A Case Study of Mary Jane Sims Elementary School
Austin Independent School District
Austin, Texas

Conducted by
The University of Texas at Austin
Principalship Program Cohort

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This study is dedicated to all the children at Mary Jane Sims Elementary School

We would like to express our gratitude to the hard working, collaborative community of Sims Elementary School. You opened your doors, welcomed us and treated us with kindness and respect. You allowed us to be learners in a community that is passionately dedicated to the safety, welfare, and education of children.

Sims is truly “a little bright star in this neighborhood.”
_Sims’ Community Member_
# Contents

Executive Summary .................................................................................................................. 2
Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 3
Methodology ............................................................................................................................ 3
   Study Design .......................................................................................................................... 3
   Qualitative Sources .............................................................................................................. 3
   Quantitative Sources ........................................................................................................... 3
   Participants .......................................................................................................................... 4
   Data Analysis ....................................................................................................................... 4
   Limitations of the Data ......................................................................................................... 4
History ........................................................................................................................................ 5
   Austin ..................................................................................................................................... 5
   Student Demographics by Campus, District, and State: A Comparison ............................... 5
Findings ....................................................................................................................................... 6
   Theme 1: Unity: Peer and Faculty Cohesion ..................................................................... 7
   Theme 2: Structures for Support ....................................................................................... 10
   Theme 3: Parent & Community Involvement .................................................................. 18
   Theme 4: School Environment and Safety ....................................................................... 21
Recommendations .................................................................................................................... 26
   Unity: Peer and Faculty Cohesion ..................................................................................... 26
   Structures for Support ....................................................................................................... 27
   Parent and Community Involvement .............................................................................. 28
   Community Involvement ................................................................................................. 30
   Bilingual Programs .......................................................................................................... 30
   School Environment and Safety ..................................................................................... 30
Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 31
2008 Principalship Cohort Members ...................................................................................... 33
References ................................................................................................................................. 34
Executive Summary

The 2008 University of Texas Principalship Cohort conducted a study of Sims Elementary as part of their degree requirements for principal certification. As part of this study, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed to create a current story of Sims Elementary. Several themes presented themselves through the data and these became our major areas of focus. These themes were Unity: Peer and Faculty Cohesion, Structures for Support, Parent and Community Involvement, and School Environment and Safety.

With regards to peer and faculty cohesion, interviews with Sims’s stakeholders as well as data collected from climate surveys indicate that the administrators and teachers are committed to the school and the community; however, some teachers and staff mentioned a concern about conflict within the staff and mixed feelings on staff morale. Among our recommendations for increasing peer and faculty cohesion are establishing norms of conduct and behavior to promote collegiality, developing “rituals, symbols, and ceremonies” to reinforce shared values, and encouraging staff to self-reflect to continuously renew their passion for education.

The Sims community also indicated the presence of several structures for support that have met some level of success with regards to student achievement. Faculty and staff interviews did, however, indicate areas for improvement pertaining to collaboration, programs for promoting student achievement, and discipline. A few of our key recommendations are implementing professional learning communities, outlining guidelines and expectations for mentoring new teachers, providing professional development on meeting the needs of gifted and talented students, and creating a school-wide discipline plan.

The data collected on parent and community involvement also presented great successes for Sims Elementary as well as opportunities for increasing involvement. The support provided for parents is strong, and there was a strong sense of parental involvement on the campus. Contradictory to this data, some respondents shared a desire for more parental involvement and the belief that one subpopulation’s parents were more involved than another. We offer several recommendations to help increase parent and community involvement: promoting, understanding, and appreciating the community’s diverse resources; offering flexible times for volunteering; and building trusting, collaborative relationships with families that respect their needs.

Our final theme of school environment and safety also reflects several successes for Sims Elementary. Interviews with faculty, staff, and parents revealed a sense of safety within the walls of Sims as well as a desire to sustain that safety in light of the perceived dangers present in the community environment. Interviews and data found in campus climate surveys showed opportunities for improvement when it comes to campus cleanliness and maintenance. Some key recommendations are to implement service-learning projects focused on improving campus facilities, to promote parent-teacher committees to work collaboratively on improving safety measures and providing school maintenance, and to create a campus-level building maintenance committee.
Introduction

Through the partnership between The University of Texas at Austin and the Austin Independent School District (AISD), the 2008 Principalship Cohort conducted a case study of Mary Jane Sims Elementary School. The cohort interviewed administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and community representatives to collect information about Sims Elementary. We coupled the data gathered through the interview process with district and state reports examining academic performance, discipline, and special populations at the school. As a beginning cohort of students, we sought to develop an understanding of a school as an entire system. We used the process to develop our skills in seeing and understanding different perspectives and to learn collaborative approaches for a school study. The study gave us the opportunity to interact with a school community and to apply research to the findings from the community and campus data. We also hoped to return to the Sims staff and community findings they may use to continue and extend the legacy of the school.

Methodology

Study Design

The cohort team utilized both qualitative and quantitative data in order to determine and analyze successes as well as possible areas of improvement at Sims Elementary. The full research group spent a week on site at the school during the summer of 2008. The qualitative data stemmed from school artifacts and from interviews conducted with administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and community members. Teams of researchers conducted both individual semi-structured interviews and informal interviews during two community walks. Quantitative data derive from campus, district, and state reports.

Qualitative Sources

• Formal and Informal Semi-Structured Interviews
• Campus Improvement Plan
• Sims 101 Guide 2007-2008
• Sims Faculty Handbook
• Observations of Facilities

Quantitative Sources

• 1989-2006 Enrollment Reports from National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education
• 1990-1991 Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) Archives
• 1995-1996 AEIS Report
• 2000-2001 AEIS Report
• 2005-2006 AEIS Report
• 2006-2007 AEIS Report
• 2006-2007 AISD Parent Survey Results
• 2007-2008 AISD Campus Report Card
• 2007-2008 AISD Parent Survey Results
• 2005-2006 through 2007-2008 AISD Staff Climate Survey Results
• 2006-2007 AISD Student Climate Survey Results
• 2007-2008 AISD Student Climate Survey Results
• 2006-2007 Discipline Reports

Participants

Prior to selecting Sims as the site for the school study, university faculty met with both the incoming and exiting principal. Information regarding the purpose of the study was jointly presented by these administrators and university faculty to the Sims staff during an after school meeting in May. Sims staff members agreed to participate in the study and volunteers signed up for interviews. Respondents were interviewed June 26–July 3. Formal interview participants included 11 teachers, 4 support staff, 3 administrators, 2 parents, and 4 community members. Over 30 informal interviews were conducted during two community walks.

Data Analysis

While reviewing interviews, we sought and categorized common themes. Once themes were established, the researcher cohort members divided into working teams based on four major themes: Unity: Peer and Faculty Cohesion, Structures for Support, Parent and Community Involvement, and School Environment and Safety. Work teams also utilized quantitative data to support findings within each theme. Triangulation was accomplished through comparing participant responses with other data resources. Member checks included providing transcripts to interviewees and meeting with the campus principal to discuss findings.

Limitations of the Data

The current study represents a first effort at qualitative and quantitative analysis by the members of our principalship program cohort students. Other limitations we acknowledge include that interviews were voluntary and conducted during the summer without follow-up discussions with interviewees. Also, there was only a limited number of parent, faculty, staff,
and community interviews and Sims students were not included in interviews. The community walks were conducted during a weekday with people who were available and volunteered to speak with us. We also did not have an opportunity to observe faculty in their work environment. The administrator transition provided another limitation; we were unable to interview the exiting principal. Additionally, we had limited access to current data sources due to student confidentiality.

**History**

**Austin**

The city of Austin, named after Stephen F. Austin, “the Father of Texas,” was founded and became the Texas state capital in 1839. In 1881, the City of Austin Public Schools admitted its first classes. Austin experienced rapid growth in the 1970s, which contributed to increased government activity. Diverse cultural groups—“European, African, Mexican, and most recently Asian” (Austin History Center, 2008)—have been attracted to the city throughout its history. Austin is now known for its cultural life and high tech innovation. It has also grown into a city of education with many prestigious colleges and universities.

AISD was established in 1883 and has witnessed many historical, demographic, and socioeconomic transformations within its structures (AISD, 2008). Sims Elementary School opened its doors to a neighborhood located in East Austin in September 1956. The school was named after Mary Jane Sims, who was born in Round Rock, Texas, and began her teaching career at age 16 at an African American school. She also authored various publications and composed popular music (Brandenstein, 1996). Over the past two decades, Sims Elementary School has undergone significant changes in student demographics and has become the AISD campus with the lowest socioeconomic status in 2007-2008. For the 2008-2009 school year, Sims will have a new principal who has already served two years as a principal at a different elementary school in AISD. The incoming principal had previously served as both an instructional coach and assistant principal at Sims and is a graduate of the UT Principalship program.

**Student Demographics by Campus, District, and State: A Comparison**

Currently, Sims serves just over 400 students in grades Pre-K through fifth. As noted by several Sims stakeholders, in recent years a shift in student demographics has influenced the culture of the campus. The change in student demographics from 1989 to 2007 shows the dramatic transition of a predominantly African American population to a predominantly Hispanic one, as indicated in Figure 1 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Merisotis (2008) stated, “We’ve already seen tremendous demographic changes in our nation over the last two decades, with the juggernaut of the booming Latino population, [and] continuing increases in the African American [population]” (p. 27).
As shown in Figure 1, between the years 1990 and 2007 the African American student population at Sims decreased in percentage from 79% to 47%, while the Hispanic student population increased from 19% to 53%. This significant shift in student demographics has made Sims Elementary a more ethnically heterogeneous campus. One parent affirmed, “[Sims Elementary] is more integrated. I didn’t want to take my kids to a school that was just one color.”

The campus data illustrate that the African American percentage has been decreasing steadily over the past two decades as compared to the district and state levels, which have been decreasing at a much slower pace. The Hispanic population at the campus and district levels has undergone noteworthy changes, while at the state level the increase has been at a slower rate. Finally, the changes in the White percentage at the campus level have not affected the school due to the small number of students in that population. At the district and state levels both trends show a steady decrease in the White population.

![Chart showing student demographics by campus, district, and state.](image)

**Figure 1.** Student demographics by campus, district, and state.

**Findings**

Through the analysis of both our qualitative and quantitative data, four themes emerged and became our major areas of focus: (a) Unity: Peer and Faculty Cohesion, (b) Structures for Support, (c) Parent and Community Involvement, and (d) School Environment and Safety. For
each theme we have provided our findings from our interviews, key Sims artifacts, and AEIS and other campus-generated data reports. In addition to these findings we include current research on each theme’s educational relevance.

**Theme 1: Unity: Peer and Faculty Cohesion**

Interviews as well as data from staff climate surveys regarding Sims Elementary School indicate that administrators and teachers are committed to the school and to the students. Based on community responses, there is a general attitude that Sims has great teachers who make a difference. There is also a feeling of camaraderie among staff and faculty that has created an informal unified front; however, some teachers mentioned areas of concern within this front with regards to conflict between teachers and treatment from administrators. Although overall, many interviews indicated that teacher morale is at an optimum state, there were mixed responses and some unease in this area. Additionally, teacher mobility has been relatively high the past 2 years due to some teachers moving within the school, either to further their career or because of attrition.

**Sims Elementary’s Climate**

Unity or school cohesion can be defined as the “extent to which there is trust, shared expectations, and positive interactions among students, teachers, and administrators” (Stewart, 2007, p. 190). According to Lima (1998), cohesion consists of “the characterctic patterns of relationships and forms of assoication between members” and also “the substantive attitudes, values, beliefs, habits, assumptions, and ways of doing things” (p. 4). The teachers at Sims Elementary are all committed to one common cause—their students’ learning. Confirming the general consensus, teachers were described by one respondent as “the strength…they’re really focused on instructional improvement, teaching, and learning.” Another respondent mentioned that at Sims “everyone comes together to make kids successful,” while another said, “[They] all have the same idea in mind that these children need to be moved forward to become life-long learners.” Interviewees indicated that Sims teachers are strong, dedicated and want what is best for kids. Relationships and taking a personal interest in the students is also a value embraced by most of the staff. Data taken from the 2007-2008 AISD Staff Climate Survey results indicated that teachers go the extra mile and are committed to their students and to their jobs. Additionally 99% of Sims parent participants in the AISD Parent Survey Results reported that their child is getting a good education. The administration and campus leaders are also considered highly dedicated and instrumental in the success at Sims. Respondents boasted that leadership is “our greatest asset” and the principal knows how to gather and motivate staff. Camaraderie and a sense of community resonate throughout the data.

In spite of the overall dedication and sense of community, there were some instances where teachers experienced dissension within the larger group, which in turn has affected school cohesion. Although the majority of respondents asserted that Sims is an inclusive campus, these
statements are not supported by all data. Some stated that the “working relationship between teachers [has gone] down some,” while another affirmed, “Last year, we had a lot of negativity in the office.” Negativity and poor relationships affect the overall culture of a school and lessen unity. A few respondents mentioned that cohesion is also negatively affected when unprofessionalism is allowed and “the administration doesn’t remedy that,” or when people are “called out” or “berated” at staff meetings. Additionally, an interviewee mentioned that cohesion falls victim when “at staff meetings, it’s divided by grade levels or by colored groups.” This concern negatively affecting campus unity is also evident in the decline in perceptions of professional competence, support for colleagues, and cooperative interactions on the AISD Staff Climate Survey (Figure 2).

A second aspect within unity is the idea of teacher morale. Teacher morale is a “state of mind determined by the individual’s anticipation of the extent of satisfaction of those needs which she or he perceives as significantly affecting his or her total work situation” (Evans, 2007, p. 832). At Sims, this idea differs among respondents. Some said, “I love this place,” while others described teachers as exhausted and frustrated. Staff indicated more frustration with paperwork and testing pressures, and that “morale is low because we can’t teach.” The fluctuation of morale is evident in the disparity among respondents as well as a decline in subscale scores on the AISD Climate Survey (Figure 2).

![Figure 2](image_url)

Figure 2. Staff climate survey on teacher morale. A score of 3.0 or higher reflects a positive response.
Another factor that could affect cohesion is the mobility rates in the past 2 years among staff. Mobility can be viewed through four lenses: (a) transferring to another school (attrition), (b) moving within the school, (c) leaving the field due to a life event, or (d) leaving teaching altogether (Osborn, 2006). In the 2007-2008 school year, the school had 9 new teachers out of 31. In 2008-2009 there will be about 6 new teachers out of 30 teachers and one new administrator. One respondent said even though new teachers “display a really high level of professionalism,” mobility affects the ability to maintain cohesion. It is important to acknowledge that mobility is affected by movement within the school; some teachers indicated staff “loop” for the benefit of their students, while others leave to advance professional growth. Other reasons for teacher mobility at Sims could be uncovered through further research.

**Educational Relevance**

School cohesion is important because a “school context in which there was a great deal of cooperation among teachers and administrators, support for students, and clear expectations about the school’s mission appeared to translate into higher levels of achievement, irrespective of school social ills” (Stewart, 2007, p. 190). This proves that regardless of where kids are coming from, a unified front from their teachers and administrators can lead to student success.

On the subject of teacher morale, it is key to understand that respect, care, and professional support are basic needs of all teachers and can affect a teacher’s working environment (Beatty & Brew, 2004). “All of these kinds of [needs] are highly prized by teachers and engender tremendous loyalty for leaders who develop them” (Beatty & Brew, 2004, p. 331) and can drive morale. Furthermore, “school cultures that help teachers to find their work meaningful (e.g. clear and morally inspiring goals) also have a positive influence on teacher’s affective dispostions” (Leithwood & Mcadie, 2007, p. 43). Efforts to enhance teachers working lives and teacher morale is crucial because that enhancement ultimatley improves schooling (Evans, 2007).

Finally mobility, whether for positive or negative reasons, should be considered, because “discontinuity of staff can be a major inhibitor to the efficacy of schools in promoting student development and attainment” (Macdonald, 1999, p. 841). According to Martinez (2004), lack of unity can lead to teacher mobility. Martinez stated, “Teachers leave the profession because of difficulties with coworkers and administrators, not because they dislike teaching” (p. 4), indicating that these factors need to be taken into account when there is a high mobility rate.

**Summary: Unity: Peer and Faculty Cohesion**

Interviews from parents, staff, and teachers indicated that Sims maintains a positive and unified school culture through their dedication and commitment to students. There are some areas of concern with school cohesion with regards to dissension and conflict between staff and between teachers and administrators. Teacher morale is mostly viewed in a positive light but
needs to be stronger among all staff. The mobility rate, too, should be considered when considering unity of the campus. Keeping cohesion, morale, and mobility in mind should ensure an upbeat and encouraging campus climate for all Sims employees, while coinciding with a supportive and caring learning environment for all students.

**Theme 2: Structures for Support**

The Sims community has acknowledged that they have made quite a journey over their history. The interviews conducted with faculty, staff, community members, and parents revealed that “the changes and improvements that brought us to this place took many years to accomplish.” Interviewees mentioned time and time again, “Although we have accomplished much, we still have more learning, growing, and improving to do” (*Sims 101 Guide*, p. 6). Structures for support where interviewees mentioned successes as well as a need for improvement were collaboration, programs for promoting student success, and discipline.

**Collaboration**

The area of collaboration strategies used on campus is a topic that was directly addressed during the interview process of Sims teachers and faculty. We received many positive comments and attitudes reflecting that collaboration is taking place on campus. One faculty member stated that at Sims Elementary, “We are very much team oriented and know that teachers learn from each other.” A majority of the teacher respondents referred to team or grade-level meetings and informal discussions as sources of collaboration. One teacher expressed a more detailed description of collaboration with a teammate, including meaningful dialogue, sharing ideas, and collaborating after school and during planning time. Another respondent referred to the creation of professional learning communities for planning within the past few years. Another teacher responded, “We meet every week on purpose to discuss our lesson plans…where we need to focus.” Apart from interviews, we also found support for collaboration in the Action Steps of the Campus Improvement Plan (CIP) in the form of professional learning communities, grade-level planning with weekly meetings, and peer observations. In the Recruitment and Retention Plan section of the CIP as well as the Sims 101 Guide, there is mention of mentors and support for new teacher, which is yet another example of professional collaboration.

Although it is obvious that collaboration is widely noted as part of the Sims culture, there seems to be a lack of uniformity in implementation. Based on our interviews, there is inconsistency in uniformity from one grade level to the next in how they collaborate. One teacher summed up that point by stating, “Collaboration happened, but I think it was much more dependent on people and not really institutionalized or an expectation.” Another respondent stated that collaboration is “not so much a very structured meeting system” and “we’re still kind of disjointed on a campus level.” Yet another stated, “When I met with my team, one of them wasn’t interested in planning, so it was always kind of a waste of time.” Other frustrations
regarding collaboration arose in the areas of sufficient time for group planning, coordinating with special areas or special education teachers, and new teacher mentoring. One respondent shared, “I think we had two official planning days all year which left something to be desired.” Another expressed, “What I miss is getting to talk to grade level teachers.”

Another form of collaboration is the relationship between new teachers and assigned mentors. In regards to mentoring, one respondent expressed, “I loved my mentor. …My strategic compensation mentor…bent over backwards to work with me.” However, in discussing campus collaboration, a new teacher was quoted by a member of our research team as saying, “I was always looking for help and it was frustrating that there was no sort of continuity in where you could find it or an expectation that you’re seeking help would be met.” According to the Staff Climate Survey Results, there are drops in three areas of staff collaboration: (a) teachers help and support each other, (b) teachers respect the professional competence of their colleagues, and (c) the interactions between faculty members are cooperative (Figure 3). These areas not only saw notable drops from the 2006-2007 school year to the 2007-2008 school year, but they are also well below the elementary school average for AISD.

![Figure 3. Results for professional teacher behavior.](chart.png)
Educational Relevance

Collaboration encompasses a multitude of components; however, for our study we focused on collaboration as professional interaction among faculty that enhances teaching practices and affects student achievement. Two examples of collaboration are professional learning communities that effectively use planning time and mentors for new teachers. An idea embedded in the professional learning community concept according to DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) is that educators cannot help all students learn at high levels unless they work together collaboratively. One of the propositions of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2004) is teachers must be members of “learning communities…who contribute to the effectiveness of their school by working collaboratively with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum development, and staff development” (p. 8). Matthews and Crow (2003) stated an important aspect of collaboration involves professionals working together in teams. Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2007) indicated that teachers who actively engage in professional learning communities will increase their professional knowledge and enhance student learning.

Bryk, Camburn, and Louis defined learning communities as schools in which “interaction among teachers is frequent and teachers’ actions are governed by shared norms focused on the practice and improvement of teaching and learning” (as quoted in Matthews & Crow, 2003, p. 164). Bryk et al. (as cited in Matthews & Crow) identified three core practices of a professional community: (a) inclusion of teachers engaging in reflective learning, (b) the deprivatization of practice which means teachers are sharing and making their ideas public, and (c) peer collaboration. Vescio et al. (2007) enhanced those ideas by stating other essential characteristics such as constant focus on student learning and reflective dialogue that leads to extensive and continuing conversations among teachers about curriculum, instruction, and student development. In regards to professional learning community meeting structure, Reeves, Emerick, and Hirsch (2006) stated, “Guidance with flexibility will foster and customize solutions for planning challenges facing individual schools.”

Mentoring is also an important collaborative relationship. Matthews and Crow (2003) stated, “Experienced teachers gain insight into their own teaching by sharing and reflecting as they mentor novices. Mentoring encourages them to be reflective about their own beliefs about teaching, students, learning, and their careers” (p. 90). Mentors for new teachers can yield other positive effects as well. One study claimed effective, within-field mentoring is related to higher levels of new teacher retention (Smith & Ingersoll, as cited in Young, 2007).

Programs Promoting Student Success

Our qualitative data indicated Sims has a multitude of structures in place to support students and staff to ensure student achievement. Teachers described various strategies they capitalize on to reach diverse learners. One teacher disclosed, “When students have whole group time we break them up to work to get them where they need to be.” By using data-driven
instruction and being dedicated, the staff at Sims provide all students opportunities for success. “[The teachers] do everything it takes to make sure each and every one gets educated.” This “everything it takes” attitude includes small-group instruction, after-school tutoring, and after-school programs to provide every student with the best chance to receive an education. The Sims philosophy of learning includes, “All of you can learn, you’re going to learn, it’s not an option.” Another teacher asserted, “We have a no-excuse mentality.” It is evident that the community prioritizes reflective practices to ensure student learning. Consequently, their reflective nature acknowledges areas of programmatic improvements.

When teachers were asked how special populations were served at Sims, a majority of the respondents agreed students were appropriately served in bilingual and special education programs; however, a key area of programmatic improvement was the Gifted and Talented (GT) Program. Respondents said, “unfortunately, our GT [students] are not getting special services,” and “we don’t have enough GT [identified students] and we know that.” Most respondents stated the GT population was underserved and that it was something they wanted to improve; 2 stated they were unaware of a GT program. According to the 2006-2007AEIS data, the Sims GT program does not have the student GT representation compared to other schools in the district, the district, or state (Figure 4). Another concern was the high retention rate at second grade (Figures 5 and 6) and teachers’ comments about lack of instructional support in the lower grades.

Figure 4. Gifted and Talented (GT) Program enrollment 2006-2007.
Figure 5. Retention rates for kindergarten (K), first, and second grade, 2005-2006.

Figure 6. Retention rates for kindergarten (K), first, and second grade, 2006-2007.

Educational Relevance

GT children exhibit “outside of the box” thinking and demonstrate skills that require differentiated instruction within a curriculum (Tomlinson, 2000; Van Tassel-Baska, 2006). “Differentiation is about high-quality performance for all individuals and giving students the opportunity to develop their particular strengths” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 24). Further, Tomlinson (1999) argues that educators prepare curriculum for students who are at risk of falling behind and
therefore should also be cognizant of preparing an appropriate curriculum for gifted and talented students (p. 21). Unfortunately, many minority students do not get identified and do not have the opportunities afforded to other gifted students. When reviewing reports on national demographics of gifted students in recent years, “the trends revealed that Black, Latino, and Native American students have always been underrepresented in gifted education programs, and in some years, their underrepresentation increased” (Harris, Brown, Ford, & Richardson, 2004, p. 19)

**Discipline**

Sims Elementary has faced many of the same challenges (i.e., high teacher turnover, low academic achievement, and high disciplinary actions) as other urban schools with similar demographics. Despite these sometimes overwhelming hurdles, over the past few years Sims staff have been very successful at mitigating many of the negative associations common to high poverty, urban schools, as illustrated by their turnaround from an Unacceptable accountability rating to receiving Recognized status for the 2005-06 school year from the Texas Education Association. Despite the increase in student achievement, there is still a general consensus among teachers and staff members that disciplinary issues on campus continue to be a major problem, impeding the teachers’ ability to maximize instructional time. As one teacher expressed, “The behavior is some of the biggest problems here and I think that’s the biggest thing. I spend a lot of time managing behavior.”

Interviews with Sims faculty and staff identified student discipline as a major concern, revealing a general perception of inconsistency in the way behavioral issues were addressed by administrators and an overall perceived lack of administrative support. More than one teacher reported that students “just sit there” when sent to the office. One teacher, discussing the same issue, commented, “Other teachers had the same situation.” Several teachers also reported a “lack of consequences” for student misbehavior. As a result of these perceptions, many teachers reported they no longer refer problematic students to the office. The following interviewee statement sums up the responses of these teachers: “We don’t even send them [students] to the office much anymore…we send them to each others’ room. We kind of take care of it ourselves.” These sentiments could explain the general disconnect encountered between teachers’ perception of student discipline and that of administrators. Not all administrators interviewed mentioned discipline as a problem. In light of these findings, referral data may not accurately reflect the true nature of discipline at Sims or be an appropriate measure, as used in the 2006-2007 CIP, to identify improvements in this area.

Although not as frequent, some teachers also reported disciplinary inconsistencies from classroom to classroom. One respondent said, “Right now it’s each child and classroom for itself.” Another expressed frustration in the following statement: “I can have my students walking quietly down the hall, but if they see fourth graders acting wild, they’re going to say, ‘I can’t wait until I’m older.’ It [discipline] needs to be across the board.” Despite seeing the previous evidence of teachers supporting each other with student discipline problems, there is
some concern, as expressed by another interviewee, that the lack of a campus-wide discipline plan may create a “not my kid, not my problem” attitude among teachers.

Another area of concern revealed in a few teacher interviews and further evidenced in the Discipline Report for the 2006-2007 School Year is disciplinary action inequities (see Figure 7). One teacher reported there was a “huge disparity between how Latino kids are disciplined and how African American kids are disciplined.” The teacher added, “Kids are not stupid, they see how it is.” Although it is not clear who is being treated unfairly in this statement, the discipline report clearly shows large discrepancies between the numbers of referrals given to African American students as compared to their Hispanic counterparts. These data do not reflect student or teacher specific disciplinary reports.

![Figure 7. Student discipline aggregate report, 2006-2007.](image)

Overall, when respondents were asked about school weaknesses and areas for improvement, the need specifically for a “school wide discipline plan” was the number one response. One teacher declared, “Lack of [a] consistent campus-wide discipline plan. That is huge. That has been a big, big problem.” In addition, various teachers hinted that one side effect of the lack of a school-wide discipline plan is higher teacher mobility. This sentiment was echoed by one respondent who noted,

One of the biggest needs is the school-wide discipline. Students come from rough families, they come to school angry. We need to address that as a school wide problem and come up with a plan, and I think it makes it hard for people to stay for that reason.

Although there is mention of a school discipline plan in the Sims Elementary 101 manual as well as the proposed development of such a plan in the 2007-2008 CIP, there is little evidence of such a school-wide discipline plan ever being materialized beyond a brief code of conduct outlined in
the teacher handbook, which mentions etiquette and “the mildest appropriate” consequences for misbehavior in the cafeteria, hallway, and dismissal times. Nowhere else is it clearly evident that an actual school-wide discipline plan is in effect. Based on the responses of the teachers and staff, if a plan does exist, it is not being articulated throughout the campus.

Educational Relevance

Student behavior and discipline are integral components of increased student achievement and teacher morale. Negative student behavior has a direct impact on student achievement (Chen, 2007). According to Cotton (1990), “Approximately one-half of all classroom time is taken up with activities other than instruction, and discipline problems are responsible for a significant portion of this lost instructional time” (para. 4). Furthermore, research cited by Lumsdem (1998) identified “good student behavior as one of the key conditions associated with high teacher satisfaction” (par.10).

The light-hearted personal approach to discipline of administrators towards students cited by many teachers is one disciplinary approach that can be supported by the research of Nelson, Lott, and Glen (2000). Nelson et al. have shown that punishment does not necessarily motivate students to display good behavior. They argued that instead of focusing on generic punishments, which can perpetuate bad behavior by ignoring the root causes of that behavior, teachers and administrators should look to remediate and prevent the behavior through logical consequences.

Although there are many equally valid approaches to the disciplining of students, Sims is still in need of addressing students’ behavioral issues in a coherent and consistent manner that distributes consequences equitably. This can be accomplished by creating a collaboratively developed, school-wide discipline plan that clearly communicates the behavior expectations and consequences to teachers, students, and parents (Colvin, 2007; Gaustad, 1992; Horner & Sugai, 2007). The components of such a discipline plan include creating a purpose statement and a school-wide statement of behavioral expectations, teaching behavioral expectations in the classroom, maintaining the expectations, correcting problem behaviors, and consistently applying and sustaining the plan for the long term (Colvin, 2007; Gaustad 1992; Horner & Sugai, 2007).

Summary: Structures for Support

Structures for support offer a way to provide continuity among school-wide systems. Data indicate three areas of needed support. First, respondents indicated that faculty collaboration is present at Sims Elementary; however, the effectiveness of it is in question. Clear expectations and structures for collaboration can ensure effectiveness. Second, according to respondents, programs for promoting academic success for all learners can and should be improved; the GT Program was specifically identified. Third, faculty and staff expressed a desire
to design and implement a school-wide discipline plan, which research has suggested will have a positive and direct impact on student achievement and teacher morale.

**Theme 3: Parent & Community Involvement**

Reviewing and analyzing the Sims interviews dealing with parent and community involvement revealed three distinct areas: (a) support for parents, (b) support from parents, and (c) support from the community. Support for parents is strong, and community support is viable according to respondents; however, respondents’ comments on parent participation proved to be somewhat contradictory. Some respondents believe one subpopulation of parents is more supportive than another.

**Quality Community Programs**

One of the greatest strengths at Sims Elementary is the process of parent empowerment through the support of various programs. Not only can parents receive support by attending functions such as parents’ nights (literacy night, a math night, and a science project night) and parenting classes, Sims parents also have access to resources such as food, clothing, and even job support. Many respondents spoke positively about the work accomplished at Sims Elementary through the parent support specialist. “She models some of the things that we need at the school, compassion, kindness, and generosity by always being open to help.” Through this program, Sims parents feel they can come to the school and be supported. This belief is additionally reflected in the 2006-2007 Sims Parent Climate Survey, where 88% of the parents responding agreed that “the Parent Support Specialist at my child’s school has made me more aware of AISD support services and community resources in Austin.” Furthermore, the data in Figure 8 illustrate the feeling of support they are provided by Sims staff.

There is evidence of parent involvement throughout the school and community. There is variance in the degree of involvement and the background of the volunteer. Parent volunteers assist students with reading and homework, participate in the parent-teacher organization and various committees, and help at grade-level parties. They also work in the office and cafeteria. Several staff members feel that parents are present, but they would like to see a deeper level of contribution. Forty-four percent of staff interviewed referenced a higher level of presence within the Hispanic community compared to the African American community. However, in a community interview, one respondent stated, “It’s a myth that Black folk don’t care about their children. Just tell us what you need and we’ll find a way to get it to you.”

The relationship between Sims Elementary and the surrounding community is one of pride. “Sims really has a history of being like a little bright star in this neighborhood.” The community support of Sims has varied through the years. The majority of staff members identified at least one form of community support, which has included tutoring from community members, donations (Caravel Shoes, financial, school supplies, clothing, personal hygiene...
packages, Christmas bags, necklaces for Mother’s Day projects, meals, and backpacks full of food), services (school cleaning and planting), programs (Boys and Girls Club, Neighborhood Longhorns, 21st Century), and equipment. “Dell came out 2 years ago and did work on the grounds, built a bench and canopy, repainted the U.S. map on the black top.” Despite the varied community supports, many staff members were not aware of who and how much the community partners with Sims. Community involvement also plays a significant role in the student academic performance. As stated in the 2006-2007 Sims Student Climate Survey, “increased parent and community involvement [are] strategies that have been shown to enhance school climate and students’ overall educational experience” (p. 6).

Figure 8. Parent survey.

The successful relationship between Sims Elementary and the parents and community could be affected by changes in school structure. Teacher, parent, staff, and administrator groups described the loss of a bilingual administrator in the front office as an area of concern. Effective
communication between Sims staff and the bilingual community is important, as some parents feel “we will not have a trust if we do have an interpreter. It is going to be a barrier.” Sims Elementary has recognized the need to continue to build relationships. “It’s really good to have someone in the front office who speaks Spanish. If there’s not somebody in the front office who can answer them, you end up alienating them.” Parents indicated that having a bilingual staff member in the office would contribute to having successful connections with bilingual parents and community members.

Educational Relevance

The 2008 Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC, 2008) standards and federal law mandate school leaders to create positive avenues of collaboration and communication with parents and community. Standard 4 states, “An educational leader promotes the success of every student by collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources” (ISLLC, 2008, p. 15). As a result, educational leaders promote the success of every student when they respond to the needs and interests of the parents and community.

Furthermore, studies have reported that support from parents has advantageous effects on student learning behaviors. “When parents are involved, students report more effort, concentration, and attention. Students are more inherently interested in learning, and they experience higher perceived competence” (Gonzales-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005, p. 117). Gonzales-DeHass et al. continued, “Studies reviewed in this article indicate that parent involvement, both in the home or school context, is associated with positive outcomes for the student’s motivation” (p. 120). Correlations between parent and increased student achievement have been made when one or more parent is involved. Data from the U.S. Department of Education’s 1996 National Household Education Survey finds that, “students in traditional two-parent families were 43 percent more likely to receive primarily ‘A’ grades if their fathers were highly involved in their schools. Those whose fathers did not live at home were 43 percent more likely to receive ‘A’ grades if their fathers participated in even one activity at school” (Gonzales-DeHass et al., p.5). “Students whose parents are involved report being more interested in learning” (Gonzales-DeHass et al., p. 117). Further, Gonzales-DeHass et al. cited the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement’s August 2005 newsletter as suggesting, “Successful parent school partnerships are not stand-alone, add on programs. Instead they are well integrated with the school’s overall mission” (p. 3).

As support for parents and parent support create positive outcomes for student achievement, community support follows suit. A word of caution, however: involvement from parents and community needs to be closely monitored, and any involvement must be responsive to the unique needs of cultural subgroups and family composition. Lunenburg (2002) reported that across Hispanic, African American, and White groups, involvement roles of audience, home tutor, and program supporter topped parent responses. Lunenburg identified that Hispanic
parents’ involvement falls into three additional areas: “having high expectations, having a firm belief in the educational system, and having a desire to be linked to the school” (p. 11). In a review of research into parent involvement, Pomerantz (2007) found that parent involvement had a greater impact for African American than for European American children.

**Summary: Parent and Community Involvement**

Sims Elementary School has an outstanding system for supporting parents. The parent and community are also highly involved at Sims, with widely varying degrees of involvement. Although the relationship between the school and the surrounding community and parents within is present, there is room for improvement. Parent involvement has a positive effect on effort, concentration, attention, and motivation. Therefore, the perceived disparity between African American parental involvement and Hispanic parental involvement is troubling. There is concern about the effect of not having a bilingual presence in the front office, possibly negatively affecting the bilingual parent and community relationships. Efforts made to alleviate tension by addressing the lack of bilingual representation should bolster the relationships among school, parents, and community. Community involvement produces similar results, but must be focused on quality not quantity.

**Theme 4: School Environment and Safety**

The issues of school environment and campus safety were not specific interview questions posed to Sims Elementary stakeholders. These issues revealed themselves when interviewees were asked to tell us about their school and to discuss things they would like to change about Sims. Interviews with Sims faculty, staff, parents, and community members revealed contrasting views of Sims as a safe school environment and the level of campus maintenance. Data found in campus climate surveys and our interviews established that many Sims stakeholders believe their school to be a safe learning environment, whereas others feel that Sims has opportunities for improvement when it comes to safety, cleanliness, and maintenance issues.

**Safe School Environment**

We asked interviewees to describe their school and to mention things they would like to change about their school. The answers varied, but a common theme among many of the interviewees was the issue of safety on campus as a result of the community environment surrounding Sims. Several parents and teachers agreed that Sims was a safe haven for the children who go to school there. One parent said of her child, “You know when they’re here, they’re safe.” A teacher agreed, “Here’s their heaven where they are safe.” Student and Parent Climate Surveys conducted by AISD in 2007 reflected the belief that students are safe at Sims. As evident in the data presented in Figure 9 (where a score of 3.0 or higher reflects a positive response), students’ feelings of safety have remained stable over the last 3 school years.
evident in Figure 10 is that more parents strongly agree or agree that their child’s school is a safe learning environment than in previous years.

\[0.0\ 0.5\ 1.0\ 1.5\ 2.0\ 2.5\ 3.0\ 3.5\ 4.0\ 4.5\ 5.0\]

\[2005-2006\ 2006-2007\ 2007-2008\]

Figure 9. Student Climate Survey on Environment and Safety.
Although several teachers and parents stated that they felt students are safe while at Sims Elementary, some stakeholders raised concern about the safety and security issues raised by the community environment surrounding Sims. One community member noted that students tend to avoid walking along Springdale Road because of heavy traffic, and that s/he had witnessed students cutting through the cemetery in order to avoid prolonged exposure to unsafe conditions. This community member also mentioned the lack of speed bumps surrounding Sims Elementary. Some parents and teachers noted that the illegal activity that goes on around Sims affects the learning environment. One teacher stated, “We had three lockdowns, which is a lot.” Another teacher mentioned, “I’ve found pot on the playground this year, and all the 5-year-olds knew what it was.” A number of stakeholders also mentioned that the community environment’s impact on safety also presents itself after school hours. One staff member proclaimed,

Drugs and prostitution come out. It’s too dangerous for the kids to come out. People at the bus stop, they’re not going anywhere, but they’re just hanging around. It’s a different atmosphere compared to during the day. We all feel like it’s really dangerous for kids to be around in the community any other time besides during the day. It’s pretty scary even for staff because of all that goes on. We don’t want any of our kids to get into any of that, and to protect them from any of that is to get them home.

Figure 10. Parent Climate Survey on Environment and Safety.
Several interviewees expressed the need to keep kids safe while they are at Sims because they know what they have to deal with when they leave school. They revealed an understanding that they cannot control many outside factors with regards to safety, but they can control what happens in the school.

**Campus Maintenance**

Respondents reported concerns with regard to campus maintenance ranging from aesthetics to necessary upgrades. One teacher remarked, “If we could get someone to help us purchase picnic tables. A little bit more atmosphere. Friendly things.” Administrators and teachers voiced a need for renovations and seemed concerned that Sims might be considered by the district to be a low-priority campus. When asked what changes s/he would like to see at Sims, one teacher replied, “Well, because we are low income we always get the low end of the stick. Equipment, repairs, classrooms—we are low on technology and these kids need to be exposed to that.” The general sentiment of faculty and staff regarding maintenance was captured by one teacher, who stated a simple desire: “Inside and outside of [the school] if things that need to be fixed can be fixed, that’d be great.” While researchers were on campus conducting interviews, we directly observed broken items including tiles, sinks, stall doors, water fountains, and the presence of mold. It is uncertain whether or not these conditions are prevalent in the district or unique to this campus.

By and large, when asked what changes they would like to see at Sims, teachers and parents alike expressed that cleanliness is an issue. As one teacher noted,

I think what bothers me is that the school is not as clean as other schools. …I hope when we complain about things not being what they need to be, [our new principal] will put her foot down. Restrooms not being as clean and trash not being taken out bothers me.

One parent concurred that the cleanliness of the school is lacking and even donated cleaning supplies to clean the bathroom. Despite frequent reports of dissatisfaction with sanitary conditions, the general consensus among respondents was not to lay blame with the custodial staff. As one teacher mentioned, “Our custodial staff needs help. [Things] could be more clean.” Another teacher observed, “Lots of people fuss about the custodial staff, but if they started on a good foot it would get done,” suggesting that a thorough, professional cleaning conducted before the start of the school year could be maintained more easily.

**Educational Relevance**

There is substantial research on the impact of the school environment and climate on student achievement and learning. The American Federation of Teachers (2006) found, “Unhealthy and unsafe school conditions make it difficult for students to concentrate, for teachers to teach, and for staff to do their jobs” (p. 5). Freiberg (1998) also noted, “School climate can be a positive influence on the health of the learning environment or a significant
barrier to learning” (p. 22). In order for learning to take place, students need a safe, clean, and well-maintained learning environment, according to the American Federation of Teachers.

When thinking about the safety of public schools, Stephens (1998) emphasized it is important to realize that “a safe community is a prerequisite for a safe school. However, schools can no longer be seen as ‘islands of safety’” (p. 254). This perspective assumes that a school cannot be taken out of the context of its community and the level of safety present in a school is directly related to the level of safety found in its community. Stephens continued,

Violence has invaded far too many of the nation’s schools. …Nationally, of every twelve children who are absent from school on a given day, one child stays away because of fear. School safety has also become a leading concern for inner city teachers; they, too, are demanding a safer environment. (p. 254)

A positive and safe environment has implications that reach beyond student achievement and learning. A positive school climate also has been “associated with fewer behavioral and emotional problems for students” (Marshall, 2003, p. 2).

Likewise, data support the notion that students are greatly influenced by the physical state of their learning environment. According to a study conducted by the American Federation of Teachers (2006), the effect of well-maintained facilities on education cannot be overstated:

The urgent conversation about educational improvement in our country is usually missing one critical element—the physical condition of many of our schools. …We must stop ignoring the impact that the physical environment plays in students’ health and learning. And to allow school staff to perform at their best, we must expect that school buildings meet the highest standards of facility excellence. (p. 20)

This research indicates that the impact of the physical condition of our schools extends beyond the student body. A 2004 study (as cited by the American Federation of Teachers, 2006) found that “facility quality is an important predictor of the decision of teachers to leave their current position” (p. 8). Recruiting and retaining quality teachers to ensure student achievement could be compromised if the campus is perceived as poorly maintained.

Regarding building equity issues raised by the Sims community, Lair (2003) asserted, “Educators and lawmakers must consider the role that school facilities play in providing an equitable, efficient and quality education” (p. 7). Mirroring the concerns of some Sims respondents, Lair considered greater implications of inequity: “Blatant discrimination and denial of needed benefits for disadvantaged students would not be tolerated in Texas. Yet, some could argue that denial of access to certain school facilities is a form of discrimination” (p. 186).

**Summary: School Environment and Safety**

Interviews with teachers and parents revealed a sense of relative safety within the walls of Sims Elementary and a desire to sustain that safety in light of the dangers present in the
community environment. Faculty, staff, and parents also commented on the need to prioritize the cleanliness and maintenance of the school facility. Research suggests the creation of a safe, clean, and well-maintained school environment will directly impact the creation of an affective, equitable learning environment.

**Recommendations**

Based on analysis of our findings and research on the four themes of (a) Unity: Peer and Faculty Cohesion, (b) Structures for Support, (c) Parent and Community Involvement, and (d) School Environment and Safety, we offer the following recommendations. These recommendations are research based, and we hope they serve as a supplement for the continuation of Sims Elementary’s journey to an equitable and quality education for all students.

**Unity: Peer and Faculty Cohesion**

Unity can be described as a tightly woven circle and an interconnectedness among all stakeholders. A cohesive school is one where “everyone walks the talk” and has a “shared understanding” (Wisconsin Urban Schools Leadership Project, 2008, p. 15). Unity on a campus establishes a universal commitment to the school and one another; “all participants remain dependent on others to achieve desired outcomes and feel empowered by their efforts,” which can influence academic achievement (Wisconsin Urban Schools Leadership Project, 2008).

Unity is threatened when, as mentioned previously, situations are handled negatively or unprofessionally. Collegiality deals with the “manner in which the staff members in the school interact and the extent to which they approach their work as professionals” (Marzano, 2003, p. 60). It is recommended that Sims establish norms of conduct and behavior that “engender collegiality and professionalism,” such as “how staff will resolve conflicts and how they will behave in professional activities” (Marzano, 2003, p. 65). Strategies for defining and creating norms can be found in DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker’s (2006) *Learning by Doing*.

In order to promote unity and more “trust as the basis for relationships” (Wisconsin Driver Behaviors, 2008, p. 15), we recommend that Sims develop “rituals, symbols, and ceremonies that reinforce the shared values” (Wisconsin Driver Behaviors, 2008, p. 15). These rituals should be consistent and all inclusive. The importance of these relationships is backed by Martinez (2004) in *Teachers Working Together for School Success* in that “worker satisfaction and productivity are influenced by social interaction” (p. 4). Additionally, Bryk and Schneider (2003) found, “Schools with high relational trust were much more likely to demonstrate marked improvements in student learning” (p. 43)

Concerning teacher morale, Bolin (1987) advised that teachers first recognize their discouraged state in order for them to be encouraged. Through self-reflection comes renewal and
a reminder of their purpose in education. Berman (1987) suggested that teachers take on initiative and find ways to rejuvenate their teaching practice. Instead of letting external factors control attitudes, teachers should remember that their “commitment to the education and welfare of children must remain the primary concern” (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 41). Consequently, according to Osborn (2006), increasing teacher job satisfaction can reduce attrition. Structures for support and the following recommendations also should play a significant role in increasing morale and lessening mobility.

**Structures for Support**

Structures for support are structures within the school that set up students for academic achievement. We have focused our study on collaboration, programs for promoting academic achievement, and discipline.

The first structure of support requiring attention is teacher collaboration. Our research participants stated that there is a lack of consistency among collaborative groups and expressed concern surrounding groups who tend not to collaborate at all, or to collaborate in an ineffective manner. Although some collaboration is present on campus, providing structure for those collaborative relationships will enhance teaching practices and affect student achievement. Khorsheed (2007) discussed several ways to create significant blocks of time and innovative teacher grouping to ensure all stakeholders are able to collaborate in the most effective manner. We recommend that Sims administrators and faculty collaborate to find and create significant chunks of time at least once a week for each grade level to hold professional learning community meetings with all stakeholders present (such as special-education and special-areas teachers). We also recommend establishing guidelines and clear expectations for professional learning communities and assigning one facilitator for each grade level to help ensure effective use of time and create continuity among all grade levels. The facilitator may be a specialist, administrator, or another campus leader. Reeves et al. (2006) quoted one principal as saying, “There needs to be some guidance on planning time…and we (principals) need to do more to help ensure that time has value” (p. 5). Reeves et al. gave some examples for holding teams accountable for the content of their meetings, such as keeping team minutes or journals. We also recommend that administrators provide staff development for defining what professional learning communities should look like and what the expectations are.

The Sims CIP and Sims Elementary 101 Guide outline guidelines for mentors and new teachers with appropriately matched mentor and mentees and regular meeting times. Our recommendations are that the plans in place be revisited and enhanced by more clearly defining the roles and including “action steps” in the CIP regarding mentors. Matthews and Crow (2003) offered insightful information regarding (a) the mentor selection process, (b) knowledge and skills that are necessary for mentors, and (c) allowing new teachers time and energy to be effective recipients of mentoring.
The second structure requiring support is the GT Program. Our recommendations include professional development on the nature and needs of GT students to increase student identification and teacher GT pedagogical knowledge. This training should help teachers to identify students in their classroom who exhibit GT characteristics in order to provide more appropriate curriculum. “Students differ in experience, readiness, interest, intelligences, language, culture, gender, and mode of learning. As one elementary teacher noted, ‘Children already come to us differentiated. It just makes sense that we would differentiate our instruction in response to them’” (Tomlinson, 2000, p. 24).

To build up the GT Program, establish a separate goal in the CIP that is explicit and identifies changes to meet the needs of gifted students. A committee could be dedicated to the specific issues that warrant attention: Empower the GT committee, increase the number of nominations in the fall, and celebrate the students who are accepted in the GT Program. We would also make the recommendation to examine the retention rates in kindergarten through second grade.

The third structure of support warranting attention is the area of discipline. Based on the concerns expressed by teachers and faculty, and as indicated by the CIP and the Discipline Reports for the 2006-2007 School Year, there appears to be a specific need for a campus-wide discipline plan. It is our recommendation that Sims Elementary create a plan designed in line with the latest research-based practices, such as Positive Behavioral Systems (Horner & Segai, 2007), a program with which the incoming principal already has familiarity. We also recommend looking into professional development for teachers in need of cultural awareness or diversity training, effective classroom management, or strategies for working with students with ADD/ADHD, as each of these areas was specifically mentioned as an area of concern by respondents. Several interviewees mentioned the improvement in behavior seen in children whose parents or guardians observed classroom behavior. It is our recommendation that as part of Sims Elementary’s overall parental involvement practices, parents be invited to become more involved in their children’s discipline.

Parent and Community Involvement

Gonzales-DeHass et al. (2005) defined parent support “in terms of parenting behaviors directed towards children’s education” (p. 101) The U.S. Department of Education (1996) defined it as “regular two-way and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities” (p. 2). This report utilizes a hybrid of the two definitions considering parent involvement as parenting behaviors directed towards children’s academic learning, where the parent is accessible, engaged, or present in the schools. For example, parent involvement may involve helping the student with homework, sending materials to the classroom, or planting flowers in the school courtyard. Community involvement is defined as “a group of people and/or organizations that are connected to each other through common interests, such as providing neighborhood services, or common characteristics such as geographical
location” (Burkhauser, Bronte-Tinkaw, & Kennedy, 2008, p. 1). According to Burkhauser et al., the range for community involvement and community members “may include individuals, families, schools, business, religious organizations, museums, libraries, and colleges and universities, among others, and they may demonstrate their involvement in various ways” (p. 1).

ISLLC (2008) Standard 4 targets three ways for an educational leader to promote “the success of every student: collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources” (p. 17). It requires that leadership “promote understanding, appreciation and use of the community’s diverse cultural, social, and intellectual resources, build and sustain positive relationships with families and caregivers, [and] build and sustain positive relationships with community partners” (p. 17).

Additionally, more specific ways educational leaders can target involvement with parents, specifically fathers, begin when planning school events. On the PTA Web site, O’Shea (2008) recommended,

Start and end on time. Many fathers have to get back to work at a particular time. If events start and end late, many fathers will become discouraged and won’t return. ... Let dads help outside of regular school hours. Some fathers simply can’t make it into the building, so offer involvement opportunities on evenings and weekends, such as building shelves for the library or buying some of the supplies for Family Fun Night. Some dads can be a big help with fundraising, too. (para. 9-10).

A U.S. Department of Education (1996) study found,

Schools that succeed in engaging families from very diverse backgrounds share three key practices: focusing on building trusting collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and community members; recognizing, respecting, and addressing families’ needs and any class and cultural differences; and embracing a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared. (p. 2)

Marzano (2003) recommended three action steps for effective involvement of parents and community:

Establish vehicles for communication between schools and parents and the community; establish multiple ways for parents and community to be involved in the day-to-day running of the school; [and] establish governance vehicles that allow for the involvement of parents and community members. (p. 151)

While many campus activities already follow these suggestions, the action steps can be used to enhance and strengthen existing programs and establish new opportunities for parent involvement.
Community Involvement

Partnerships between schools and parents and community members strengthen and empower schools to improve student’s learning. While Sims already has a strong partnership with the community, during the member check with the incoming principal it was established that the staff should be made aware of all current partnerships. In order to cultivate a deeper community involvement, Sims first could consider preexisting relationships and how those partnerships could be developed further. When expanding community partnerships, the school could include current partners in the search for new community resources. A suggested process is to determine and prioritize what specific needs the school has that community involvement could support; to make a list of potential partnership candidates, such as businesses, museums, libraries, other schools (including universities), or other worthwhile organizations that support student learning; and to define expectations of qualified community members before requesting support but stay open to community member’s suggestions. Burkhauser (2008) suggested that when communicating with potential supporters, stakeholders should not assume that the candidate knows about the school and the programs requesting support. In addition to community support within the local area, grant writing support could fill the needs of Sims programs through educational organizations (Jehl, 2007). Another opportunity is partnering with local colleges and university. The current relationship with The University of Texas (or other schools) could be expanded to include pen-pal programs, partnering teacher education programs (current university students) with Sims students to improve language and literacy skills (Massey, 2007). The strong and dedicated leaders at Sims Elementary School are highly capable of ensuring program success with collaboration and support of staff members.

Bilingual Programs

The incoming principal is aware of concerns regarding bilingual representation in the front office and has actively sought bilingual staff. If additional funding is not available for hiring a full-time bilingual administrator or counselor in the front office, the principal could consider research indicating that principals in a school with one predominant language build community support by learning to communicate in that language (Gardiner & Enomoto 2006). Gardiner and Enomoto suggested participation in professional development to learn the history and culture. A logistical possibility may be to move the counselor or reading coach (if bilingual) to the front office.

School Environment and Safety

School environment can be described as the external physical conditions both inside and outside the walls of Sims Elementary School, including conditions that affect the cleanliness and maintenance of the school facility. Safety takes into account conditions that affect the safety of students, faculty, and staff.
The U.S. Department of Education (as cited in the American Federation of Teachers, 2006) commissioned a study on the health and learning impacts of environmentally unhealthy public school buildings on students and teachers. The findings were that poor facility environments adversely affect the health, performance, and attendance of students. Taking into account the limited resources available to Sims Elementary, we recommend the implementation of service-learning projects that focus on improving the campus facilities (e.g., gardening projects, trash pickup, classroom cleanliness, etc.). As noted earlier in this study, Lair (2003) stated, “Educators and lawmakers must consider the role that school facilities play in providing an equitable, efficient and quality education as they continue their efforts to improve student achievement” (p. 7). Lair continued, “Clearly, properly renovated aging buildings commingled with quality teaching, aligned innovative curriculum, and visionary leaders make a difference in student achievement” (p. 184). It is our recommendation that Sims leadership promote parent-teacher organizations or committees to work collaboratively on improving safety measures and providing school maintenance. Research also supports the creation of a campus-level building maintenance committee to identify building problems, brainstorm possible solutions and necessary resources, seek outside assistance, and ensure follow through (Noonan, 2004). To address the perception of unequal distribution of resources, a community task force could conduct an audit of Sims as well as comparable campuses to evaluate the equity of facilities, technology, and equipment.

Students’ physical safety is another critical factor in creating the necessary conditions for student academic achievement. The threats from the surrounding environments can affect students’ readiness to learn. Stephens (1998) suggested, “Placing school safety on the educational agenda is a mandatory step toward safer and better schools” (p. 273). We recommend that Sims faculty and staff place safety in the mission statement and campus-wide vision to ensure that safety is and remains a priority. Furthermore, Stephens stated that schools need to “develop a comprehensive, system-wide safe school plan” that focuses not only on “security and supervision options, but also on educational options, including community and corporate partnerships” (p. 273). It is our recommendation that campus leaders collaborate with teachers, parents, law enforcement, the courts, social service personnel, religious organizations, and corporations to develop, implement, review, and revise a school-wide safety plan.

**Conclusion**

The 2008 University of Texas Principalship Cohort study of Sims Elementary School identified four major themes through the review of data: (a) Unity: Peer and Faculty Cohesion, (b) Structures for Support, (c) Parent and Community Involvement, and (d) School Environment and Safety. Each area presented areas of strength as well as opportunities for growth. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed to create the current story of Sims Elementary, and research-based best practices were identified to support growth in the focus areas.
Commitment to the school and community anchored the focal area of peer and faculty cohesion; however, some concerns began to emerge as some staff and teachers raised the issue of internal conflict and declining staff morale. Recommendations for increasing peer and faculty cohesion included establishing norms of conduct and behavior to promote collegiality; developing rituals, symbols, and ceremonies to reinforce shared values; and encouraging staff to self-reflect to renew their passion for education.

The Sims community also indicated the presence of several structures for support that have met some level of success leading to student achievement. Faculty and staff interviews indicated needed improvement in collaboration, programs for promoting student achievement, and discipline. Key recommendations suggest implementing professional learning communities, outlining guidelines and expectations for mentoring new teachers, providing professional development on meeting the needs of GT students, and creating a school-wide discipline plan.

Parent and community involvement showed great successes at Sims Elementary, and opportunities to increase involvement were identified. The strong support for parents and opportunities for parent involvement on the campus came through solid campus programs. Some respondents shared a desire for parental involvement at a deeper level and the belief that one subpopulation’s parents were more involved than another. Recommendations to help increase parent and community involvement include promoting, understanding, and appreciating the community’s diverse resources; offering flexible times for volunteering; and building trusting, collaborative relationships with families that respect their needs.

The final area of focus, school environment and safety, also shows several successes for Sims Elementary to celebrate. A key success is that faculty, staff, and parents perceived a sense of safety within the walls of Sims and declared a strong desire to sustain that safety in light of the perceived dangers in the community environment. Data sources suggested needed improvement with campus cleanliness and maintenance. Recommendations from research suggest implementing service-learning projects focused on improving campus facilities, promoting parent-teacher committees to work collaboratively on safety measures and school maintenance, and creating a campus-level building maintenance committee.

We cannot express deeply enough our appreciation to the members of the Mary Jane Sims community for sharing their time and insights about this remarkable school. It is our hope that the findings and recommendations included in this report will assist campus members in achieving the mission, goals and vision of Sims Elementary.
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