benefits of the new policy implementation.

Pre-determined codes were a focus in the analysis of the responses. There were three pre-identified codes: additional measures of growth, additional accountability measures, and accountability measures that should be discontinued.

Measures of growth and additional accountability measures were mentioned as an additional factor that should be included in accountability systems. A synthesis of literature regarding accountability systems suggests that measures beyond standardized testing—such as community engagement, school climate, and social emotional health initiatives—should be a focus for policy (e.g., Martin et al., 2016).

A further predetermined code included measures that should be discontinued. This theme was selected to gauge principals’ perspectives about elements of Virginia’s implementation of ESSA that should not exist. The review of literature supports the notion that principals support additional measures for accountability. However, many principals do not believe that school accountability measures that place sanctions or labels on schools are beneficial. Table 6 is a Table of Specification that identifies the evaluation questions, data sources, and associated data analysis for this study.

Table 6

*Table of Specifications for Research Questions, Data Sources and Data Analysis*

<i>Research Questions</i>	<i>Data Source</i>	<i>Data Analysis</i>
To what degree of fidelity do individual school improvement plans align with the components of ESSA relating to accountability and increasing the achievement of student groups, including minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?	School Improvement Plans	Document analysis using emergent and a priori coding  Inductive and deductive analysis

What are principals' beliefs about the potential benefits and liabilities of the implementation of ESSA regarding school improvement, including increasing achievement for minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?	Participant Interviews	Emergent and a priori coding Inductive analysis
What are the recommendations from principals regarding improving the school level implementation of ESSA to support increased achievement for including minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?	Participant Interviews	Emergent and a priori coding Inductive analysis

*Note.* SWDs = Students with Disabilities; SES = Socioeconomic Status

## **Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions**

**Delimitations.** The delimitations of this study were based on the selection of seven schools (four elementary, two middle, and one high school) in a single rural school district. The qualitative data obtained were restricted to principals and did not include other school and/or school district personnel that may play a role in the implementation of the policy and/or interventions. Teachers' perceptions and understanding were not included in this study. Rather, the focus of this study was on building-level leaders and their perceptions of current Virginia school improvement initiatives. The use of qualitative data alone prevented any quantitative evaluation of the fidelity of implementation, the effectiveness of the plans in reaching goals for closing the achievement gaps or any realized outcomes of the school improvement plans.

**Limitations.** The interviews in this study were conducted in December 2019. Since these were one time interviews, I was not able gain principal insights that may have developed later in the year. Quite possibly, the principals gained further insight into ESSA implementation as the school year progressed. School plans are written documents that are used as a roadmap for actions. As such, they may not reflect in detail every initiative or action taken to mitigate differences in achievement between student populations.

**Assumptions.** The prevalent assumption in this study was that the schools and school district in this study share a commitment to improving student achievement for all students. Specifically, this assumption was based on the premise that principals are committed to increasing achievement for the lowest achieving disenfranchised students as

identified in gap groups. A second assumption was that ESSA policy and Virginia Interpretations are aligned in a common goal of closing achievement gaps. The third assumption in this study was that achievement for economically disadvantaged students, minorities, and SWDs can be increased despite the socioeconomic factors that might hinder learning and achievement. Although I recognized the challenges regarding specific gap groups, this study was grounded in the belief that schools can support all students despite adverse environmental factors.

### **Ethical Considerations**

**Confidentiality.** To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in place of schools' names. The seven schools in this study are given names such as School ES1, ES2, and SS3. Furthermore, the names of the principals in this study are not included.

**The Institutional Review Board Process.** Research at William & Mary included a review of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The purpose of this board was to ensure that research was conducted in an ethical manner. As a doctoral candidate, I was required to complete ethics training through several online CITI modules. In addition, permissions were acquired from the school district as well as principals.

**Positionality.** I served as a principal in schools in the rural school district. These experiences provided me with an intimate understanding of district initiatives and processes. I had also been exposed to the attitudes and beliefs of district personnel including teachers, building level administrators, and central office personnel. However, I was not in a supervisory role of any of the principals included in this study.

As a principal in schools in this school division, I had an integral part in planning and responding to SOL data and increasing the achievement for minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs in two particular schools. Since principal interviews were a major component of the data collection for this study it was important to mitigate bias from this study. To mitigate positionality as a district school leader, I interviewed an assistant principal. This allowed me to see if the vision of providing supports for historically low achieving students had been communicated with fidelity to other members of his staff.

A personal implicit bias may exist in identifying the achievement gaps for African American students, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs and determining the appropriateness of interventions. This worldview, combined with my personal beliefs about teaching and learning and leadership experience with accountability systems for schools, there was the potential for bias in collecting and analysis of the interview data. In order to account for this, I relied on a field test of the interview protocol to identify any bias in the process and questions generated for the participant interviews. Pre-determined codes that aligned with school improvement literature provided guard rails for my analysis. Additionally, I used reflexive journaling, transcription software and analytic memos to minimize any subjectivity in the analysis and reporting of findings.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is intended to ensure equity in public schools for all students. Specifically, it promotes protections for high need students and also proposes for innovations in education for the specific purpose of preparing students for the challenges of the 21st century. While paralleling many of the previous NCLB policies, ESSA attempts to give states more flexibility regarding how schools are evaluated.

Virginia's implementation of ESSA reflects many of the core values of the policy. It contains indicators outside of standardized testing. This includes growth bands, an attendance indicator, and a graduation completer index (for high schools). It also provides an emphasis on achievement for specific groups of students. The school quality report designates overall achievement by identifying the levels of achievement among gap groups. The gap group achievement reported uses stoplight reports as a tool for communicating results. The overall results of individual SOL assessments are reported as green (Level 1 designates students at or above standards), yellow (Level 2 designates students just below) or red (Level 3 designates students significantly below). The overall school quality report is based on the number of green, yellow, and red levels across all reporting categories. This accountability system is intended to identify areas of need

outside of overall pass rates and to create a greater emphasis on gap groups such as minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs.

This chapter presents the findings of a study that examined the impact of ESSA on practices in schools in a rural school division. Specifically, I examined the implementation of this policy as it relates to the achievement of African American students, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs. Three questions were examined in this study:

1. To what degree of fidelity do individual school improvement plans align with the components of ESSA relating to accountability and increasing the achievement of student groups, including minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?
2. What are principals' beliefs about the potential benefits and liabilities of the implementation of ESSA regarding school improvement, including increasing achievement for minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?
3. What are the recommendations from principals regarding improving the school level implementation of ESSA to support increased achievement for including minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?

Seven of the eight schools in this division participated in this study. Four were elementary schools, two were middle schools and one was a high school. The data sources used in this study included documents in the form of Effective School Plans (ESPs), which were the equivalent of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) and interviews with school leaders engaged with the implementation of the ESSA policy. The ESPs

were the data source used to answer Research Question 1. The interviews were used to answer Research Questions 2 and 3.

Saldaña (2015) defines coding as a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data. Coding involved in qualitative research is a cyclative process. In almost all cases, the coding process involved more than one cycle of coding. For each question, several cycles of coding were involved to identify themes that emerged from the data.

The data analysis of this research involved three cycles. The first cycle involved looking for codes that matched the pre-determined codes. The first cycle also involved identifying emerging codes. Emerging codes were developed from patterns that formed as I conducted interviews and reviewed ESPs. The second cycle involved narrowing codes into larger categories. Emergent codes were integrated, where appropriate, within the predetermined codes. The third cycle involved reviewing the documents again to identify larger themes and to determine a clear description of the themes.

Saldaña (2015) also suggests that the type of coding should be related to the several components of the research. First, the coding should be related to research question. Second, the paradigm should be considered. Third, researchers should consider if the coding method will be predetermined, emerging, or methodological needs of the study. In the case of this study, some of the themes were predetermined, but later additional codes and themes were identified. The coding decisions were made based on methodological needs of the study.

Achievement gaps in this study were categorized into four groups according to the VDOE levels of disparity for the respective gap groups of African American students, SWDs, and economically disadvantaged students in math and reading: Small (5% or less), Medium (6%-10%), Large (above 10%), and Too Small (TS, meaning too small to measure).

### **Evaluation Question #1**

*To what degree of fidelity do individual school improvement plans align with the components of ESSA relating to accountability and increasing the achievement of student groups, including minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?*

To answer this question, ESPs were reviewed in the three outlined cycles of data analysis. In the first cycle, I reviewed evidence that relates to the predetermined codes in the study. Regarding “school context that relates to gap groups,” I looked for evidence in the ESPs that identified the number or percentages of students in each gap group in each school. Most of this evidence was included in the inquiry process. For example, schools identified the percentages of African American, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs in their overall student populations. In addition, I also looked for evidence in which the school plan outlined the pass rate percentages for specific gap groups in the effective school plans. This included specific numerical percentages. In other cases, the ESP identified achievement of a specific gap group as low. In addition, emergent codes were created as I found more evidence of codes. In the second cycle, codes were merged into themes. Codes that were related to others were merged together as themes. Also,

some codes were not as prevalent as others. These codes were omitted. For instance, some codes only had two or three points of evidence.

In the final cycle, the ESPs were reviewed a second time to further clarify the themes. The effective school plans were also reviewed a second time to answer questions about themes. For example, the documents were reviewed to produce specific examples of the specific steps to close gap group achievement. Another example included reviewing the documents to see if schools actually analyzed data according to gap groups. These codes align with the requirements of the Virginia ESSA requirements for school accountability. Section 1 of the Virginia ESSA plan identifies subgroups as a priority. White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian students are recognized as the largest gap groups. As mandated by ESSA federal policy, states must recognize statutorily required subgroups such as economically disadvantaged students. The first two codes regarding a recognition of gap groups and specific steps to improve gap group achievement align with this section of the plan.

The third and fourth predetermined codes of collaboration among teachers to improve instruction and a use of formative assessments to progress monitor align to the requirement to increase gap group achievement. Teacher collaboration is not only identified as a means of improving overall instruction, but also is a key component in supporting gap group achievement (Hayes, 2008). Similarly, a frequent use of assessments and a systematic response to improve achievement aligns to the Virginia ESSA requirement to increase gap groups achievement (Hayes, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2010).

One emergent code involved social emotional learning. This is aligned to the Virginia ESSA plan as well. Title IV, Part A indicates student support as a means to provide students with a well-rounded education and to improve student conditions for learning. The Virginia plan lists initiatives such as Virginia Tiered Systems of Support (VTSS) as a means to implement such support. VTSS is also mentioned in Title I, Part A, “school conditions.” VTSS is identified as a means of improving discipline, school environment and promoting social emotional health.

A second emergent code was related to increasing attendance. This is aligned to the Virginia ESSA plan as well. The Virginia plans cites that students who are chronically absent have less of chance to be academically successful. The Virginia ESSA plan outlines an indicator to reduce chronic absenteeism, which is defined as students who miss 10% of the school year. Steps to increase attendance or lower chronic absenteeism became evident during this study. In the sections that follow, I discuss themes that were generated from this analysis. Table 7 outlines the themes identified in this study and the frequency of evidence found for each school.

Table 7

*Table of Qualitative Evidence of Identified Themes for Evaluation Question 1*

School	Increase attendance	Increase Gap Group Achvt.	School Context	Steps to Address Gap Group Achvt.	Evidence of Collab.	Use of Formative Assessments	Social Emotl. Learning
ES2	2	1	3	3	1	1	2
ES3	7	5	5	8	0	4	2
ES4	4	10	6	10	7	0	3
ES5	1	1	3	5	1	3	7
SS1	1	3	1	14	5	1	6
SS2	4	4	5	4	0	7	3
SS3	5	2	4	9	5	3	4

**School context and planning included gap groups.** The seven ESPs that were reviewed began with a section that describes the inquiry process. While the ESPs did not indicate that this data was analyzed, it did indicate that schools considered the gap group populations in the schools. The inquiry process outlines the school context. In general, school context refers to student enrollment, demographics, as well as academic strengths and weaknesses. A theme identified in the document review was the recognition of gap groups in the school context. The ESPs in three of the seven schools identified the percentages of SWDs and African American students in their school plans. In four cases, the inquiry process in the ESP indicated that gap group achievement was a problem or area of need for the school. In two instances, schools indicated increases in gap group achievement. In addition to this, five of the seven schools had measurable and quantitative goals regarding gap group achievement. This demonstrates that in a number of cases, schools were cognizant of gap groups in their schools. At the same time, the ESPs did not indicate reasons for the gap groups. Moreover, there was no evidence of specific SOL strands that caused particular gap groups to fail.

Schools that had higher levels of evidence of including gap groups in the school context had smaller achievement gaps for African American and economically disadvantaged students. However, this was not the case for SWDs. The same schools that had smaller gaps for African American and economically disadvantaged students had larger gaps for SWDs.

**The ESP identifies specific goals to increase gap group achievement.** Just as strong school plans are characterized by specific overall academic goals, there should be

specific goals to increase achievement for gap groups. In the inquiry process, schools identified overall goals for SOL assessments in the areas of math, reading, writing, history, and science. There were also specific goals for grade levels or subjects. In addition, there were goals for gap groups. However, in some cases these goals were not as specific as the overall goals. In two instances, these goals were stated as an increase for SWDs or African American students; however, they did not include a specific percentage. For example, one school indicated that the goal was to “increase achievement for SWDs,” but did not give a specific percentage. Four of the schools replaced the specific target goals designated from the division leaders regarding achievement for African American, SWDs, and economically disadvantaged students and instead, increased the benchmarks for these gap groups. One school wrote in specific statements that achievement for gap groups would increase from one percentage to a higher percentage. In all of these cases, the schools set goals that met or exceeded the benchmarks for the Virginia ESSA requirement.

Schools that had smaller achievement gaps for African American students had higher evidence of specific goals to increase gap group achievement. Similarly, schools that had smaller achievement gaps for economically disadvantaged students in math and reading also had higher levels of evidence specific goals to increase gap group achievement. However, this was not the case for achievement for SWDs. In both the areas of math and reading, schools that had larger gaps for SWDs had high evidence of specific goals to close gap group achievement.

**Specific steps to address gap group achievement.** All of the schools identified gap group pass rates in their inquiry process of their ESPs. In relation to this, the document review indicated that all of the seven schools had evidence of specific steps to close gap group achievement in their respective ESPs. There was variation in the number of strategies among the schools, with the lowest instance being 3 and highest occurrence being fourteen.

While there was no evaluation of the quality or effectiveness of the strategies, the steps identified specific content and grade level initiatives to close gaps. These included instructional strategies and support from resources in the school. These instances related to generally improving overall instruction and specific progress monitoring of groups. For example, one school indicated that observations would be conducted with the specific purpose of monitoring interventions to check if they were being implemented with fidelity. Small group instruction was listed in another instance to address achievement for students that did not grasp specific SOL concepts. Another school was more specific in providing interventions for students who were below the 25th percentile. In relation to this, another school identified a data tracking for fifth-grade students. Plans also included specific steps to increase attendance and lower discipline referrals. It should be noted that the evidence that was coded as relating to specific steps to close achievement gaps also related to other codes and fell into further themes that were identified in this study.

The document review indicated that there were equal occurrences of the specific steps to close achievement gaps between secondary and elementary schools. Of the seven ESPs reviewed, there were 26 instances of evidence of specific steps to close

achievement gaps for elementary schools compared to 27 instances of evidence for secondary schools. However, when considering the size of achievement gaps, the schools with smaller achievement gaps had higher levels of evidence of specific initiatives to close achievement gaps. For example, these schools commonly had evidence that included a focus on progress monitoring of students that related to assessments that were given periodically throughout the school year. One school identified creating tailored specific intervention plans for groups of identified students. In twelve instances, the schools identified that these plans would be monitored by observations. The purpose of this was to monitor if interventions were being correctly implemented in the classroom. Schools also listed assessment of students as a further means of monitoring the progress of interventions and initiatives to improve instruction and ultimately close gap groups. Other schools identified the disaggregation of the previous year's SOL data to create plans of instruction to address academic deficiencies.

African American students had small to medium disparity gaps in the schools that had higher levels of evidence of specific initiatives to close achievement gaps in both math and reading. This was also the case for economically disadvantaged students. In both the areas of reading and math, schools that had higher amounts of evidence of specific initiatives to close achievement gaps had smaller achievement gaps.

However, this data was different for SWDs. While achievement gaps were categorically smaller or medium for African American students and economically disadvantaged students in schools with more evidence of specific initiatives to close achievement gaps, the same schools had large gaps and lower achievement for SWDs.

An analysis of this data indicated that the plans did not have evidence that was specific to the challenges of meeting the needs of SWDs. There were two instances that mentioned that a reading specialist would support SWDs. One secondary school had begun implementing common planning for inclusion settings for general education and special education teachers to support and facilitate instruction and achievement in these classes. However, the majority of the instances reflected general processes such as data tracking and small group instruction.

**Frequent use of formative assessments to progress monitor.** A review of literature suggests that a frequent use of formative assessments can be effective in closing achievement gaps. A document review of ESPs indicated that six of the seven schools in this study had evidence of a use of formative assessments to close achievement gaps. This included periodic benchmark assessments to progress monitor students during the course of the year. It also included the use of formative assessments embedded in daily instruction. There were also many examples of processes or procedures to analyze the data that came from these assessments.

An analysis of the data revealed that schools that had larger disparity gaps of 10% or more in achievement for African American students in math reading had more instances of using formative assessments than those with smaller gaps. Schools with an African American population that was too small to count also had low evidence of using formative assessments. Schools that had smaller achievement gaps of less than 5% for economically disadvantaged students in math and reading only had slightly more evidence of using formative assessments. These schools had evidence that included

progress monitoring, and a use of specialists to support targeted groups of students.

Regarding SWDs, schools that had smaller gaps had less evidence of formative assessment practices and procedures. The evidence was similar to that of the schools that had smaller gaps for African American students. One school's ESP did identify that the SOL data for SWDs was disaggregated at the beginning of the year to make instructional decisions.

**Collaboration among teachers to improve instruction.** A synthesis of literature identifies that teacher collaboration can be effective in increasing student achievement and closing achievement gaps. Five of the seven school plans included evidence of teacher collaboration in ESPs. Similar to other themes there was a range of frequency. On the low end, one school had a single indication of collaboration while at the high end a school made seven references to collaboration as a strategy. The strategy of collaboration was reflected in examples of common planning and teachers collaboratively reviewing and responding to data.

School plans included specific initiatives to include common planning for inclusion teachers to support SWDs. One secondary school indicated that they were in the beginning stages of common planning for inclusion teachers in the four core areas. However, the plan was not specific to what would happen during this time. Schools that had smaller achievement gaps for African American students in reading and math had more evidence of teacher collaboration than schools with larger gaps. Similar data was found for economically disadvantaged students. However, schools with high amounts of teacher collaboration still had large gaps for SWDs.

**Social Emotional Learning initiatives included in the school plan.** A theme identified in the document review was the application of social emotional learning, including the implementation of VTSS initiatives. All of the schools included in this study had evidence of implementation of social emotional learning in their respective ESPs. The most common initiatives included common school wide disciplinary expectations and teaching appropriate behaviors to students. Two of the four elementary schools included in this study included incentive programs and programs that recognized student behavior.

On the secondary level, the excerpts in the plans included the implementation of advisory periods. The advisory periods included social emotional lessons that were specific to each grade level. Two schools indicated a use of therapeutic day treatment counselors to identify students categorized as Tier 3 regarding behavior. An analysis of this data indicated that there was equal evidence of social emotional learning on the secondary level and elementary levels. Of the seven schools included in this study, there were 14 instances of evidence regarding social emotional learning on the elementary level compared to 13 instances of social emotional learning on the secondary level. One particular secondary school was in the beginning stages of implementing VTSS and had begun with introducing common behavioral expectations for students as well as implementing student recognition systems.

Schools with smaller gaps in achievement for African American students had more evidence of social emotional learning practices. This was also the case for economically disadvantaged students. However, the same schools that had larger

evidence of social emotional practices and smaller achievement gaps for African American and economically disadvantaged students, had larger achievement gaps for SWDs.

While disproportionality regarding disciplinary incidences for African American and SWDs has been identified as a division wide problem, only one secondary school had identified this as an area of concern. That same secondary school was the only school that had specific goals to lower the number of referrals for African American and SWDs.

**Strategies to increase attendance.** Increasing attendance was a further component in increasing gap group achievement. Moreover, it is a factor in accreditation in the Virginia ESSA plan. This was a common theme identified in the document review of ESPs. Many of the ESPs had whole sections that focused on increasing attendance. In the case of increasing attendance, elementary schools had a slightly higher amount of qualitative evidence than secondary schools. There were some distinctions in the evidence of increasing attendance between elementary and secondary schools. Many of the elementary schools used rewards and recognitions in addition to analysis of attendance data. For instance, one elementary school had a contest among classes for the highest attendance. Another elementary school had the daily attendance posted on a bulletin board in the front hallway so that students and parents could see progress. However, on the secondary level, the evidence included merely upholding the division wide attendance policy which gave failures to students who missed more than 10% of the days in a class (16 absences). This should be considered as that the elementary schools had lower instances of chronic absenteeism than secondary schools.

Schools that had smaller achievement gaps for African American students in reading had higher evidence of steps to increase achievement. However, in math, schools that had small and medium gaps had the same amount of evidence as schools with larger gaps. For economically disadvantaged students, schools with smaller gaps for math and reading had higher evidence of steps to increase attendance. For SWDs, the schools with smaller gaps did not have higher evidence of steps to increase gap group achievement.

### **Evaluation Question #2**

*What are principals' beliefs about the potential benefits and liabilities of the implementation of ESSA regarding school improvement, including increasing achievement for minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?*

Individual semi-structured interviews with school principals were conducted to answer this research question. There is considerable research and literature that indicates that principals have a major impact on the overall direction and success of a school (Miller & Lee, 2014; Versland & Erickson, 2017). Principals' efficacy is also a critical factor in closing achievement gaps and insuring equity for all students. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

Three themes were identified for this question: performance indicators beyond SOLs testing are beneficial, participant understanding of ESSA policy, focus on social emotional learning as an intervention. All codes aligned with components of the Virginia ESSA plan. The first code was growth bands. "Title I, Part A" includes academic indicators outside of testing. The Virginia ESSA plans outlines indicators for schools that are not high schools. Growth bands are identified in this section. The second

predetermined code is also identified in the Virginia ESSA plan in Part A. While the Virginia ESSA plan outlines alternative testing measures outside of testing, it still maintains requirements for standardized testing.

Similar to the first question, there were three cycles of coding. The first cycle involved looking for word and phrases that correlated with predetermined themes. The first cycle also involved developing emerging codes. In the second cycle included merging codes into themes. Similar to the previous question, some codes were omitted as there was not significant qualitative evidence to support them. In the final cycle, the recorded interviews were reviewed again to clarify themes and answer remaining questions. Table 8 outlines the frequency of identified themes for Evaluation Question 2.

Table 8

*Table of the Frequency of Identified Themes for Evaluation Question 2*

School	Growth Bands as Beneficial	Attendance Indicator as Beneficial	Learning About ESSA independently	Social Emotional Learning as beneficial
ES2	2	1	1	0
ES3	2	1	1	1
ES4	0	1	0	1
ES5	5	0	1	0
SS1	1	1	1	3
SS2	4	2	0	0
SS3	0	-	0	3

**Performance indicators beyond SOLs testing are beneficial.** A major component of ESSA included factors outside of standardized testing. Of the seven participants interviewed, six indicated that the factors outside of testing were beneficial. The participants who were interviewed expressed that the focus on the performance

indicators in the accountability system held benefits for students and teachers. Specifically, their interviews reflected that they believed that the attendance indicators and growth bands were beneficial. They indicated that for students it provided a transparent and public reporting of achievement growth and progress of students who did not pass a SOL test in math or reading. Three participants related this to SWDs, who based on individual learning challenges may not have met the SOL standard but had nonetheless made progress. At the same time the participants indicated that this system of accountability was beneficial to the morale of teachers in that it recognized their effort in working with students with high deficiencies. Many of the participants indicated that some students started the school year with significant deficiencies based on previous year's SOL assessments. In the case of SWDs, participants reported that many of these students had SOL scores in math and reading that ranged from the mid-200 to mid-300. While participants indicated that the goal was for all students to meet or exceed the pass score, counting growth for these students helped to paint an accurate picture of school efforts to support all students.

Participants also expressed benefits in the addition of an attendance indicator. All of the participants expressed that students need to be at school in order to learn. One participant even mentioned that for at risk students, school was probably a safer environment than the home environments. Participants also indicated that identifying and overcoming barriers to student attendance was still a challenge.

Additionally, one secondary school administrator indicated that the Career and Technical Education (CTE) indicator were beneficial. This participant expressed that in

previous years there had been so much of a focus on SOL testing, that in many cases, CTE classes were ignored and, in some ways devalued. The participant indicated that in the case of secondary school, there was a population that was not interested in attending college and that CTE classes had more meaning than core classes. The College and Career Indicator recognized the work and efforts of CTE teachers and their efforts to prepare students for work settings after high school.

Many of the principals not only expressed the benefit of the attendance indicators, but also indicated specific initiatives to increase attendance. At the same time, principals expressed difficulty in addressing the smaller percentages of students that were chronically absent. In three cases, participants indicated that in most instances students who are chronically absent have parents that do not value school attendance. Changing these mindsets for students and parents is difficult. Both secondary and elementary equally saw the attendance indicator as beneficial. Of the seven schools included in this study, four elementary participants found it beneficial and two secondary principals found it beneficial. Only one secondary participant found the attendance indicator as not being beneficial.

**Participant understanding of ESSA Policy.** The ESSA policy is an action or proposed action intended to achieve goals and objectives related to student achievement. The implementation stage of a policy is the most crucial in meeting these goals (Kraft & Furlong, 2019). As such, the implementers, in this case school division personnel, require adequate knowledge and understanding of the components of the policy in order to take

action in ways that will realize desired outcomes. The majority of the principals indicated that they were not fully prepared to implement the policy at the onset.

Four of the seven participants stated that they learned about ESSA policies on their own. The participants indicated that they learned about ESSA by completing independent research which included searching the VDOE website or by reading about it. This theme demonstrates a disjointed understanding of the policy among the participants. One elementary participant stated: “most of the information I have comes through articles on social media and e-mail blasts I receive through professional organizations.” Another principal stated, “I learned about [ESSA] through reading.” A third elementary principal indicated that she learned about it from professional organization publication and that her knowledge was extended by a “colleague that was interested in the policy.”

An analysis of the interviews suggested that elementary principals researched this more than secondary principals. The interview also revealed that principals that learned about ESSA and the specific implementation in Virginia worked in schools that had smaller achievement gaps for African American and economically disadvantaged students. However, even when there was higher evidence of principals researching ESSA independently, larger gaps were present for SWDs.

Like NCLB, the goal of ESSA is to promote equity by requiring schools to meet benchmarks for specific gap groups. The Virginia implementation of ESSA places a highlighted focus on gap group achievement in annual school quality reports. The achievement of gap groups is further highlighted by green (Level 1), yellow (Level 2), and red (Level 3) designations. Under the current Virginia implementation of ESSA, a

school could feasibly have strong overall achievement in reading and math but lose “accreditation” status because of continuous low gap group achievement.

An analysis of interviews indicated that principals were cognizant of the ESSA requirements regarding gap group achievement. In conducted interviews more than half of the principals indicated an understanding of these requirements. Of the principals interviewed, there was a recognition that not meeting benchmarks for specific gaps groups could lead to a school losing accreditation. An analysis of the data indicated secondary and elementary principals recognized these gaps.

Analysis also suggested that schools with smaller gaps in reading and math for economically disadvantaged students were led by principals who were cognizant of this requirement. However, this was not the case for African American students and SWDs. Schools in which principals were cognizant of this policy requirement still had large or medium gaps for African American and SWDs in reading and math.

**Focus on social emotional learning as an intervention.** Research suggests that interventions targeting students’ social emotional learning can increase achievement for at risk students (Jones & Schindler, 2016). Additionally, the Virginia Implementation of ESSA promotes social emotional learning in the interest of supporting all students. Like the document review of ESPs, four of the participants interviewed provided examples of social emotional learning through VTSS, Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS), and support from outside agencies to support students with social emotional needs. This also correlated with findings from the document review of the ESPs.

An analysis of the principal responses indicated that the principals that found social emotional learning to be beneficial led schools that had smaller gaps for African American student in math and reading. Similarly, these schools showed smaller achievement gaps for economically disadvantaged students. The details were not specific. In the majority of these cases schools indicated that VTSS or PBIS initiatives. This included common definitions of how disciplinary expectations. On the elementary and middle school level, principals cited incentive plans. However, only two schools indicated specific goals regarding how these initiatives would be measured.

**Evaluation Question #3**

*What are the recommendations from principals regarding improving the school level implementation of ESSA to support increased achievement for including minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?*

Interviews were used to answer this question. Four themes were identified from these interviews: Alternative accountability measures to gauge the achievement of SWDs, guidance in reducing chronic absenteeism, guidance in increasing gap group achievement, and additional resources to support the requirements of ESSA. Table 9 outlines the qualitative evidence found for the themes identified in this evaluation question.

Table 9

*Table of Qualitative Evidence of Identified Themes for Evaluation Question 3*

School	Additional Support for Attendance	Alternative Accountability Measures	More Guidance in Increasing Gap Group Achievement	Additional Resources
ES2	1	0	0	1
ES3	0	1	0	0

ES4	0	0	0	0
ES5	1	1	2	2
SS1	0	1	1	2
SS2	1	0	0	0
SS3	0	0	1	1

**Alternative accountability measures to gauge the achievement of SWDs.**

Three participants expressed a need for further accountability measures beyond SOL testing. Participants recognized that while there were accountability indicators outside of testing, that more were needed. When considering SWDs, principals expressed more accountability measures that recognize growth for SWDs. Specifically, participants expressed a need for alternate assessments to adequately gauge growth for SWDs. They also expressed assessments that would reflect school efforts to support SWDs despite the high levels of academic deficiencies that they perceived SWDs to have regarding learning. They also mentioned a need for further alternative accountability measures to gauge the performance of SWDs outside of SOL testing. One participant mentioned value in the Virginia Grade Level Alternative (VGLA). This participant felt it was appropriate measure for SWDs. However, this same participant was cognizant that this had been problematic because some schools had taken advantage of it and used to VGLA to “assess every special education student.” This was a practice that the participant admitted was not fair to students, but suggested that there be a measure to regulate this.

**Guidance and support for reducing chronic absenteeism.** Attendance is component of student success. When considering at risk groups, attendance is critical in closing achievement gaps. Chronic absenteeism was addressed under NCLB as a second indicator for elementary and middle schools to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP).

Under the new ESSA requirements in Virginia, chronic absenteeism has become an indicator for all schools to meet accreditation. Specifically, schools cannot have a chronic absenteeism rate above 15% (Virginia Department of Education, 2020).

Secondary principals cited a new division policy that indicates that students cannot pass a class if they are chronically absent. The enforcement of this policy, which also mandates that parents are contacted when students receive a certain number of absences, was beneficial. When interviewed, principals cited the enforcement of this policy as a strategy to increase attendance particularly on the secondary level. At the same time, three principals also felt home environment and parents were a factor in increasing attendance. Considering this as a factor, principals expressed additional support or guidance in addressing students who were chronically absent. Three principals indicated difficulty in addressing chronic absenteeism for students whose parents did not value regular attendance at school.

**Guidance in increasing SWDs achievement.** Although all of the schools were fully accredited, gaps in achievement existed for at least one gap group in almost all schools. A review of ESPs as well as interviews with principals suggested that there was a recognition of gap groups in their schools. Moreover, principals were aware of the ESSA requirements in Virginia regarding gap group achievement and state accreditation. Additionally, principals were able to articulate specific initiatives to increase achievement for gap groups.

Still, principals expressed further guidance in addressing the challenges of closing achievement gaps. This was particularly the case for SWDs. Principals discussed

progress monitoring and data analysis procedures as a means to increase achievement for SWDs. They also mentioned using specialists to support SWDs. However, principals mentioned that those initiatives did little to close gap groups. While the initiatives that principals were using seemed to be closing gaps for African American and economically disadvantaged students, these initiatives did not seem to address the needs of SWDs and the majority of participants expressed to be at a sense of loss in closing these gaps.

**Additional resources to support the requirements of ESSA.** Four of seven principals recognized the alternative accountability measures. They also were cognizant of additional requirement to increase gap group achievement. However, the participants all expressed a feeling that this policy required them to do more with less resources. Interestingly, the participants were not asking for additional teaching positions. Many of the participants were asking for additional positions such as resources to address the needs of students. This included resources to ensure that all students had access to technology. Again, this was related to the achievement of SWDs. Principals expressed additional resources to support the achievement of SWDs. In three cases, participants expressed a need for additional teachers and personnel to support the needs of SWDs. One participant expressed the need for additional after school programs to support all students with particular needs. This included instructional programs that would support the academic needs of students who had excessive deficiencies.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study included two data sources to answer how the Virginia implementation of ESSA was being accomplished in a rural school division. A document review of ESPs

provided insight about the extent to which the plans reflected aspects of the accountability system outlined in the state's ESSA policy, specifically the types of initiatives used to meet the policy goals to close achievement gaps. Participant interviews generated perception data related to fidelity of Virginia's implementation of ESSA in their schools, as well as recommendations for improvement.

Overall, the ESPs reflected aspects of the policy were being addressed in the areas of established goals and initiatives targeting gap group achievement. All of the school plans included research-based approaches for addressing low achievement, such as teacher collaboration, frequent use of formative assessments, social emotional learning interventions, and strategies for promoting student attendance. These action steps align with the components of the Virginia ESSA policy on accountability. Schools that had strong evidence of these components along with detailed process steps for implementing them had lower gaps in achievement for African American students and economically disadvantaged students. However, in the same schools there were larger achievement gaps for SWDs.

As policy implementers, the participants have a high stake in the outcomes. Each participant was cognizant of the requirements of ESSA and were fully aware of the status of gap groups in their schools. Overall, they found the addition of alternative indicators of attendance and growth bands as beneficial. The participants indicated that growth bands gave an accurate picture of the efforts to support low achieving and at-risk students. Growth bands were particularly beneficial in illustrating the growth of students with high deficiencies. The attendance indicator was also seen as beneficial. When

discussing attendance, participants essentially recognized that students needed to be at school to learn. At the same time, the participants expressed difficulty in addressing the small populations of students that were chronically absent.

There was also evidence of principals implementing social emotional learning. A similar pattern was found in the analysis in that principals that expressed social emotional learning as beneficial and took action to employ specific initiatives to promote this in their schools had smaller achievement gaps for African American and economically disadvantaged students. However, these same schools had larger achievement gaps for SWDs.

When looking at principal recommendations, a major theme was additional alternative measures. Principals recognized and saw the benefits of the additional accountability measure of chronic absenteeism. They also saw the benefits of growth bands. However, principals recommended additional alternative assessments. In several instances, principals recommended additional alternative measures to indicate growth for SWDs. Furthermore, principals recommended more guidance in increasing achievement for gap groups. But in almost all cases, principals identified SWDs as more of a concern than African American and economically disadvantaged. They suggested that while many of the current initiatives were increasing achievement for African American and economically disadvantaged students, their schools still struggled with achievement for SWDs. Principals also recommended further resources to support the achievement of SWDs.

The document review and interviews both suggest that principals are cognizant of ESSA requirements and there is evidence of goals and initiatives to increase gap group achievement. In several cases, the schools that had higher evidence of goals to increase gap group achievement, specific goals to close achievement gaps, and social emotional learning had smaller achievement gaps for African American students and economically disadvantaged students. However, these schools and their principals still struggle to close achievement gaps for SWDs.

This analysis suggests that schools are attempting to consider the achievement of gap groups. These initiatives are having an impact on economically disadvantaged students and African American students. However, principals and schools still seem to struggle with the achievement of SWDs. This analysis can have implications for the implementation of ESSA in Virginia and policy recommendations.

## CHAPTER 5

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Discussion of Findings**

A review of the literature identifies several causes for achievement gaps. The most prominent cause of achievement gaps is poverty (Lacour & Tissington, 2011). In relation to poverty, limited learning opportunities, re-segregation of students as well as a limited access to qualified teacher all work cause achievement gaps for economically disadvantaged students, minorities and SWDs (Darling-Hammond, 2015). These factors are reflected in the achievement of economically disadvantaged students and minority students. Schools can play a critical role in mitigating these disadvantages by providing high quality educational experiences for all students.

The purpose of this qualitative evaluation of the implementation of the accountability policy in a rural school division was intended to examine the school level approach to addressing the components of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) in Virginia. Principals, as key implementers of the policy, were asked about their knowledge of the policy and their perceptions as to the benefits of this new system of school accountability. Through a pragmatic approach, the purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the policy as it is implemented in practice and to provide

useful guidance to stakeholders and policymakers responsible for reporting on the success of the policy.

The context of this study reflected some of the points identified in the literature review related to middle to high achieving schools and efforts to close the achievement gaps between underachieving target populations and achieving peer groups. While this particular school division was a high achieving, achievement gaps still existed. The achievement of economically disadvantaged students, African American students and SWDs lagged behind the achievement of white students and the general population.

While achievement gaps continue to plague schools, a synthesis of literature indicates that despite the challenging factors that exist in modern schools, best practices or strategies can work to promote success for all students and to close achievement gaps (Leithwood et al., 2010). A review of literature suggests that when schools have effective leadership, implement systems of collaboration, and utilize frequent assessments, achievement gaps can be closed (Hayes, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2010; Reeves, 2003).

The results of this study identify that in a number of cases, principals in this school division are not only responding to the requirements of ESSA but are also implementing initiatives to close achievement gaps. The higher qualitative evidence of principals and schools utilizing frequent assessments, implementing opportunities for teachers to regularly collaborate and social emotional learning were the same schools with smaller achievement gaps for African American and economically disadvantaged students. To add, when principals and schools recognized gap groups in their contexts,

created specific goals and initiatives to close gap group achievement, African American and economically disadvantaged achievement gaps seemed to close. At the same time, schools that had small achievement gaps for African American and economically disadvantaged students continued to have large gaps for SWDs.

The focus of school improvement plans must support the efforts of closing achievement gaps. Schools must be intentional and practices that support closing achievement gaps must be included in closing achievement gaps. In addition, school improvement plans must have intentional and specific steps to address achievement gaps (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014; Cleveland & Sink, 2017; Fernandez, 2011; Huber & Conway, 2015). The schools that participated in this study reflected in their ESPs consideration of economically disadvantaged students, African American students, and SWDs in their specific context. Moreover, the schools reflected in this study had intentional goals with specific steps to close these gaps.

There is considerable literature that supports the notion that SOL testing should not be a main or sole component in accountability systems (Close et al., 2018; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; R. Smith & Lowery, 2017). Rather, there should be multiple measures that give a more accurate picture of schools and performance. The current Virginia implementation of ESSA has measures outside of SOL testing to be included when evaluating overall school effectiveness. These measures include a graduation completion index and an attendance indicator. The graduation completion index measures the percentage of students receiving a board recognized diploma, GED, still in school, or a certificate of completion. These different categories of completion have varying values

with board recognized diploma having the highest value. The chronic absenteeism indicator measures the number of students that are absent more than 10% of the year. A school cannot have more than 15% of its total population as identified as chronically absent. Moreover, the current school accountability system in Virginia also has growth bands to considers student growth on the elementary and middle school levels.

In both the ESPs and participant interviews there was evidence that these aspects were part of the planning and consideration in schools. The effective school plans were examined had specific goals of increasing attendance. Moreover, principals indicated that growth bands were beneficial in reflecting the work students with high deficiencies and the teachers that worked with them. The one high school participant also indicated that CTE highlighted the learning of students taking these courses.

Interestingly, the schools that had higher qualitative evidence of strategies to close achievement gaps had smaller gaps for economically disadvantaged students and African American students. However, these same schools had larger gaps for SWDs. As a result, principals recommended additional support and guidance in increasing achievement for SWDs. Moreover, principals recommended alternative assessments to measure the growth of SWDs. And finally, principal recommended for additional guidance and support for reducing chronic absenteeism.

The literature indicates that since NCLB, the goal of accountability policy has been to close achievement gaps (Herrera et al., 2017). However, as a policy, NCLB fell short of its expectations in that it focused solely on standardized testing as a means of evaluating schools in closing achievement gaps (N. Smith & Wright, 2017). Like NCLB,

the goal of ESSA is to close achievement gaps. In contrast, ESSA gives flexibility to states in closing achievement gaps and allows for multiple measures for success. A synthesis of literature indicates that accountability policies should include multiple measures to gauge the success of schools (Close et al., 2018; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; R. Smith & Lowery, 2017). As ESSA allows for multiple measures of evaluation it is an opportunity to change how schools are evaluated and how success of gap groups is defined. While the Virginia Implementation of ESSA has multiple measures to gauge student success such as growth bands and indicator for chronic absenteeism, the principal recommendations for further alternative measures to gauge the success of SWDs can have implications for policy.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The results of this study indicate that principals are cognizant of the requirements of ESSA. It also indicates that principals and schools in this rural school division are attempting to implement initiatives to close achievement gaps. This includes initiatives that are specific to close achievement gaps. This also includes teacher collaboration, a frequent use of assessments, and the implementation of social emotional learning. The schools that had the higher evidence these components also had smaller achievement gaps for economically disadvantaged and African American students. However, the larger gaps remain persistent in the same schools. The results of this study indicate that principals are recommending further alternative measures to gauge the performance of SWDs, additional measures for social emotional learning (SEL), additional technical assistance in reducing chronic absenteeism and additional professional development in

outlining the overall expectations of ESSA in Virginia. Table 10 outlines the findings and recommendations the correlating recommendations for practice and policy.

Table 10

*Findings and Related Recommendations for Policy and Practice*

Findings	Related Recommendations
Schools included specific goals and steps to close achievement gaps. These steps included teacher collaboration and a frequent use of assessments. While gaps seem to close for African American and economically disadvantaged students, significant gaps still exist for SWDs.	Alternative measures should be created for SWDs to measure growth and improvements.
Principals believe that social emotional learning is beneficial in supporting at risk students.	Additional alternative measures should be implemented in the Virginia implementation of ESSA to include social emotional learning.
Principals recommend additional guidance in strategies and initiatives in lowering chronic absenteeism and increasing achievement for SWDs.	The school division and principals should seek to have a further understanding of students who are chronically absent and explore high yield interventions for chronic absenteeism.
Principals recommend additional guidance in strategies and initiatives in lowering chronic absenteeism and increasing achievement for SWDs.	VTSS efforts should focus on addressing disproportionality specifically for African American students and SWDs. Consider alternate assessments for SWDs

*Note.* SWDs = Students with Disabilities; SEA = State Educational Agency ; LEA = Local Educational Agency; ESSA = Every Student Succeeds Act ; PD = Professional Development

*What are the recommendations from principals regarding improving the school level implementation of ESSA to support increased achievement for including minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?*

**Alternative measures should be created for SWDs to measure growth and improvements.** Mathis & Trujillo (2016) suggest that school accountability policy must allow for multiple indicators for success. To add high stakes testing as a sole means of gauging school effectiveness is not good practice regarding policy. Rather, policy must consider multiple measures of growth including growth.

The results of this study indicate that principals are implementing initiatives that relate to closing achievement gaps. And while these initiatives seem to have an impact on achievement gaps for African American and economically disadvantaged students, the gaps for SWDs remain. A policy recommendation would be to include further alternative measures to gauge the progress of SWDs. Some examples of alternate assessments of progress could possibly be the Virginia Grade Level Assessment (VGLA) or further portfolio assessments to assess SWDs. Principals viewed the VGLA as a more appropriate means of assessing and measuring achievement for SWDs. At the same time, they were cognizant of that the VGLA was previously exhausted as a means to assess SWDs and that is reason why it is not part of the present accountability system. A further policy recommendation would be to use the VGLA as an assessment for SWDs, but to place appropriate restrictions for use. Many of the principals interviewed indicated that as SWDs learn differently, they should be assessed differently as well.

*To what degree of fidelity do individual school improvement plans align with the components of ESSA relating to accountability and increasing the achievement of student groups, including minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?*

**Additional alternative measures should be implemented in the Virginia implementation of ESSA to include SEL.** Social emotional learning can be beneficial in supporting gap groups or at-risk students. While there are clearly academic needs that should be addressed in schools, at risk populations also have several social emotional needs that should be addressed (Zinskie & Rea 2016). When considering that students from low social economic backgrounds are more likely to have disciplinary incidents

than students that do not come from impoverished backgrounds, the need for social emotional learning becomes even more imperative (Lacour & Tissington, 2011). These SEL initiatives include programs that teach students correct behaviors as well school wide norms. They also include programs that provide preventions or alternative to disciplinary referrals. While research indicates that elementary schools are more likely to have these programs, they become less evident on the secondary level (Kostyo et al., 2018).

Overwhelmingly, in this study, ESPs that had higher evidence of SEL initiatives had smaller achievement gaps for African American and economically disadvantaged students. Additionally, principals who expressed the benefits of SEL initiatives, had smaller gaps for reading and math for African American and economically disadvantaged students. This suggests that SEL initiatives can have an impact on closing achievement gaps in school settings (Cleveland & Sink, 2017; Kostyo et al., 2018).

The Virginia Implementation of ESSA recommends and encourages the use of social emotional learning initiatives in schools. A further policy recommendation is to include an indicator that measures the implementation of social emotional learning in school settings. This policy alternative could not only emphasize the importance of implementing SEL initiatives, but also have an impact on addressing disproportionality regarding reported disciplinary incidents and ultimately closing achievement gaps.

*What are principals' beliefs about the potential benefits and liabilities of the implementation of ESSA regarding school improvement, including increasing achievement for minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?*

**The school division and principals should seek to have further understanding of students who are chronically absent.** Mathis and Trujillo (2016) identify attendance as an additional component outside of testing. Attendance is a critical factor in student achievement. It is even more a critical factor regarding the achievement of at-risk students. ESSA prioritizes attendance as a factor in closing achievement gaps.

ESPs that were reviewed in this study, identified evidence of specific initiatives to close achievement gaps. Schools with higher evidence of these initiatives had smaller achievement gaps for economically disadvantaged and African American students. In addition, the principals that were interviewed identified the benefits of the current Virginia ESSA policy emphasizing attendance. However, these same principals identified lowering chronic absenteeism as difficult. This was particularly the case on the secondary level. In several cases, principals identified a population of students that were chronically absent. Despite various initiatives, several principals identified parents as not putting an emphasis on regular school attendance. Supporting these students in meeting attendance requirements was something that principals identified as an obstacle. A practice alternative can be for principals to gain a further understanding of the reasons for chronic absenteeism. In this particular school division, there is a small population of students that are chronically absent. Principals should also use further understandings of needs of these students and their families to support improved attendance.

*To what degree of fidelity do individual school improvement plans align with the components of ESSA relating to accountability and increasing the achievement of student groups, including minority students, low-SES students, and SWDs?*

**VTSS efforts should include cultural competency initiatives to focus on addressing disproportionality specifically for gap groups.** The school division included in this study has gaps in achievement for African American, economically disadvantaged students and SWDs. While there seems to be a pattern of closing achievement gaps for African American and economically disadvantaged students, these gaps remain consistent for SWDs.

A further review of the school division data indicates that disproportionality of discipline referrals exists for African American and SWDs. While these students make up smaller portions of the general population, they account for disproportionately higher levels of discipline incidents and suspensions. Discipline incidents and referrals are linked to lower achievement (Kostyo et al., 2018).

Cross (1988) emphasizes the importance of cultural competence in the organizations. First, it allows for stakeholders to be aware of themselves. Secondly, it allows an organization to recognize and accept differences. Finally, it allows stakeholders to understand the dynamics of differences. By gaining cultural proficiency, stakeholders understand that not addressing inequities ultimately have a detrimental effect on the organization.

While VTSS efforts are indicated in the ESPs, they mainly focus on efforts to teach common disciplinary expectations and incentives for the general population. The schools in study should be more intentional in their efforts to close achievement gaps for African American and economically disadvantaged students. The division should

examine staff and faculty perceptions of African American and SWDs. Cultural Competency should be included to address issues of disproportionality in school division.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

#### **Examine fidelity of implementation of initiatives to close achievement gaps.**

The schools that participated in this study had a number of initiatives that were intended to close achievement gaps. This included a frequent use of assessments as well as collaborative opportunities for teachers. Schools also identified VTSS efforts to decrease referrals by teaching common disciplinary expectations. The findings of this study could be further examined by exploring the fidelity of implementation of strategies and initiatives that are listed in ESPs.

A mixed methods study could be used to examine how classroom interventions, teacher meetings, as well as VTSS efforts are being implemented at the building level. This investigation could include teacher perceptions as well as classroom achievement data to provide information regarding effectiveness of these initiatives and how to improve them to close achievement gaps.

#### **Examine teacher perceptions of gap group achievement in low minority and economically disadvantaged schools.**

Principal beliefs are a critical factor regarding the direction of a school and even more critical regarding the achievement of gap groups. Teacher beliefs and attitudes are equally important in the overall direction of achievement, learning and school culture. Teacher beliefs are also important regarding student achievement for gap groups. Specifically, the efficacy that teachers have regarding students who come from low social economic environments and the

expectations they have for learning and achievement are critical for these students (Miller & Lee, 2014; Torres et al., 2008; Versland & Erickson, 2017).

While the schools in this study had somewhat higher populations of students identified in gap groups, there would be benefit in examining teacher perceptions of minority students and economically disadvantaged students in schools that have lower populations of minority and economically disadvantaged students. This research could reveal a school's capacity to close achievement gaps despite meeting state accreditation standards. Even more so, it could reveal the challenges and work that leaders must take to close achievement gaps. This study could also determine the level of cultural competency of teacher and the school division. The level of cultural competency could be linked to disproportionality regarding discipline and could support VTSS efforts to further close achievement gaps.

### **Summary**

Literature characterizes the implementation of ESSA on the state level as an opportunity to not only close gaps in achievement, but to also transform how schools are evaluated in meeting the needs of all students (Fleischman et al., 2016; Gayl, 2017; Sampson & Horsford, 2017; Saultz et al., 2017; Zinskie & Rea, 2016). In relation to this, Virginia has implemented a framework of ESSA that involves multiple measures of student success outside of standardized testing. These measures include a graduation completer index, a chronic absenteeism indicator, and growth bands. A college, career readiness, and workplace readiness indicator is also a part of the Virginia implementation of ESSA.

This study revealed that all of the schools in this rural district are implementing research proven initiatives. A common pattern was that teacher collaboration structures, formative assessments, and social emotional learning were found in ESPs. While showing an impact on closing achievement gaps for African American students and students from low social economic backgrounds, gaps for SWDs remain persistent. As such, the principal recommendations for further alternative measures to gauge student success for SWDs could be an important policy recommendation in accurately meeting the needs of SWDs and measuring learning.

Issues with chronic attendance continues to be a challenge for schools and principals seek strategies to reverse this trend. In the school division that was studied, only one school was not at Level 1 for attendance. A document review of ESPs revealed that most of the schools have initiatives to reduce chronic absenteeism. However, when principals were interviewed, they indicated smaller groups of students that were chronically absent in their schools. Principals perceive that these students usually have parents who may not see the value of regular attendance. The recommendation to provide technical assistance to schools to address the achievement of at-risk students could further support gap groups and increase overall achievement for students.

Finally, the ESSA policy aims to increase the achievement of all students by encouraging schools to address social emotional learning. The schools involved in this study presented several initiatives to promote social emotional learning, such as VTSS programs and PBIS initiatives. When considering the various social emotional needs of at-risk students, the addition of an indicator that measures schools' implementation of

social emotional learning programs may shine a brighter light on this important aspect of student readiness for learning.

As an opportunity to change and transform how schools are evaluated, the Virginia implementation of ESSA must have a continuous focus on ensuring equity by requiring schools to close achievement gaps. The promotion of equity in schools is a critical component in ensuring that all students are successful, but also ensuring that students can be competitive globally. While the Virginia implementation of ESSA has adopted several practices that seem to be occurring in this rural school division, additional local and state policy alternatives can further promote equity and transform how schools perform.

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Protocol

**Basic Information.** The interviewer will record the following information:

- The name of the Principal
- The name of the school
- The place and time of the interview
- Number of years as a principal
- The number of years the principal has served in this particular school.
- The number of years of administrative experience
- Other schools

### Introduction

- The interviewer will introduce himself:
  - “Good afternoon! My name is Craig Reed and I am a third year Executive Ed.D. student at William & Mary. I am currently a principal in the school district.
- The interviewer will give the purpose of the study:
  - “The purpose of this study is to examine the implementation of ESSA in Virginia in schools in a rural district. Specifically, the goal is to examine how schools work to increase achievement for minorities, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities (SWDs). This interview will record your perceptions and recommendations regarding the Virginia implementation of ESSA”

### Norms

Before we begin, I’d like to share several norms:

- There are no right or wrong answers.
- Please do not identify other people by name. You may refer to them instead as “a student” or “a principal” or “a teacher.”
- In order to maintain confidentiality, please do not share or discuss with others the specific ideas or information shared in this session.

### Opening Question

- Tell me about your school.
  - *What makes your school unique?*

## Content Questions

The interviewer will ask the following questions. The responses of the interviewee will be recorded. Later, a transcription will be created for coding.

1. Tell me what you know about the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).
2. How have you learned about it?
3. Tell me what you know about the current Virginia system of accreditation.
4. What do you know about the differences between the previous accreditation system under NCLB and the current school accreditation system?
5. Has the implementation of the current accountability system influenced the school improvement process at your school? If so, in what ways?
6. What factors do you perceive to contribute to achievement gaps for African American students, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students in your school?
7. Describe how the use of growth bands has affected the overall reporting of achievement for your school.
8. Have growth bands impacted the reporting of gap group achievement. Has it impacted your choice of initiatives in your school improvement plan?
9. Describe specific initiatives or interventions that are being implemented in your school to increase achievement for minority students, low SES students and students with disabilities to close achievement gaps.
10. Tell me about initiatives in your school that support minority, economically disadvantaged students, and SWDs to access more rigorous learning.
11. What has been the evidence of increased achievement at your school?
12. What do you perceive to be the benefits of the current accountability system over the short term? Long term?
13. Do you perceive there to be any challenges to the implementation of the current accountability system?

14. What changes or recommendations would you make to the current accreditation system to address the improved achievement of African American students, economically disadvantaged students and SWDs?
15. Do you feel prepared to implement the current accountability system at your school?
  - a. Why or why not?
  - b. What type(s) of support would assist you in implementing and responding to the expectations in the current accountability system at your school?
16. Do you believe that the attendance rating in the current accountability system is beneficial?
17. Do you believe that the social emotional learning initiatives in your school will close achievement gaps?

### **Probing Questions**

1. “Can you tell me more?”
2. “I need more detail.”
3. “Can you explain your response more?”

### **Closing Instructions**

- Thank the interviewee
- Insure Confidentiality
- Ask if another interview is possible, if necessary

If I have any questions or problems that may arise as a result of my participation in the study, I understand that I should contact Craig Reed, the researcher at 804-536-1219 or [Cbreed@email.wm.edu](mailto:Cbreed@email.wm.edu) or Dr. Margaret Constantino, his dissertation chair at 757-221-2323 or [meconstantino@wm.edu](mailto:meconstantino@wm.edu) or Dr. Tom Ward, chair of EDIRC, at 757-221-2358 or [EDIRC-L@wm.edu](mailto:EDIRC-L@wm.edu).

My signature below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I have received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to participating in this research study.

DATE \_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in a research study to examine how schools are implementing elements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), to improve learning and to close achievement gaps.

This project was found to comply with appropriate ethical standards and was exempted from the need for formal review by the College of William and Mary Protection of Human Subjects Committee (Phone 757-221-3966) on November 11, 2019 and expires on November 11, 2020.

I understand that all GCPS principals, including the superintendent and assistant superintendent of schools, will be asked and have the opportunity to participate in the action research process as members of the GCPS, and that my participation in the study is purposeful and voluntary. Data collection will be ongoing throughout the cycle from November 11, 2019 to November 11, 2020. Data collection methods will include personal journals maintained by each of the participants to be shared with the researcher. All members of the GCPS will also have the opportunity to participate in structured and unstructured interviews that are conducted one to one between the participant and researcher, based on participant interest.

I understand that the interviewer has been trained in the research of human subjects, my responses will be confidential, and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. I understand that the data will be collected using an audio recording device and then transcribed for analysis. Information from the audio recording and transcription will be safeguarded so my identity will never be disclosed. My true identity will not be associated with the research findings. I understand that there is no known risk or discomfort directly involved with this research and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time. I agree that should I choose to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the study that I will notify the researcher listed below, in writing. A decision not to participate in the study or to withdraw from the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher, the College of William & Mary generally or the School of Education, specifically.

If I have any questions or problems that may arise as a result of my participation in the study, I understand that I should contact Craig Reed, the researcher, at phone number: 804-536-1219 and/or email at: [cbreed@emailwm.edu](mailto:cbreed@emailwm.edu). I understand that I may also contact the Chair, Dr. Peggie Constantino at 757-221-2323 and/or email at [meconstantino@wm.edu](mailto:meconstantino@wm.edu). You may also contact Dr. Tom Ward at (757) 221-2358 or [EDIRC-L@wm.edu](mailto:EDIRC-L@wm.edu). My signature below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I have received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to participate in this research study.

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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## VITA

Craig Bernard Reed received a Bachelors' degree in English Arts from Hampton University in 1994. In 1995, he received his teaching certification for English Education from Longwood University. He also has a Masters' Degree in Educational Policy Planning and Leadership from William & Mary. He taught English for nine years. He also has extensive administrative experience. He has served as an assistant principal on the middle and high school levels. He has also served as a principal in two middle schools and two high schools. His Educational Doctorate was conferred May 2020.