Lessons Learned: How Early College High Schools Offer a Pathway for High School Reform

Theodore Stefan Kaniuka[1] and Melinda Vickers[1]

Abstract

In 2002, Early College High Schools Initiative became a reality across the United States for students and educators looking for ways to improve student graduation rates, college attendance, and overall student achievement. This mixed method case study found that (a) the early college high school environment supported the academic success of disadvantaged and underrepresented students, (b) during subsequent conversations with teachers, students, and the administration, it was revealed that these stakeholders readily identified critical success factors, and (c) there was a high degree of agreement on what these factors were—high expectations, purposeful actions, and meaningful relationships.

What We Currently Know About the Early College Initiative

In 2002, the first early college high schools began to appear in the United States as an answer for improving the postsecondary opportunities for traditionally underrepresented youth under the umbrella of the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI; Hoffman & Webb, 2009; Jobs for the Future [JFF], 2009). As designed, these high schools offer students a rigorous curriculum, on completion of which the students will

[1]Fayetteville State University, Fayetteville, NC, USA

Corresponding Author:
Theodore Stefan Kaniuka, 1200 Murchison Road, Butler Building, Fayetteville, NC 28301, USA
Email: tkaniuka@uncfsu.edu

have earned a high school diploma and either an associates degree or college credits. The mission of these schools was clear—to address the nagging reality that minorities are less likely to attend college than other students; and for those doing so, far fewer minority males access postsecondary education than minority females (American Council on Education [ACE], 2006). Despite the relative success of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in closing achievement gaps (Lee, 2006) and in improving the graduation rates of some minorities (Center on Education Policy [CEP], 2009; Bernstein, Millsap, Schimmenti, & Page, 2008), the disparities as defined by race and gender persist. The achievement gap remains an elusive and persistent challenge and is further complicated by the fact that nationally little or no progress has been made in helping traditionally underrepresented students achieve college readiness.

There is a paucity of published research examining the effectiveness of early college high schools. An evaluation conducted by the American Institutes for Research and SRI International (2006) examined a random sample of early college high schools to determine the degree to which these schools have remained true to the original core principles. It was found that the schools are adhering to the original core principles (JFF, 2002) and the schools are considered to be generally successful in providing a rigorous curriculum based on the new three Rs (rigor, relevance, relationships), serving minority youth, and developing learning communities. The National High School Center (2007) in a report focusing on dual enrollment curricula and opportunities for students summarized some of the research on the ECHSI. Although scant, the research clearly showed that traditionally underserved populations are being served and that school attendance has improved.

A related body of research to the work on the ECHSI is that of the small high school reform movement as nearly all early college high schools are significantly smaller than traditional high schools. Small high schools vary in design but are typically characterized as a high school that (a) is college prep in nature, with nonselective enrollment, (b) has no more than 400 to 500 students, and (c) opens the first year with ninth grade only. The results from the research on small high schools have not been consistently positive as Kahne, Sporte, de la Torre, and Easton (2008) found in their evaluation of the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative. Results were seen as inconsistent such that (a) small schools did not offer a stronger instructional climate, (b) nor did these small schools improve student achievement, and (c) students also reported very different experiences and degrees of success as a result of the school they attended. These results were consistent with findings of Bernstein et al. (2008) as they reported some positives for students attending smaller high schools but generally the results for small high schools have not been consistently linked to improvements in student performance.

Taken as a whole, the research on ECHSI lacks what Fleishman and Heppen (2009) argue is needed; that is, evidence-based reforms are required to meet the goals contained in current reform policies with the purpose of providing educators with reliable choices. What is currently needed in the existing body of research on the ECHSI is

empirical data demonstrating the effect on student performance and the achievement gap. This case study will look at one early college high school to determine to what degree this school is affecting student performance and attempt to develop some understanding as to why.

The School

This study endeavored to address the dearth of research on the performance of students attending early college high schools by reporting on one early college high school, Cross Creek Early College High School (CCECHS) in Cumberland County, North Carolina. Cross Creek was one of the 13 early college schools opened in North Carolina in the 2005-2006 school year as a collaborative model between the CCECHS and Fayetteville State University (FSU) housed in the School of Education building on the FSU campus. CCECHS was developed as a means to provide Cumberland County students a high school experience that allows an alternative way to earn college credit. Consistent with the early college initiative, CCECHS was designed to provide traditionally underrepresented youth (prospective first-generation college students and minorities) with exposure to an academically demanding course of study. This course of study includes only honors-level instruction for North Carolina Department of Public Instruction courses, and students are able to attend select FSU undergraduate classes. A student in this environment could earn up to 60 college level credits in 4 years in addition to earning a high school diploma.

During the 2008-2009 school year, CCECHS served a population of 268 students from all areas of Cumberland County in Grades 9 to 12. The student population at CCECHS reported in percentages was as follows: 70.1% Black, 16% White, 6.4% multiracial, 6.7% Hispanic, and 0.4% American Indian and Asian. Cumberland County Schools served a student population of 52% Black, 37% White, 7% Hispanic, and 2% American Indian and Asian. Examining gender, Cumberland County served 51% male and 49% female, and CCECHS served 34% male and 66% female. Generally consistent with the school system's overall poverty as measured by the percentage of the student population receiving free or reduced lunch services, over 56% of Cross Creek students receive free or reduced lunch services demonstrating that the school population can be considered low wealth. Clearly, Cross Creek had a student body, which represented traditionally underserved students as defined by race, gender, and wealth.

Research Questions

To establish the current level of academic performance and provide insight as to those factors contributing to the success of the school, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How does the academic performance of the students attending an early college high school compare with the performance of similar students who attend traditional high schools?
2. What thoughts do the students attending the early college high school have on why they were successful, their perspectives on the roles of classroom teachers and administrators, and advice to traditional high schools engaged in reform?
3. What thoughts do faculty members have on why they are successful, their perspectives on the roles of classroom teachers and administrators, and advice to traditional high schools engaged in reform?

Research Design

Participant Population

This study used three distinct groups of participants to gather the data necessary to answer the three research questions; in particular, groups were developed to (a) examine the academic program, (b) gather reflections of senior students, and (c) gather reflections of current faculty on their experiences.

Students. To compare the academic performance of the early college and traditional high students, a stratified proportional sample of traditional high school students was taken in an effort to match the early college students on gender, race, and prior academic achievement. Table 1 shows the distribution of both groups of students across the aforementioned criteria. A *t* test was run comparing the academic performance (developmental scale score) on the Grade 8 reading and math state tests, and the difference was found to be insignificant with $t(526) = -0.126$, $p = .90$; and $t(526) = 0.069$, $p = .95$, respectively. The Grade 8 data were chosen, because this was the last grade level in which all students were attending a traditional public school.

Senior students. To gather information on what factors students considered as important contributors to their success at CCECHS, all senior students ($n = 61$) were asked to complete a short online survey. Seniors were selected as the target population as they were approaching the end of the high school experience and could respond based on this 4-year experience.

The faculty. The faculty of CCECHS consisted of a diverse group of teachers who had a mix of teaching experiences. The staff of the school consisted of 16 classroom teachers, 1 counselor, an assistant principal, and a principal. Thirteen of the staff members were female, with 6 of the females being Black, 6 White, and 1 listed as other. Of the 6 male faculty members, 4 were White and 2 Black. The teaching staff was moderately experienced with an average of 12.2 years ranging from a second-year teacher to one with 24 years in the classroom. Only one teacher had a graduate degree, a master of science in Spanish. The White female principal had been leading the school since day one with all her experience as principal accrued at this school, and the Black male assistant principal was completing graduate school seeking licensure in school administration.

Table 1. Student Demographics and Prior Academic Performance

School	Cross Creek Early College	Traditional High Schools
Students (*n*)	268	268
Race/ethnicity (%)		
Black	70.1	70.1
White	16.0	16.8
Hispanic	6.7	6.7
American Indian	0.4	0.4
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.4	0.4
Multiracial	6.4	5.6
Gender (%)		
Female	66.0	66.4
Male	34.0	33.6
Academic performance (Developmental Scale Score)		
Grade 8 Reading	*M* = 292.82	*M* = 294.29
	SD = 43.38	*SD* = 43.78
Grade 8 Mathematics	*M* = 341.62	*M* = 341.39
	SD = 37.8	*SD* = 38.72

Design and Procedure

Academic achievement was evaluated using a two-way chi-square analysis, with school being the grouping variable and the number of students passing (failing) on select state exams the other variable. The state tests selected were Algebra 1, Biology, Civics and Economics, English 1, and U.S. History, because passing these five tests is required to meet North Carolina State graduation standards. The data were first analyzed by the school for each of the five tests to determine if in fact there was a difference in achievement between the two groups of students for each of the tests. A subsequent analysis was conducted by splitting the data by race and gender to examine issues of how school type and gender and race were related in influencing student performance. These data are reported in descriptives—specifically percentage and number of students passing. In cases where there were 5 or less students, only the percentages were reported.

To explore the nature of the early college experience, senior students were asked to complete an online survey that asked them (a) to comment on four aspects of their high school experience, (b) about what factors contributed to their success, and (c) to offer advice to school principals interested in considering aspects of the early college model. Related to exploring the students' experiences, faculty were asked to complete a similar survey in an attempt to gather information on their professional experiences at the early college, what they consider as critical success factors, and to comment on principal leadership. In both cases, a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)

Table 2. Results of the Two-Way Chi-Square Comparison for All Students

Test	Percentage of Students Passing (Number)		Pearson χ^2	p Value	Cramer's V
	CCECHS	Traditional School			
Algebra 1	89.8 (194)	77.9 (209)	12.01	.00	.16
Biology	83.2 (104)	70.3 (90)	5.87	.02	.15
Civics and Economics	87.8 (159)	71.2 (89)	13.34	.00	.21
English 1	99.8 (181)	85.3 (168)	15.35	.00	.2
U.S. History	82.3 (102)	60.7 (37)	10.21	.00	.24

Note. CCECHS = Cross Creek Early College High School.

was used because the written responses were open coded and reevaluated using axial coding to identify any relationships between the categories and themes identified in the open coding process.

Results

Academic Achievement

The results of the two-way chi-square analysis showed that compared with similar traditional high school students, the students attending CCECHS performed significantly better on the five state tests as reported in Table 2. In other words, CCECHS had passing rates on the state tests that were significantly greater as compared with traditional high school students. For example, CCECHS had 89.81% to 77.99% passing for traditional schools in Algebra 1 and 99.79% to 85.28% passing for English 1, respectively.

The data were disaggregated by race and gender for each school setting. The descriptive statistics that are reported in Table 3 show that in over 58% of the possible comparisons a greater percentage of Cross Creek students passed as compared with the traditional school students. In 11.7% of the comparisons, the traditional students faired better. Taking this further, in all cases the Black students at Cross Creek had higher passing rates as compared with their traditional school peers. In a majority of the cases, for White, Hispanic, and multiracial subgroups, the results also favored the Cross Creek students.

The achievement gap as measured by comparing the percentage of students earning a passing score examined across student subgroups was smaller for Cross Creek students. For example, the gap for Black females in Algebra 1 was 4.7% for Cross Creek students and 12% for the traditional students. As compared with their traditional school peers, the Hispanic and multiracial females attending Cross Creek frequently

Table 3. Percentage and Number of Students Passing by Test, School, Race, and Gender

		Race and Gender											
		American Indian		Asian		Black		Hispanic		White		Multiracial	
Test	School	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Algebra 1	Cross Creek	100 (*)		100 (*)		89.1 (90)	84 (42)	100 (7)	71.4 (*)	93.8 (15)	100 (19)	100 (9)	100 (*)
	Traditional	100 (*)				71.3 (92)	79.7 (47)	83.3 (10)	100 (6)	83.3 (20)	100 (21)	81.8 (9)	100 (*)
Biology	Cross Creek	100 (*)				80 (48)	89.3 (25)	100 (*)	100(*)	77.8 (7)	100 (10)	57.1 (*)	100 (*)
	Traditional					62.3 (38)	80.6 (25)	60 (*)	50 (*)	71.4 (*)	91.7 (11)	71.4 (*)	100 (*)
Civics	Cross Creek	100 (*)		100 (*)		84(68)	86.7 (39)	100 (6)	83.3(*)	93.3 (14)	100 (14)	88.9 (8)	100 (*)
	Traditional					63.9 (39)	75 (21)	75 (*)	50 (*)	87.5 (7)	90.9 (10)	75 (6)	100 (*)
English 1	Cross Creek	100 (*)		100 (*)		94 (74)	97.8 (45)	100 (7)	100 (6)	100 (15)	100 (14)	100 (9)	100 (*)
	Traditional	100 (*)		100 (*)		80.9 (76)	80.4 (37)	100 (9)	80 (*)	100 (15)	100 (14)	90 (9)	100 (*)
U.S. History	Cross Creek	100 (*)				75.9 (44)	92.6 (25)	100 (*)	80 (*)	88.9 (8)	90.9 (10)	62.5 (*)	100 (*)
	Traditional					45.5 (15)	60 (6)	100 (*)	100 (*)	100 (*)	83.5 (*)	75 (*)	100 (*)

Note. (*) is used when there are ≤5 students in this category.

Table 4. Results of the Two-Way Chi-Square Comparison for Black Student Achievement

Test	Percentage of Black Students Passing (Number)		Pearson χ^2	*p* Value	Cramer's *V*
	CCECHS	Traditional School			
Algebra 1	87.4 (132)	73.9 (139)	9.46	.00	.17
Biology	74.5 (73)	68.5 (63)	5.1	.02	.17
Civics and Economics	84.9 (107)	67.4 (60)	9.22	.00	.21
English 1	95.4 (124)	80.7 (113)	13.52	.00	.22
U.S. History	82.1 (69)	48.8 (21)	14.31	.00	.33

Note. CCECHS = Cross Creek Early College High School. This table reports only the results for Black students as all other student groups were found to have results that were insignificant at $p < .05$.

had greater rates of passing. Looking at male students, the results are similar. The gap for Black males in Algebra 1 was 16% and 20.7% for Cross Creek and traditional students, respectively. For both school settings, multiracial males performed equal to or better in every case as compared with White students, whereas this only occurred three times for the multiracial female students.

The next analysis was conducted to determine the degree to which each of the racial subgroups reported in Table 3 differed significantly in performance across the two school types. When examining the results, it was found that only the results for Black students were significant, and as a matter of parsimony, only these results are reported in Table 4. As is clearly seen in Table 4, the Cross Creek Black students performed significantly better as compared with the traditional school Black students.

Student Thoughts on the Early College Experience

The students were asked to provide written responses to four questions about their experiences at the high school. These written responses were gathered anonymously via an online survey. Of the 61 seniors attending the high school, 31 completed the survey.

Success at school. The students were overwhelmingly positive when they were asked, "Would you consider your time at CCECHS as a success? Please explain why or why not." The answers varied in approach but one dominant theme did surface, and although the academic rigor was demanding, the students felt it was an experience that provided them the opportunity to excel. The idea of excelling was expressed in many ways in terms of both high school courses and earning college credit. This student's response is typical, "Yes because we have had an excellent opportunity to learn at a higher level with college classes and advanced high school classes." Several students reflected on this and stated that the idea of success was defined in terms of preparing for college either by the earning of college credit or the academic expectations that

prepared them to be successful in the college courses they took. This consistency of focus on the future and the benefits of a rigorous high school experience were also considered by some students as a way to balance the idea of being a teenager with the demands of future endeavors. This identity of being future focused and embracing the experience was stated best when a student offered,

> Yes, I would consider my time spent a success, because I found my true identity in the process of gaining knowledge of college at an early age. I achieved higher education that I probably would not have been able to achieve at a normal high school.

Clearly, the students communicated an earnest appreciation of the school and were consistently focused on the importance of academics and how this school allowed them to develop an identity of success.

Teacher behaviors. Students recognized a set of consistent behaviors that they claimed were not always present in the teachers they had at their previous schools. The responses to the question, "Do the teachers at CCECHS act differently than the teachers you had in your other schools? Please explain," revealed that the students found a sense of caring and support different from that to which they were accustomed. Students wrote about the sense of support in terms of how caring, attentive, interactive, and involved the teachers were not only with respect to academics but also about the welfare of the students. One student wrote, "Absolutely. Teachers at CCECHS actually care for their students, we are not just a number." The idea of caring and being present is a central theme as to how the students perceived their teachers. Caring took several forms from focusing on academics and providing an environment emphasizing learning to one that was relaxed and warm. A keen focus on academics was tempered with a humanistic approach.

Related to the idea of caring was the amount of effort the teachers were willing to provide as this second theme, personal investment in the students, permeated the comments. Typifying this sentiment, one student commented, "They care about everyone and they will do pretty much anything in their power to help a student out." But the idea of personal investment was not only found in the effort the teachers made but also in the method. One student stated, "They really try to get to know you as a person, rather than just trying to do their jobs as teachers. We laugh, play around, and do other things other teachers would not do." This sense of investment is then one that is based on personal relationships created in the learning environment, which was perceived by the students as conducive for learning. This idea of investment captured in the preceding student's comment communicates the idea that students were quite aware of the passion and commitment teachers radiated or failed to: "Most of the teachers act differently from the ones I had at a regular high school. They seem to be a little more passionate about what they're teaching." The students at this school viewed their teachers as committed, passionate, caring, supportive, and dedicated to the students.

Students' perception of the principal. It has been said that the principal often sets the tone of a building and the students and teachers can sense the difference. The next question, "Does the principal act differently than the other principals you have had? Please explain," provided the students the opportunity to give insight on how they viewed her and what if anything could be identified as behaviors deemed as different from past experiences. In the case of CCEHCS, the connection between principal and teacher behaviors was abundantly clear. This idea is captured in the following student response, "Yes, the principal is just like the teachers. She cares about the students."

Students again used the word "care" or the phrase "cares about" when describing how the principal acted differently. This caring took forms such as looking at you as an individual to having developed a sense in the students that all the students mattered. Typical of these comments was this one, "You can tell that Ms. V is genuinely concerned about ALL of her students." The emphasis on the capitalized all was in the student's original comment. Clearly, the idea of all and the inclusive nature of the principal's concern was perceived as important to this student. The inclusive theme was evident in other comments as this one, "Yes because she looks out for all her children (students) and she gives us special attention when we need it and on the spot not when she feels like it." This comment extended the idea of inclusiveness to also show the idea of attentiveness and support echoing the themes expressed when discussing the teachers. Many students stated that the principal knows their personal goals, family relationships, personal activities, and her interaction with the students generally creates a sense that the students understand that they are important to the principal. The importance of family and the theme of caring was exemplified in this statement, "She treats the students as her own whereas others just treated their students as just that, students." Caring, attentiveness, and having a feeling of being known were very important to these students. While the principal may support the idea of rigor in academics, the students have resoundingly expressed the importance of relationships as a critical factor as to why this school is different.

Advice for other schools. The final question asked on the survey was, "If you could offer advice to other school principals or teachers in traditional schools that you feel may be important to them if they want to have a school like CCECHS what would it be?" While the question spoke to advice, after having read the students' comments it was clear that this question as perceived by the student really asked them quite simply, "What makes CCECHS a success?"

The central theme or idea that most closely organized the thoughts of the students was one of creating a caring and student-centered school. Students recognized the reason they were there in how they answered the survey, but as important as academics was to these students, the idea of relationships was nearly universally mentioned. For example, the following comment summarized the feelings and perceptions of the students as the advice to heed, "I would tell them that relationship is just as important as academics. I have never met someone that could come to a place every day and successfully learn from someone that they did not like or respect." While learning was important to this student, the idea that learning is symbiotic and is related to

nature of the relationships between the teacher and student was evident. More so, according to this student, learning cannot occur if effective human relationships were not present. Students consistently spoke about caring, attention, getting to know, and treating students as individuals as the types of teacher behaviors successful schools need to have.

Several students spoke about the school (teachers and administrators) having a keen focus on the students. This advice was not one that communicated a sense of "I just want to be the center of attention" but one that claimed if you show a genuine interest in me, I will respond in kind suggesting again that relationships are a critical component of the experience that these students value. One student viewed a lack of emotion or passion that teachers have for students as a barrier to learning as the student wrote,

> My advice to other school teachers/principals would be to not try to hold a barrier up towards the students. If you showed compassion for the students the way you do for your job/subject you teach, then it would surely show in the students.

To this student when a teacher seemingly loses interest in his or her students and the students perceive this, the students lose interest in learning and school. Another student offered the idea that schools must have a keen focus on the students, and schools can do this by listening to the students and show that you are listening by helping them succeed. Finally, the idea of a school family was seen in several student comments. Students used words such as *home away from home*, *family*, and terms such as *mothers*, *fathers*, and *grandmas* to define the expectations they had for school personnel as ways schools could improve.

Although there were students who were not as enthusiastic about the school, their numbers were very few. Actually of the 31 participating students, only 2 had less than positive comments, and it was obvious from the comments that the 2 students had been disciplined repeatedly. A successful school as defined by the students at CCECHS was one that was academically beneficial but, just as important if not more, is having a school that students can feel that they are supported and cared for as in a family.

Teacher Thoughts on the Early College Experience

The teachers were asked to provide written responses to five questions about their experiences at the high school. These written responses were gathered anonymously via an online survey. Of the 16 teachers in the high school, 11 completed the survey.

Student success. Teachers reflected on why they believed students were successful as they responded to the question, "In your opinion is CCECHS successful for the students it serves? Please explain." The teaching staff considered several factors, including the demanding curriculum, strong relationships with students, and individual support facilitated by the small size of the school. The most dominant theme was to have high expectations and offer a challenging curriculum while simultaneously providing students with the support they need to meet these expectations. It was clear

that teachers recognized that students in this school were being asked to do more, and in turn the teachers felt that they needed to reciprocate and invest in the students. This theme was consistent with the ideas offered by the students as they experienced this heightened level of commitment and support. One teacher's comments summarized the theme most effectively as he wrote,

> CCEC provides an educational environment that encourages learning beyond what traditional high schools offer. Teachers are willing to employ all types of strategies and accommodations to improve the learning environment for all students. Students are presented with a rigorous curriculum and equal amounts of support to be successful students within the program.

The idea of caring was also deemed as critical by the teachers; however, it was expressed differently. The idea of caring expressed by the teachers, although related to that of the students, was more focused. Specifically, the teachers viewed the idea of caring as a purposeful act to support student performance and lifelong development. This idea of caring manifested itself in the concept of relationships. The terms *caring* and *relationships* were usually mentioned in the same sentence or response to this question. The idea of how teachers viewed relationships and the type of climate they help provide was seen in this comment: "In this setting, we are able to offer the individual attention, support, and encouragement that build strong relationships and give struggling students a lifeline that they would not experience anywhere else." Teachers recognized the individuality of each student and were cognizant that students needed attention, support, and encouragement to be successful, and according to their experience this type of relationship was not likely to occur in traditional school settings.

Teacher leadership. The current literature on school reform and leadership is replete with examples of the attention teacher leadership has received, and it continues to garner significant attention. The second question, "Are there differences in teacher leadership and participation at CCECHS as compared to other schools you have worked at? Please explain," probed the teachers to discuss how the idea of teacher leadership was viewed in this school and hopefully offer insight into what teachers see as important.

All but one teacher had worked in other public schools, whereas the remaining teachers had a wide range of experiences; and this allowed the teachers to reflect and compare how they are involved in the leadership system. What surfaced was a strong sense of collaboration and meaningful participation in the decision-making process. For example, the following comment typified what was seen in the comments offered by veteran teachers,

> I feel at CCECHS, teachers work together as a unit to achieve the same goal. Additionally, I feel through meetings, conferences, and planning, the teachers at CCECHS work together and truly invest their time into educating our students to the best of our abilities.

The collaborative nature of their relationship is evident in this comment as well as in many others, but even more so was the idea of why. In several other comments, purposeful teacher leadership was mentioned in connection to student outcomes and achieving the mission and purpose of the school. The idea of purposefulness was strongly connected to the concept of meaningful participation. Teachers did not want to just collaborate but qualified the idea of leadership to include that for teachers to be seen as leaders, the leadership activities had to be meaningful for and focused on students.

Principal leadership. Teachers were asked to comment on how they perceive the leadership provided by the principal as they responded to, "Is there a difference in principal leadership at CCECHS as compared to the other schools at which you have worked? Please explain." It was not surprising when reading the teachers' comments to find that they viewed their principal as collaborative, possessing high expectations, involved, and focused on achieving the mission of the school. An example of these attributes is contained in the following comment:

> Both principal and assistant principal at CCECHS have visited my room various times already this year, where last year I was only visited once by my principal. Furthermore, I feel there is great communication about expectations from our administration. As a result, I feel I am a much better teacher than I was at my previous school.

Other teachers viewed the leadership provided as being different from the perspective of team membership. Several teachers spoke about how they were "listened to" or how the principal sought out the "voice" of the teachers when major decisions were being contemplated. Considering the pedagogical voice teachers have, one staff member was clear that the principal required that the expectations outlined in the curriculum must be met, but how teachers planned and actually delivered the curriculum was characterized as teachers having a high degree of autonomy. The comments to this question were the most focused and consistent of any offered by the students or teachers. The lack of variety was interpreted as a manifestation of the keen focus on the mission of the school and the consistency in leadership's actions and words provided by the administration. A consistent, well-focused leadership approach was seen as purposeful. The students discussed the idea of having a purpose, the teachers did as well, and this idea of purpose was also seen in the approach leadership practiced.

Advice to other schools. The final two questions had the teachers offer advice to other schools seeking to improve student outcomes. Therefore, the responses to the last two questions were collapsed and included in this section. Teachers took the opportunity to share the following ideas that they felt were critical for other schools to consider. Teachers spoke about the smallness of the school, providing a rigorous and relevant curriculum, and how it is necessary to reinvent yourself as a teacher.

The smallness of the school was attributed to facilitating the individual support teachers were able to give their students. Several comments addressed how this small environment is important to assisting students and therefore the school can "set an advisor, facilitator, or monitor over them to build personal relationships with the student body, it would increase academic performance, and the desire to stay in school." However, with this smaller size, teachers were busy sharing roles and responsibilities with a heightened level of personal and professional accountability. This did not seem to be a detriment as the teachers consistently expressed high levels of satisfaction and feelings of success. One teacher was adamant about how to be successful in this type of environment: "You must be willing to put in the time and effort to reinvent yourself as a teacher and have the courage to try new things." Approaching the task of incorporating the lessons learned in the early college experience was not easy and required change. But another teacher, still commenting on what schools need to have for success looked beyond just her own personal changes and saw something else, a strong sense of community:

> Our strongest trait is our loyalty to each other. We enjoy camaraderie because we know we are all focused on our mission of teaching students. In larger schools, some of that camaraderie stays within a department. Here, because we are small, we have interdepartment communication that is effective and provides a channel for providing support for students and teachers alike.

This comment reflected the dominant theme about the culture of the school that strong relationships were expressed in terms of loyalty, and this trait was necessary for the faculty to focus on the needs of students. Another teacher spoke to the idea of how important this feeling of togetherness and oneness was visible in the school as teachers were present in the social and academic lives of the students.

Summary of qualitative results. When examining the survey responses, one recurring theme that presented regardless of question or whether the respondent was a student or a teacher was the idea of relationship. It permeated the student responses and from the students' perspective appeared to be the decisive factor in providing them the skill to succeed with a more rigorous curriculum. It suffused the teacher responses in terms of what they saw as a critical component in their ability to facilitate student success with a more challenging curriculum. The idea of relationship was the central unifying theme in terms of the defined culture of the early college high school experience for students and faculty. It was also a central characteristic that defined the leadership roles the staff saw themselves in as well as their perception of the school's administration.

Discussion

Findings and Implications

What lessons have we learned from examining this school? First, the students attending Cross Creek are performing better than their peers in the traditional high school

setting. Second, this achievement advantage holds true for many subgroups within the school. When looking at the achievement gap in absolute terms, the gap between students in Cross Creek is much narrower such that the average achievement gap in Cross Creek was slightly over 8%, whereas in the traditional schools it was 25.5%, or over 3 times as great. In several instances, minority students (non-Asian) performed as well if not better as compared with their White peers at Cross Creek, and in some cases better than the White traditional high school students. In light of the mediocre progress made in closing the achievement gap and the struggles high schools have in meeting their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals, the academic performance of the CCECHS students is noteworthy as Cross Creek has met the AYP targets each year since opening. The academic performance of these early college students provides a clear picture of what can occur when students are provided an accelerated, rigorous, and challenging curriculum. High schools seeking to challenge their students should take note that compressing 4 years of traditional high school into 2 coupled with a college experience can yield significantly improved results.

The culture of Cross Creek is one where relationships are seen as strong, supportive, and positive. Certainly, students saw a meaningful benefit in attending the early college and undoubtedly are motivated to succeed. Nevertheless, their success in their eyes is not one uniquely attributable to the curriculum and the work they do, but to the type of dynamic environment that results when they feel secure, valued, and part of something. Previous research (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Stearns & Glennie, 2006) has found that some schools "push out" students by creating environments students see as alienating, unresponsive to the needs of the students, and lacking in positive adult relationships. While fostering relationships has been seen as a positive characteristic of the small school setting, it is more than that; it is the nature of these relationships that were found to be important such that these relationships need to be purposeful and focused on learning. At Cross Creek, learning is rigorous and challenging but the students perceive that the staff is going to support them by being there when needed, offering help, and having a keen focus on the students. These results support previous findings:

> Students' behavior often changes when they feel like a part of a community in a school. First, a sense of belonging increases the likelihood that students will accept school rules and policy. As they become important and valued members of their school's network of peers and adults, students become more invested in school. Second, students are more likely to take educational risks when they feel safe in their school environment. (Knesting, 2008, p. 3)

It is not only the students who sensed the importance of relationships, as the teachers consistently commented that developing and fostering relationships was a critical success factor. The teachers often spoke of how important it was to know the students, be available for them, and have expectations that if met, would lead to success. This is consistent with what Stevens, Sporte, Stoelinga, and Bolz (2008) found in their review of

small schools in Chicago and what Wolk (2005) discovered at two other early college high schools; namely, that successful schools had a sense of mutual caring and support.

The implications for schools looking to improve student achievement suggests that serious efforts to revamp the academic program must be comprehensive such that it is more than implementing a new curriculum or creating a smaller school. The difference as seen in CCECHS is how the dynamic between teacher, student, and curriculum can manifest itself in superior academic performance. Successful school improvement should not be devoid of the importance of the connections between teachers and students. These connections mutually support multiple layers of academic success for students. Schools should view the quality of the teacher-student relationship as a significant school improvement strategy and goal, one that may often be overlooked in school improvement. Explicitly incorporating the idea of "developing supportive relationships" is one that this study demonstrates as critically important and experience shows is usually absent in many school improvement plans. Therefore, embedding relationship development by stating it as a goal to be accomplished will facilitate the efforts of school personnel to reflect the needs and desires of students.

The supportive school culture of CCECHS is also one that encompasses the professional climate in which teachers work. The professional environment in CCECHS was seen by teachers as one communicating a sense of being valued, fostering security in their roles as classroom teachers, and encouraging them to participate in schoolwide decisions. This type of professional teaching environment has been seen as positively affecting school performance (Hirsch, 2009) and as an important characteristic of learning communities (Dufour, 2004). The teachers had a strong sense of satisfaction, and high importance was placed on being meaningfully involved in the school from decision making within the classroom, defining the nature of relationships with students and other faculty, and being embedded in comprehensive leadership activities. This type of professional involvement may help create that sense of ownership and commitment that the students benefited from and the teachers were willing and able to provide. Put differently, teachers exhibited what Bolam et al. (2005) called a "collective responsibility for pupils' learning" (p. iii).

Implications for School Practice

The faculty and students at Cross Creek took the opportunity a small school provided to create relationships and purposefully use these relationships to focus on learning. The development of this environment was directly attributable to the leadership practiced by the school principal. As seen by the faculty and students, the importance of her support took the form of being accessible to students, having high expectations for both students and faculty, and treating faculty as professionals who are collaboratively involved in improving the school. Faculty sensed the impact of relationships within the culture of leadership in the building where the staff was empowered through a strong sense of shared purpose and collaboration. This inclusive leadership style was deemed as very beneficial to the staff in terms of a decision-making climate that engaged the

staff in the day-to-day procedural issues to long-term pedagogical practices and curricula content.

Schools seeking to improve should have (a) the keen focus on student learning outcomes, (b) focus on how the relationships that currently exist within their schools support what is important to students and teachers, and (c) a leadership system that is clearly seen by students and teachers as being supportive, available, consistent, and visible. Schools' leadership should strive to develop a school culture where a high degree of commonality is expressed by both groups as they define the key elements of their success. The research on smaller schools (Kahne et al., 2008) has shown that the relationships between students and faculty are enhanced while not finding substantive improvements in student achievement. This study shows that while strong relationships are important and the small school environment facilitates their development, the inclusion of a rigorous curriculum is necessary for student success and may explain why some schools are successful and others are not.

Future Research

This study suggests that there is a dynamic between a rigorous curriculum and how the culture supports the work of students and teachers. To discover the nuances of this dynamic, future research should investigate the classroom dynamic between student and teacher as they work toward student success. The importance of how teachers support students as they strive to achieve academic success in an accelerated environment is important as American schools race toward producing more competitive citizens. Second, although these students have accomplished much, can these students sustain and persist in colleges that usually lack that "relationship"? The students clearly stated how important relationships are with faculty and moving from a smaller learning environment to a larger university may pose unique challenges for these students as they attempt to maintain their academic success. If there is an absence of significant relationships, will these students fail to maintain? This study only looked at one school, and the limitation on the generalizability of the results is serious. This study should be expanded to include many more early college high schools to determine if what was found here is consistent within a larger context.

Concluding Remarks

The experience at Cross Creek Early College is successful for both students and faculty. Chenoweth (2009) suggests that all schools can learn from those schools that have been successful, and this study provides lessons from which all high schools can learn. The students and faculty at early college high schools want to be there and arguably may have an investment in their education that is not seen in other schools. However, success is not just having a small school, or students and faculty wanting to be there. As seen here, it goes beyond that to include a synthesis of sorts that creates a bond between student and teacher, focusing on success, the willingness to support each other,

and be involved. The importance of understanding schools such as Cross Creek is critical (see Reindl, 2006). By developing a deeper understanding of successful schools, we can move from the "initiative" phase of high school reform to the "design" stage, and actually scale up successful reforms (Cohen & Ball, 2007; Rowan, Correnti, Miller, & Camburn, 2009).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

References

American Council on Education. (2006, October 30). *Students of color make dramatic gains in college enrollment but still trail whites in the rate at which they attend college*. Retrieved from http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Search&template=/CM/HTML Display.cfm&ContentID=21571

The American Institutes of Research, & SRI International. (2006). *Early college high school initiative:2003-2005 evaluation report*. Seattle, WA: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Bernstein, L., Millsap, M., Schimmenti, J., & Page, L. (2008). *Implementation study of smaller learning communities*. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates.

Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Stoll, L., Thomas, S., Wallace, M., Greenwood, A., . . . Smith, M. (2005). *Creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities* [DfES Research report RR637]. Bristol, England: University of Bristol.

Center on Education Policy. (2009). *State test score trends through 2007-08, Part 3: Are achievement gaps closing and is achievement rising for all?* Washington, DC: Author.

Chenoweth, K. (2009). It can be done, it's being done, and here's how. *Phi Delta Kappan, 91,*38-43.

Cohen, D., & Ball, D. (2007). Educational innovation and problem of scale. In B. Schneider & S. McDonald (Eds.), *Scale up in education* (pp. 19-36). New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.

Dufour, R. (2004). What is a professional learning community? *Educational Leadership,61*(8), 6-11.

Fleishman, S., & Heppen, J. (2009). Improving low-performing high schools: Searching for evidence of promise. *America's High Schools, 19,*105-113.

Hoffman, N., & Webb, M. (2009, June 11). Early-College High School: Modest Experiment or National Movement? *Education Week*. Retrieved from http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/06/11/35hoffman.html

Jobs for the Future. (2002). *Early college high schools: Core principles*. Retrieved October 12, 2009, from http://www.earlycolleges.org/Downloads/CorePrinciples.pdf

Jobs for the Future. (2009). *A portrait in numbers*. Boston, MA: Author.

Kahne, J., Sporte, S., de la Torre, M., & Easton, J. (2008). Small high schools on a larger scale: The impact of school conversions in Chicago. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 30,*281-315.

Knesting, K. (2008). Students at risk for school dropout: Supporting their persistence. *Preventing School Failure, 52*(4), 1-10.

Lee, J. (2006). *Tracking achievement gaps and assessing the impact of NCLB on the gaps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Civil Rights Project.

National High School Center. (2007). *Findings from the early college high school initiative: A look at best practices and lessons learned regarding a dual enrollment program*. Washington, DC: Author.

Natriello, G., McDill, E., & Pallas, A. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Reindl, T. (2006). *Postcards from the margin: A national dialogue on accelerate learning*. Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

Rowan, B., Correnti, R., Miller, R., & Camburn, E. (2009). *School improvement by design. Lessons from a study of comprehensive school reform programs*. Pennsylvania, PA: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

Stearns, E., & Glennie, E. (2006). When and why dropouts leave high school. *Youth & Society, 38*, 29-57.

Stevens, D., Sporte, S., Stoelinga, S. R., & Bolz, A. (2008). *Lessons from high performing small high schools in Chicago*. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.

Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Wolk, R. (2005). *"It's kind of different" student experiences in two early college high schools*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.

Bios

Theodore Stefan Kaniuka teaches in the Department of Educational Leadership at Fayetteville State University. He has worked as a district superintendent, associate and assistant superintendents, principal, and classroom teacher.

Melinda Vickers is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership at Fayetteville State University. She is currently a high school principal in the Cumberland County School district.