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**THE ROLE OF INSTITUTION, IDEOLOGY, INTERESTS, AND INFORMATION  
IN THE DECISION TO DEPARTMENTALIZE IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS**

A Dissertation in  
Educational Leadership  
by  
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## ABSTRACT

Given escalating accountability requirements under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), educators and administrators face intensified pressure to significantly increase student achievement in their schools. Changing how schools and classrooms are organized for instruction, as a strategy for school improvement, has been one response to this pressure. Departmentalizing in the elementary school serves as one example of such an organizational change. Very little research, however, specifically addresses elementary-level departmentalization. Without a strong research basis for their decision to departmentalize, how are schools making this choice in an era in which evidence-based decision making is demanded?

This qualitative study explored the decision-making process involved in determining whether or not to departmentalize in the elementary grades through an in-depth case study of one small, rural Pennsylvania district, where the choice to departmentalize has been made. Specifically, the study sought to provide insight into the involvement of individual stakeholders in the decision; the influence of these stakeholders' ideologies, interests, and access to information on the decision; and the impact of the institution on the decision. The benefits and limitations of elementary departmentalization were also described.

Data collection occurred over a two-month period and included individual conversational interviews with 3 administrators and 13 teachers, 3 parent focus group interviews, and analysis of a variety of relevant documents. Extensive analysis was primarily accomplished through pattern coding, based on the research questions. The research resulted in a thick, rich description of the district's long-standing experience with departmentalization in the sixth grade and its recent decisions to expand departmentalization to the fifth grade and to explore departmentalization in fourth grade.

Two broad conclusions were drawn from the research. For one, the institution exerted a significant influence on the decision-making process and on the ultimate decision. This institutional context influenced the individuals' perceptions of their own interests, ideologies, and knowledge used in the decision-making process. The second conclusion drawn from the research suggested that semi-departmentalization may effectively reduce many of the limitations typically associated with a departmentalized approach by balancing a student-centered approach with content specificity. A number of recommendations for practice and for further research were also provided.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Overview

Confronted with the politics of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and escalating Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements, educators and administrators are feeling the pressure to significantly increase student achievement in their schools (Andrews, Duncombe, & Yinger, 2002; Duke, 2006a; Research for Action, 2004). Politicians face similar pressure to support claims of NCLB success and to justify continued federal involvement. In reality, however, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores indicate that fourth grade reading scores have plateaued; and, while mathematics scores have continued to increase, the rate of progress has slowed since the implementation of NCLB (Fuller, Wright, Gesicki, & Kang, 2007).

Under increased accountability pressures, educators and administrators may find themselves reacting, rather than deliberately responding, to the need for instructional improvements. Successful change, however, is more likely, when districts maintain a strong focus on improving instruction, establish clear strategies for improvement, carefully assess external pressures, involve all stakeholders in a focused response, and appropriately allocate resources to support instruction (Wagner, Kegan, Lahey, Lemons, Garnier, & Helsing, 2006).

Given the intensified interest in school improvement, Duke (2006b) examined studies of what he calls “school turnarounds” and identified 11 elements of successful school improvement efforts:

- Providing timely student assistance;
- Expecting teacher collaboration;
- Making data-based decisions;

- Leading the school improvement process effectively;
- Adjusting the organizational structures to increase student achievement;
- Providing continual staff development;
- Aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment;
- Assessing student progress regularly;
- Maintaining high expectations for student achievement;
- Communicating with parents and enlisting parental support; and
- Adjusting the schedule to increase time on task, particularly in math and reading.

Duke (2006a) also studied 15 cases in which elementary schools were able to successfully turn around low performing schools and maintain this improvement for two or more years. Assuming that in order for these schools to improve, changes had to occur; Duke investigated the initiatives associated with each school's turnaround. The identified changes in practices were clustered into eight categories: leadership, school policy, programs, organizational processes and procedures, staffing and personnel, classroom practices, parent and community involvement, and school facilities. In examining these changes, Duke noted the following in regard to the organization of elementary schools:

The cherished image of the traditional elementary school with its self-contained classrooms and solitary teachers is disappearing. In its place is a much more complex and complicated organization involving more team teaching and team planning, greater reliance on specialists, and variable schedules dictated by student needs. The case studies reveal that turning around low-performing elementary schools may necessitate flexible ability-grouping, a host of supplementary programs, and partnerships with community groups. (p. 27)

The notion that improving schools involves changing how schools and classrooms are organized for instruction is not an innovative concept. In fact, structural reform—labeled *school restructuring*—is a sanction under NCLB for schools who enter *Corrective Action II* after failing to make AYP for a sixth consecutive year (Research for Action, 2004). Restructuring is a complex term with wide definitions. “At some basic level, though, all advocates of restructuring believe that changing the way schools are organized will cause teachers to teach differently; hence students will learn differently, and the overall performance of schools will increase” (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996, p. 1). Elmore et al. define school restructuring as changing how students are grouped for learning, changing how teachers relate to students and to colleagues, and changing the way time is allocated to the various subjects throughout the day. He suggests that, under pressure to improve, schools are drawn to making changes in organizational structures because these are visible indicators of action to both those inside and outside of schools.

One such change in the organizational structure of elementary schools that has come in and out of popularity throughout the last century has been departmentalization (Anderson, 1966; Franklin & Johnson, 1967). A review of the literature in regard to departmentalization finds a few studies on student achievement and social-emotional development and a number of opinions on the issue. This literature, however, is dated, often lacks empirical evidence, and is generally inconclusive and contradictory. Very little research looks specifically at elementary-level departmentalization. Without a strong research basis for their decision to departmentalize, how are schools making this choice? Who is involved in the decision? What are the factors that tip the scales in favor of (or against) departmentalization? This research project explored some of

these unanswered questions regarding elementary-level departmentalization in an effort to offer insight into how the decision to departmentalize is being made.

### **Statement of the Problem and Research Questions**

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the decision-making process involved in determining whether or not to departmentalize in the elementary grades. Specifically, this study addressed the following questions:

1. What were the institutional factors influencing the decision to consider departmentalization?
2. Who were the stakeholders involved in the decision? Why?
3. How did stakeholders' ideologies, interests, and access to information influence their decision in regard to departmentalization?
4. What elements of departmentalization were viewed as positive? Why? What elements were viewed as undesirable? Why?

An in-depth case study of one district, where the choice to departmentalize has been made, was conducted in an effort to provide insight into the factors influencing this decision.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Over the course of the last three decades, the role of school administrators has evolved from that of manager to that of leader. In today's era of accountability and school reform, educators must continually consider options to improve their schools. As such, decision-making models abound, and group decision making has become standard practice. No Child Left Behind requirements have forced schools to examine data and to use scientifically-based research as the foundation for classroom practices (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008). In addition, "Educators also find that their personal interests make some decisions difficult. That is, they

often must choose between doing what is right and doing what is personally advantageous” (Kowalski et al., 2008, pp. 68-69).

Given these factors, Weiss’s (1995) decision-making framework provides an appropriate conceptual lens for analyzing the elementary school departmentalization decision. Weiss’s model for decision making is grounded in the institutional perspective of organizational theory. Within organizational theory, two contrasting paradigms for analysis predominate in the educational setting: the rational and the institutional perspectives (Ogawa, Sandholtz, Martinez-Flores, and Scribner, 2003). Institutional theory is a reaction “against closed, rational systems models that portray organizations as relatively autonomous units concerned primarily with achieving technical efficiency” (Rowan & Miskel, 1999, p. 361). Rowan and Miskel (1999) contend that institutional factors play a critical role in the collective action of an organization. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) assert that structural change is less directed by the goal of technical efficiency as it is by bureaucratization. Organizational change occurs “as the result of processes that make organizations more similar without necessarily making them more efficient” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 147).

Institutional theory emphasizes that organizations are open systems—strongly influenced by their environments—but that it is not only competitive and efficiency-based forces that are at work. Socially constructed belief and rules systems exercise enormous control over organizations—both how they are structured and how they carry out their work. (Scott, 2003, pp. 119-120)

“Institutionalized products, services, techniques, policies, and programs function as powerful myths, and many organizations adopt them ceremonially. But conformity to institutionalized rules often conflicts sharply with efficiency criteria” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 340-341).

From an institutional perspective, organizations are characterized by goal ambiguity, ceremonialization of evaluation, and emphasis on professionalism and human relations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). “Institutionalized organizations protect their formal structures from evaluation on the basis of technical performance” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 357). Survival, not productivity, is the basic concern (Ogawa et al., 2003; Rowan & Miskel, 1999). Organizations become loosely coupled, disconnecting “formal structure from work activity to avoid the loss of legitimacy that would occur if inconsistencies between structure and activity were revealed” (Ogawa et al., 2003, p. 152). “What legitimates institutionalized organizations, enabling them to appear useful in spite of the lack of technical validation, is the confidence and good faith of their internal participants and their external constituents” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, pp. 357-358). In other words, stakeholders validate institutionalized organizations more so than effective operations (Ogawa et al., 2003).

For instance, the community and the board have confidence in the teachers. Similarly, all parties have confidence that whatever is taught in first-grade reading or senior physics is appropriate. This confidence is not based on an inspection of activities, but on the knowledge that the person or activity in question is properly certified or accredited. The certification process itself takes on sacred properties and is not questioned. As long as the logic of confidence applies, a person can do his or her work with the knowledge that others will not interfere. As a result, the school’s work gets done. (Herriott & Firestone, 1984, p. 44)

Thus, formal structures are institutionalized in order to provide the necessary confidence and, therefore, legitimacy to sustain the organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Ogawa et al., 2003).

In regard to educational decision making, Weiss (1995) contends that the “institution of

schools rather than the single school organization” (p. 576) influences individual preferences and impacts the ultimate organizational action. Weiss’s framework suggests that there are three elements that interact to influence the decision of an individual: ideology (values, beliefs, and philosophies), interests (self-interests), and information (knowledge).

It is important to note that Weiss’s definition of the concept of information does not place boundaries upon the individual’s knowledge. Therefore, incomplete, incorrect, and biased understandings are all included in the decision-making interplay. Sources of information considered by the individual within the decision-making process, regardless of their accuracy, include: knowledge from direct experience and training, unconscious assumptions, informal contacts from outside friends and experts, and empirical evidence.

Within an organization, a fourth element—the institution—shapes the ideologies, interests, and knowledge of the individuals. Weiss contends that institutions influence decisions through their rules, structures, and norms, as well as through their standard operating procedures. Decisions ultimately result from the interaction between the preferences of the individuals within an organization and the values and constraints of the organizational institution. Combined, these four “I’s”—institution, ideology, interests, and information—interact to influence the resulting decision.

“Every individual decision is the product of the interplay among ideology, interests, and information” (Weiss, 1995, p. 577). For example, individual values and philosophies have an affect on receptivity to new information. New information re-defines individual interests; and self-interests guide the establishment of an individual’s political and philosophical stances.

Weiss suggests that, in regard to school reform efforts, the institutional influence on a decision is strong. While administrators are more likely to demonstrate a desire for innovation;

teachers, on the other hand, are more likely to conform to the values and norms of the school environment. Access to information also differs between teachers and administrators, with administrators being more likely to rely on research and other professional sources from outside the institution. Teachers, however, tend to distrust outside information and place more value on knowledge gained from their own experience and practice. With limited external information to change ideologies, self-interest in maintaining status quo, and an institutional structure that encourages compliance; the resistance of teachers to change is to be expected. As Weiss posits:

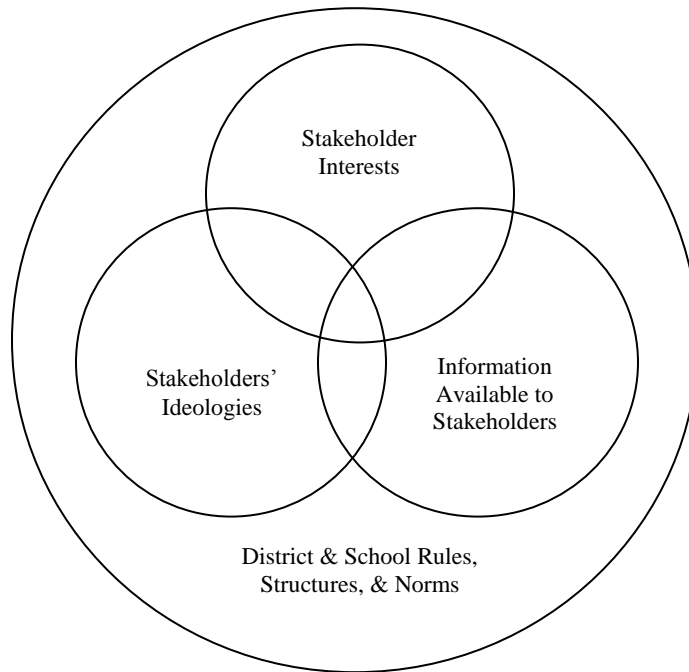
...old patterns of thought and behavior are hard to overcome. People's values resist rapid change; their perception of self-interest does not yield readily to minor rearrangements of incentives; information channels tend to stick in the old grooves; and the overarching press of institutional culture and tradition tends to keep the other elements in stasis. (p. 588)

Given this institutional "drag," Weiss contends that in order for a reform effort to truly be successful, the institution itself must change. Strengthening the ideologies, interests, and foundational knowledge of the individuals within the institution may provide the necessary support, motivation, and power for effective change.

In regard to elementary departmentalization, the decision-making framework can be represented as seen in Figure 1 (Weiss, 1995, p. 575). The individual stakeholders involved in this decision include administrators, teachers, parents, and students. As demonstrated by the overlapping circles, the self-interests of each stakeholder interact with the information available to them regarding departmentalization and also with their personal ideology regarding the student-orientation versus the subject-matter orientation of instruction. These circles are embedded within the larger circle representing the district and the school—the institution. The



rules, structures, and norms of the institution all impact the individuals' interests, ideologies, and information. The decision regarding departmentalization results from the interplay between all of these components.



*Figure 1.* Interaction of the 4 ‘I’s’ influencing the departmentalization decision. Adapted from “The Four ‘I’s’ of School Reform: How Interests, Ideology, Information, and Institution Affect Teachers and Principals,” by C. H. Weiss, 1995, *Harvard Educational Review*, 65(4), p. 575. Copyright 1995 by President and Fellows of Harvard College.

### **Significance of the Study**

The debate regarding how to best structure elementary schools has been contended, and essentially left unresolved, throughout the last century (Franklin, 1967; Gibb & Matala, 1962; Lamme, 1976; McGrath & Rust, 2002; Otto & Sanders, 1964; Slavin, 1986). A review of the extant literature reveals that limited empirical research on departmentalization in elementary schools has been conducted over the last forty years. The vast majority of available studies and opinions were published prior to the onset of NCLB, in the 1960’s and 1970’s, and offer contradictory and inconclusive results. For example, Gibb and Matala (1962) found evidence that specialized instruction had a positive impact on student achievement in science, but no

impact on mathematics achievement. Lamme (1976) suggested that departmentalization negatively affected reading achievement, while Anderson (1967) made a compelling case for teacher specialization.

More recent research by McPartland (1987) and McPartland, Coldiron, and Braddock (1987) found that trends toward departmentalization increase with the age of the student. Their reports suggest that educators need to balance the trade-offs between the high quality content area instruction that departmentalization is designed to achieve and the positive teacher-student relationships fostered by self-contained structures. Their studies, however, focused on the implications for middle school education, not elementary education.

After almost a century of discussion, there remains no definitive answer to the question of which organizational structure is most effective at the elementary school level. The fact that this issue remains unresolved, leads to questions regarding the importance of organizational structure to effective instruction (Des Moines Public Schools, 1989). Perhaps, it is not the organizational structure itself that matters, but rather the impact of the selected structure on teaching and learning (Elmore et al., 1996).

This study explored the decision-making process in regard to the departmentalization of the elementary school in the context of the current era of accountability. While not intended to resolve the century-long debate regarding the value of elementary departmentalization, the findings of this study contribute to the available research by providing contemporary views on the practice and by exploring how the departmentalization decision is being made since the implementation of NCLB. Findings were analyzed through Weiss's (1995) four "I's" framework. Given the current institutional context with intensive accountability pressures on schools, what individual ideologies and interests impact the decision to consider

departmentalization? What information do districts use to make the decision, given the scarcity of current, scientifically-based research on this issue? This study examined these questions in an effort to uncover the decision-making process and to assist schools, currently considering this form of classroom restructuring, in making a responsive, not reactive, decision in regard to elementary departmentalization.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

#### Introduction

This synthesis of the relevant literature focuses on 1) the institutional factors influencing the decision to departmentalize, 2) the influence of the individual stakeholders in making this decision, and 3) the advantages and disadvantages of elementary departmentalization. Weiss's (1995) four "I's" provide a framework guiding the first two sections of the literature review. In the first section, institutional factors are organized into three categories, proposed by Weiss: rules, structures, and norms. In the second section, stakeholders' ideologies, interests, and access to information are examined in relation to this decision. The final section weighs the impact of departmentalization and offers strategies for offsetting the undesirable elements. The intent was to develop a thorough review of the literature in order to best understand districts' decisions in regard to departmentalization.

#### Institutional Factors Influencing the Decision to Departmentalize

Policy decisions, such as whether or not to departmentalize, are molded by the rules, with which the organization must contend, as well as by its structural constraints and its norms of accepted behavior (Weiss, 1995).

**Rules.** Two of the primary "rules" with which schools must contend in considering whether or not to departmentalize include Public Law 107-110, more commonly known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (United States Department of Education, 2002), and the current teacher training and certification requirements, as established by Chapters 354 and 49 of the 1968 Pennsylvania School Code (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2009).

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, enacted by the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress, reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). NCLB included the requirement that each state establish an accountability system based upon academic standards and assessments that includes rewards for demonstration of “Adequate Yearly Progress” toward the goal of 100% proficiency by 2014 and includes sanctions for failure to achieve such annual progress (United States Department of Education, 2002). The Accountability System, established by the State of Pennsylvania, includes assessment of rigorous content standards in grades 3-8 and grade 11 in reading and mathematics with Adequate Yearly Progress measured through specified annual achievement targets. In addition, schools are held accountable for student participation in the state assessment, student attendance, and the annual graduation rate. Sanctions for not making Adequate Yearly Progress include Warning, School Improvement I & II, and Corrective Action I & II. School Improvement I requires implementation of an improvement plan and the offer of school choice. School Improvement II adds supplemental services such as tutoring. Corrective Action I initiates significant changes in curriculum, professional development, and leadership, and Corrective Action II includes governance changes such as chartering, privatization, or restructuring (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2008).

The demands of the content standards and the overarching accountability system place unprecedented pressure on teachers (Anderson, 2009). In response to this pressure, Chan and Jarman (2004) suggest departmentalization as a viable solution, indicating that departmentalization provides the following benefits: 1) allowing elementary educators to instruct in areas in which they are most comfortable, 2) reducing lesson preparation time, 3) improving job satisfaction, and 4) preparing students for the transition to secondary schools. However, their opinion lacks an empirical evidence base to support it. As noted by Stanovich

and Stanovich (2003) educators should be wary of the difference between opinions published in professional education magazines and empirical findings published in peer-reviewed journals. Educational opinion pieces may include stimulating discussions of current issues, but do not provide the valuable sources of evidence relevant to instructional decisions that peer-reviewed research can provide.

In keeping with the requirements of NCLB, professional educators are expected to utilize scientific evidence and to make data-based decisions regarding instruction (Kowalski & Lasley, 2009). However, critics argue that data are not always accurate, educational research is arguably weak, and individual, organizational, and societal variables have to be considered when making consequential decisions (Kowalski et al., 2008). Kowalski and Lasley (2009) make the following conclusions regarding what they call Evidence-Based Practice (EBP):

Much of the school reform literature is consistent on one point: the extent to which schools will improve depends substantially on how educators solve problems and make decisions. In an information rich society where the production of scientific evidence continues to accelerate, EBP offers a relevant paradigm for both of these essential processes. (p. 16)

Kowalski and Lasley also contend that EBP is not likely to be widely accepted by educators because 1) it is connected to NCLB, 2) schools lack resources to support it, and 3) practitioners have a limited understanding of the concept. However, if properly understood, EPB has the potential to improve educational decision making. Therefore, educators must recognize the need for multiple sources of evidence and make an effort to identify scientific data as well as relevant data created and systematically collected at the local level (Kowalski & Lasley, 2009). This suggests that, in regard to the decision to departmentalize, not only is a review of the available

empirical research critical, but also, at the local level, systematically collected evidence provides a valuable contribution to the decision.

In addition to the requirements regarding accountability and data-based decision making, the NCLB legislation demands highly qualified instructors. These highly qualified teachers must possess bachelor's degrees and valid state teaching certificates and must demonstrate competency in their areas of certification (United States Department of Education, 2005). In Pennsylvania, the teacher of record, or primary instructor, in grades K-6 must be properly elementary certified. Teachers in grades 7-12 must be certified in their core content areas, which may include English, Reading/Language Arts, Mathematics, Sciences, Foreign Languages, Music, Art, History, Economics, Geography, and Civics/Government (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2009). Given the certification requirements, departmentalization is the only option for instruction at the secondary level. At the elementary level, however, greater flexibility exists with elementary certificates qualifying teachers to teach all subjects within the grade span of their certification.

**Structures.** In addition to the influence of rules such as NCLB, the structure of a school as a factor of its institutional environment also impacts the stakeholders' ideology, interests, and access to information (Weiss, 1995); and therefore, helps shape the school's decision regarding whether or not to departmentalize. The institution's knowledge of and experience with various vertical and horizontal dimensions of school organization affect its members' perceptions of the value of each structure. Local constraints such as the size of the school, staff expertise, and resources also affect the decision (McPartland, Coldiron, & Braddock, 1987).

The structural organization of a school is its framework for achieving its goals (Otto & Sanders, 1964). On one dimension, a school must have a structure for moving students forward

through the system *vertically*. On another dimension, *horizontal* organization is necessary to distribute the learners among the available instructors.

A school's vertical dimension of organization serves to classify students for progression from school entrance through graduation. Graded, non-graded, and multigraded patterns are all vertical organizational structures (Goodlad, 1966). Although the first American schools were not graded, by 1860 most city schools had assumed some variation of a graded configuration. By 1870, classes, content, texts, and teachers were all graded within many schools, and this graded structure has continued through the present as the predominant vertical organization pattern (Goodlad, 1960). In the standard graded school, content is divided into 12 segments, aligned with the academic year calendar. Definitive expectations for each grade level are established, and students progress upward through the grades each year (Anderson, 1966).

In contrast to the graded structure, a non-graded arrangement allows for the continuous progress of students with varying abilities (Goodlad, 1960). Otto and Sanders (1964) provide the following illustration of the difference between these two patterns of vertical organization:

Some educators have compared the graded school to a stairway; children spend one or more years upon each step and either progress a whole step or not at all. In a similar vein the nongraded school has been compared to an inclined plane on which each child ascends at his own rate. In the nongraded structure, children progress at different rates.

Some may progress as far up the incline in two years as others do in three or four. (p. 85)

A non-graded (or ungraded) structure recognizes the diversity of the learner and provides a more flexible organizational arrangement for ensuring student learning. Therefore, a non-graded school structure is not only an operational mechanism, but is also a theoretical conception of how a school should be organized in order to provide the best opportunities to meet the learners'



needs. Non-graded programs have been described as “continuing progress plans” or “continuous growth plans.” They are characterized by flexible grouping, flexible curricular programs, and diverse instructional methods and materials. There is no promotion/failure system and no grade level arrangement (Anderson, 1966). Although grade level designations are removed, the curriculum may, however, be divided into levels through which learners progress at their own rate (Slavin, 1986). Performance level, rather than age or grade, is the determining factor in grouping pupils for learning; thus, heterogeneity is reduced (McGurk & Pimentle, 1992). Students experience successive learning opportunities relevant to their individual needs (Anderson, 1966). As explained by Goodlad (1966), “the sequence of content is determined by the inherent difficulty of the subject matter and the children’s demonstrated ability to cope with it...the children move upward according to their readiness to proceed” (p. 24).

Over the years, non-graded patterns have not become dominant as an organizational structure for American schools. Possible reasons may include practitioners’ comfort with the standard graded structure, difficulty in resolving the curriculum problems that arise from a non-graded organization scheme, and the belief that the traditional graded school does, actually, allow for flexibility and responsiveness to students’ needs, making it unnecessary to change the operational mechanism in order to forward the underlying philosophy of the non-graded approach (Anderson, 1966).

A third and final structure for vertical organization is the multiage or multigrade approach. In a multiage structure, students from at least two, adjoining age groups are assigned to the same classroom (Anderson, 1966; Hitz, Somers, & Jenlink, 2007).

Children are taught as a class and regrouped as necessary for different activities based on interests and abilities rather than on chronological age or grade level. At the end of each

year, the older students move to a new class, and a group of younger students joins the class. (Hitz, Somers, & Jenlink, 2007, p. 80)

The assumption of this model is that the learners benefit both socially and academically from exposure to student differences (Anderson, 1966). Class assignments are heterogeneous (McGurk & Pimentle, 1992). Teachers need to maintain a greater awareness of students' needs and abilities, and instructional planning and preparations become more complicated. However, the removal of the grade level barriers does serve as a benefit by facilitating the ability to appropriately group learners for leveled instruction.

The difference between a multiage and a multigrade approach is simply that the grade level designations continue in a multigrade approach (Anderson, 1966). Students are still considered to be member of a particular grade, but are placed within classrooms containing two or more grade levels. Students may receive instruction that crosses grade level boundaries. For example, within the classroom, a student who is considered to be a fourth grader may receive fourth-grade mathematics instruction and fifth-grade reading instruction (Franklin, 1967). Multigrade structures may serve to facilitate the transition from a graded to a nongraded organizational structure for teachers, students, and parents whenever a school desires to implement a nongraded approach (Anderson, 1966).

In addition to its vertical configuration, a school must also have a horizontal dimension to its school organizational structure. The horizontal dimension defines how the school distributes the students between classrooms or teachers within the school at any given time (Anderson, 1966; Goodlad, 1966). "Educational values are brought into play in deciding the basis on which learners are to be allocated into groups" (Goodlad, 1966, p. 46). In considering the multiple possibilities for horizontal organization, three areas of focus tend to be the primary

considerations for decision making: learners, curricula, and teachers. Whether classrooms will be homogenous or heterogeneous is a decision based upon a focus on the learners. When curriculum is the primary consideration, decisions focus on how to separate or combine various subjects as a basis for grouping students. How many instructors will hold responsibility for a given group of students is a choice focused around the teacher and teacher certification (Goodlad, 1966). A school's overall horizontal structure may also result from a combination of these considerations, as illustrated by the following example:

A high school, for instance, might be semidepartmentalized, with a different teacher for each subject except English and social studies, which are combined in a core curriculum taught by one teacher. All except core classes might be set up according to pupil homogeneity in achievement. (Goodlad, 1966, p. 25)

While numerous horizontal dimensions for school organization are possible, the primary configurations include homogenous, heterogeneous, self-contained, departmentalized, and team teaching (Franklin, 1967; Goodlad, 1966).

Homogenous grouping is the practice of placing students together on the basis of likeness or similarities of the *learners* (Goodlad, 1966). Ability grouping would be one example of homogenous grouping, but the grouping possibilities are endless and could include sex, age, interest, socioeconomic factors, and achievement. In contrast to homogeneity, heterogeneous grouping attempts to divide students based upon their differences. Although the classes within a school may be heterogeneously grouped in regard to students' IQs, most classrooms remain homogenous in regard to age and are often homogenous in regard to socioeconomic status (Goodlad, 1966).

In examining the horizontal organization of *curricula*, the prevailing pattern at the high school level tends to be the departmentalization of subjects (Goodlad, 1966). Elementary school configurations, however, are an area where deliberation continues.

At the elementary school level, grouping practices as related to horizontal curriculum organization frequently have been reduced to debate over the virtues of departmentalization as contrasted with the self-contained classroom. This is an oversimplification. The curriculum may be departmentalized, the classroom self-contained. The practice of moving students from room to room in a system of departmentalization or semi-departmentalization is known as *platooning*. Consequently, the grouping issue is whether to platoon or not to platoon. (Goodlad, 1966, p. 50)

At its extreme, self-contained instruction would require one teacher to provide instruction for all subjects including specialized subjects such as physical education, art, music, speech therapy, etc. However, in most districts where the primary horizontal structure is considered self-contained, appropriately certified teachers are provided for specialized subjects; and the classroom teacher serves as a generalist for the core academic subjects. The extreme of platooning, by contrast, requires the students to either move to a different classroom with a different teacher for each subject or to remain within one classroom while different teachers stream in throughout the day to provide instruction in each subject area (Goodlad, 1966). Between each extremity, there is a spectrum of possibilities for organization. “Actually, the self-contained classroom and departmentalization may be thought of as being at the opposite ends of a continuum; any deviation from the pure self-contained classroom represents a point on the continuum in the direction of departmentalization” (Lobdell & Ness, 1967, p. 191).

Although, like high schools, the elementary curriculum tends to be compartmentalized;

when examining horizontal structures based upon *teacher utilization*, the self-contained arrangement prevails in elementary classrooms (Goodlad, 1966). In secondary classrooms, however, departmentalization/platooning continues to be the primary organizational structure with each teacher taking responsibility for one subject (Anderson, 1966; Goodlad, 1966). In a true self-contained structure, a teacher is assigned to teach all subjects to the class of students assigned to him (Lobdell & Ness, 1967; Otto & Sanders, 1964). The typical elementary practice, however, is a modified self-contained approach, in which certain subjects such as physical education, art, and music are taught by specialists (Lobdell & Ness, 1967). The difference in a departmentalized structure is that a teacher specializes in a subject area(s) rather than serving as a generalist (Otto & Sanders, 1964).

One variation on how teachers are utilized is the team teaching (or cooperative teaching) approach. Team teaching is an example of a horizontal structure that combines the advantages of both the self-contained and the departmentalized approach and considers children and curriculum along with teacher utilization in grouping students for instruction (Anderson, 1966; Goodlad, 1966; Otto & Sanders, 1964). Anderson (1966) provides the following definition of team teaching:

Team teaching is a formal type of cooperative staff organization in which a group of teachers accepts the responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating an educational program, or some major portion of a program, for an aggregate of pupils. (p. 83)

Otto and Sanders (1964) point out that the team of teachers share responsibility *within the same moment* for directing the learning of the group. Goodlad (1966) suggests that team teaching is characterized by 1) a “hierarchy of personnel,” 2) delineation of roles based upon qualifications

and instructional agendas, and 3) flexible grouping of all learners within the team (Goodlad, 1966). Shaplin (1967) offers an alternative approach, which he calls team organization. “Team organization involves the formation of small working groups, organized on a formal basis, for the accomplishment of certain goals” (Shaplin, 1967, p. 274). By definition, team organization is only incompatible with the true self-contained classroom and has the benefit of being able to align with and forward the goals of all other organizational structures and instructional approaches (Shaplin, 1967).

In addition to the impact of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of school/classroom organization, a variety of other constraints such as school size and available finances also affect the decision-making process when deciding whether or not to departmentalize in an elementary school. Within very small schools it is not economically feasible for specialized instructors to be employed. Specifically, schools may lack the necessary revenue, as well as the required enrollment, to employ specialists for subjects such as art, music, or science. When finances are sufficient, a lack of available specialists for employment may also serve as an obstacle for districts desiring further specialization. Unexpected changes in enrollment can also result in a shortage of available staff to fill necessary positions or, vice versa, in the need to eliminate staff and, hence, adjust organizational structures (Otto & Sanders, 1964). Staffing impacts options for school districts. A high school with 60 teachers can obviously provide more diverse course offerings than one with only 20 (Anderson, 1966). The feasibility of structural changes such as departmentalization is greater in larger schools (McPartland, Coldiron, & Braddock, 1987). Smaller schools with few classrooms per grade level may have less flexibility in grouping the learners and assigning staff (MacIver & Epstein, 1993). Larger schools may find the need to establish smaller “schools” within their larger structure in order to create a more supportive,

caring, and responsive learning environment (Anderson, 1966; MacIver & Epstein, 1993). Team teaching is one approach to creating such a subunit (Anderson, 1966). However, alternative organizational structures, such as team teaching, also have financial implications. Carlin (1967) suggests that team teaching could add 10 to 15% to the cost of operating a school. Essentially, the structure of a school is an important decision with many alternatives and many influences affecting available options.

**Norms.** In addition to the rules and structures of an organization, the norms—i.e., accepted practices—of an institution have a strong influence on how its members' interpret new information, define their personal interests, and accept new ideologies (Weiss, 1995). Therefore, the historical development of departmentalization and traditional elementary school practices cannot be ignored in considering the departmentalization decision.

Throughout the last century, educators have debated the issue of how to best structure elementary schools and classrooms (Franklin & Johnson, 1967; Gibb & Matala, 1962; Lamme, 1976; McGrath & Rust, 2002; Otto & Sanders, 1964; Slavin, 1986). The notion of departmentalization first emerged in 1789, with the establishment of reading and writing schools in Boston. Students in these early schools attended the two separate departments of the school for a half of a day in each (Otto & Sanders, 1964). The primary educational structure in early American education, however, was the one-room school (Franklin, 1967). This changed in 1848, when J.D. Philbrick, principal of Boston's Quincy Grammar School, devised the *graded school plan*. In this system of organization, graded courses of study were developed, students were grouped into grade levels, and one teacher per grade taught all subjects to the students within that grade (Franklin, 1967; Otto & Sanders, 1964). The implementation of Philbrick's graded school plan, marked the beginning of a fifty year trend toward self-contained instruction.

Movement toward departmentalization transpired between 1900 and 1930 (Otto & Sanders, 1964). During this time, Gary, Indiana Superintendent William A. Wirt initiated the idea of *platoon schools* in which students were divided into two groups called platoons. While one platoon attended academic classes, the other group participated in various specialized activities such as art, music, dance, science, and drama. Alice Barrows of the U.S. Office of Education forwarded the platoon concept, which prospered as a result of its focus on efficiency, humanities, and democracy in education (Mohl, 1975).

Since that time, departmentalized approaches have consistently remained the preferred organizational structure for secondary schools. In elementary schools, however, departmentalization has come in and out of favor through the years and has been the subject of ongoing discussion (Anderson, 1966; Franklin & Johnson, 1967). The 1930's marked intense debate between advocates of self-contained versus departmentalized approaches, while the 1940's generally saw a decline in the practice—although city schools frequently maintained specialists for subjects such as art, music, and physical education (Goodlad, 1960, 1966; Lobdell & Van Ness, 1967). In the 1950's, national security concerns led to more intensive curricular content in mathematics and science and increased interest in departmentalization at the elementary level (Goodlad, 1960, 1966; Heathers, 1967, 1972; Lobdell & Van Ness, 1967). Generally, however, self-contained approaches have remained the predominant structure for organizing elementary schools, especially for the primary grades (Anderson, 1966; Goodlad, 1966; Otto & Sanders, 1964). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that, during the 1993-94 school year, two-thirds of our nation's elementary teachers held "general elementary assignments" and the remaining one-third were assigned to specific-subject



classes or to special education. “Most secondary school teachers’ main assignments were to teach specific subjects” (Henke, Choy, Geis, & Broughman, 1996, p. 67).

A complicating factor in reviewing the literature in regard to elementary school departmentalization is the absence of a clear definition of the term. For example, a self-contained classroom in its purest form would be described as a situation in which students receive all instruction from a single teacher. Any other structures would be considered a form of departmentalization (Franklin & Johnson, 1967; Lobdell & Van Ness, 1967). Today, however, using specialists for subjects, such as art and music, is a widely accepted practice in schools that consider their classrooms to be self-contained (Des Moines Public Schools, 1989). In examining the findings of their research on contemporary organizational practices in Midwestern elementary schools, Des Moines Public Schools found it necessary to re-define the terms *self-contained*, *semi-departmentalized*, and *departmentalized* in order to accurately summarize their results. Their resulting definitions follow:

Self-contained: Students are assigned to one teacher for the majority of the day. They may receive art, music, and physical education from specialized teachers.

Semi-departmentalized: Students are assigned to one teacher for the majority of the day and receive instruction from one additional teacher. They may also receive art, music, and physical education from specialized teachers.

Departmentalized: Students receive instruction from three or more teachers during the day. They may also receive art, music, and physical education from specialized teachers. (p. 24)

Clearly, the line between self-contained and departmentalized classrooms is not as sharply drawn today as it was in the past. Anderson (1966) comprehensively describes this blurring:

Actually changes in the personnel structure of the elementary school have made the term *self-contained-classroom teacher* somewhat less accurate than it once was. There has been a growing tendency to add trained librarians and other materials specialists to the school staff. And, depending in part on the wealth of the school district, there may also be a number of other full-time or part-time specialists: teachers of music, both vocal and instrumental; teachers of arts and crafts; physical-education instructors; teachers of special education; specialists in remedial services of various types; guidance and testing personnel; and others. (p. 31)

Throughout the last century, the question of whether elementary school classrooms should be self-contained or departmentalized has been a matter of debate. The lack of a consistent definition of these terms most likely contributes to difficulties in resolving the argument (Franklin & Johnson, 1967). Numerous educators, however, have offered their opinion on the matter. Snyder (1960) focuses an entire book on the value and operation of self-contained classrooms, indicating that “there is real cause for alarm that pressures outside the school may dictate curricular organization and content” (p. 2) and result in increased departmentalization. Lobdell and Van Ness (1967), Thornell (1980), and Walters (1970) all join Snyder in touting the benefits of self-contained instruction. As described by these authors, benefits include the following: individualization, flexibility in use of time, correlation of knowledge and skills across subjects, development of students’ independence, and opportunities to guide and support students’ emotional and psychological development.

Anderson (1967) and Tanner (1967) offer arguments in favor of departmentalization. Tanner indicates that it is unrealistic to expect teachers to be highly competent instructors in all subject areas and suggests that older elementary students need instruction from specialized faculty. Anderson builds upon Tanner's argument for teacher specialization and contends that teachers who are experts in their field will be better able to understand and meet the needs of the learners. Anderson also suggests that, due to the variety of techniques and environments offered by departmentalization, students benefit from exposure to multiple instructors throughout the day. Finally, Anderson contends that integration of subjects can occur in departmentalized structures as easily as in self-contained situations.

While results of empirical studies tend to sway the debate in favor of self-contained approaches, there are enough inconsistencies and unanswered questions to leave room for continued discussion. In a comparative study reported by Woods (1967), a non-departmentalized approach to instruction produced greater achievement gains for low income teens than the departmental approach. Most students, however, indicated a preference for the departmental approach. Spivak (1967) compared ninth grade students who had experienced departmental instruction in seventh and eighth grades with similar students who experienced self-contained programs. His results indicated that students from self-contained classrooms performed better academically and adjusted more successfully to high school. Lamme (1976) implemented a longitudinal study of students, as they moved from fourth to sixth grade, to examine changes in students' reading habits in self-contained and departmental classrooms. Her findings were twofold: 1) the classroom environment had less influence over students' reading habits in departmental situations and 2) self-contained teachers had greater influence on students' reading habits than departmental teachers. Alspaugh and Harting (1995) and Harris (1996) each

found a decline in student achievement during the transition year from self-contained to departmental settings. McGrath and Rust (2002) found greater student achievement in self-contained classes and less time needed for transitions between classes, but no differences in instructional time between departmental and non-departmental settings. Gibb and Matala (1962) found evidence that specialized instruction in the fifth and sixth elementary grades had a positive impact on student achievement in science, but no impact on mathematics achievement. Finally, McPartland (1987) found that self-contained instruction in the sixth grade heightened teacher-student relations at the cost of high quality, specialized instruction in the content areas. Thus, the inconsistent and inconclusive body of evidence leaves the question of which is the preferred organizational structure still unresolved.

Traditions, simply by definition, have the potential to become roadblocks in any change process. Elmore et al. (1996) identifies three aspects of the traditional structure of schools that are of particular concern in the face of reform. First, teacher isolation results from the traditional “egg crate” arrangement of classes within schools, as teachers and students operate unaware of the activities of those in neighboring classrooms. Next, inflexible grouping practices, including various methods of ability grouping, limit opportunities for all learners to access challenging learning activities and rob students of the opportunity to attain higher levels of achievement. Finally, the fragmentation of the curriculum into discrete subjects within an established time schedule restricts students’ learning to the time available—rather than the time required—to master the content. In both self-contained and departmentalized structures, these classic educational traditions have the potential to limit student achievement.

## **Individual Factors Influencing the Decision to Departmentalize**

**Identification of stakeholders.** In regard to the decision to departmentalize, the most critical stakeholders are, of course, the students. While elementary-level students, most likely, will not be directly involved in the decision-making process, they are arguably the stakeholders most affected by the ultimate decision to departmentalize (or not to departmentalize). Other stakeholders—teachers, parents, and administrators—may not only be affected by the decision, but also may be directly involved in making it.

The traditional school organization with the principal at the top served schools reasonably well when school performance met public expectations and few changes were occurring. Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, however, demands for school improvement and change have exposed weaknesses in that hierarchical design. Many of the strategies gaining popularity as demands for school improvement have increased include increased teacher involvement in decision making and leadership as major features. (Buckner and McDowelle, 2000, p. 35)

Therefore, the departmentalization decision within a school or district should not be made by an individual administrator. Teacher participation gives administrators insight into critical information from the frontline perspective. This involvement not only improves the overall quality of the decision, but also improves teachers' commitment to the decision and their motivation for successful implementation (Smylie, 1992).

Parent involvement also increases student achievement and motivation and improves the parent-school relationship (Epstein, 1992). As noted by Kowalski et al. (2008), allowing group participation in decision making increases productivity, broadens access to information and viewpoints, reflects the democratic values of our society, allows teachers and parents a voice in

the operation of their schools, increases political acceptance, augments professional growth, and improves morale. There are, however, several disadvantages, which include inefficiency, political manipulation, bias, confidentiality concerns, and the social influence of group dynamics. The interplay between each individual participant's ideology, interests, and information affect the effectiveness of the group decision-making process and the quality of the resulting decision.

**Ideology of stakeholders.** Personal values and beliefs guide the decisions of individuals (Kowalski et al., 2008). In regard to the departmentalization decision, values and beliefs regarding teaching and learning create two competing ideological frameworks. The first, student orientation, is the ideology supporting the traditional, self-contained elementary classroom model. In a student-oriented approach, teachers take responsibility for understanding the needs and interests of the individual learners assigned to their classroom (McPartland, Coldiron, and Braddock, 1987). Because the teacher is focused on one group of students instead of multiple classes, the teacher is able to effectively address individual needs and to focus on personal development and emotional needs along with academics (McPartland, 1990).

A subject-matter orientation, by contrast, encourages departmentalization. In a subject-matter approach, teachers focus on understanding their curriculum and developing an instructional program that allows students to learn in their particular subject area (McPartland et al, 1987). Teachers tend to take pride in being a content-area expert and are often able to prepare higher quality lessons as a result of being able to focus on fewer lesson preparations (McPartland, 1990). Ideally, schools establish a balance between both practices, but a continuum can be expected with increasing emphasis on subject orientation in the higher grade

levels (McPartland et al., 1987). The values and beliefs of the organization and its individual members influence the overall orientation of the elementary school.

**Interests of stakeholders.** In addition to the impact of ideology, the interests of the institution or organization and of the individual stakeholders within the organization also influence the departmentalization decision. The school and district (i.e., the institution) must consider budget constraints. Therefore, cost efficiency becomes an interest as do teacher and student productivity. The availability of resources will, thus, be an associated influence of any decision (Kowalski et al., 2008). Administrators have an individual interest in effective leadership and accountability for district and school success. While teachers are interested in school success, as well, they are even more focused on the success of their students. Teachers, however, like all members of a group, have many self-interests that influence their decision making (Kowalski et al., 2008). For example, teachers' individual strengths and subject area preferences influence their interests in regard to departmentalization. Working conditions also become an important interest to teachers with lesson preparation time and instructional responsibilities being conditions related to the departmentalization decision. The interests of parents focus primarily on their children's achievement and social-emotional well being, which are also interests of the students themselves and, ultimately, all stakeholders. Branson (2007), focusing on moral consciousness in leadership, describes the importance of self-knowledge in making decisions that are morally appropriate, rather than serving self-interests:

Given that all moral judgments involve the making of choices, which are directly influenced by personal motives, values, and beliefs; this means that the moral judgment process is inextricably influenced by personal motives, values, and beliefs. Through the gaining of self-knowledge about one's personal motives, values, and beliefs it is possible

to ensure that these are commensurate with achieving desired moral outcomes. This is to say, through the knowing of personal motives, values, and beliefs; a person is more able to judge their own standards. The knowing of personal motives, values, and beliefs nurtures moral consciousness, which then enhances one's moral judgment capacity. (p. 475)

Self-reflection and open-mindedness are required so that ethically sound decisions that are truly in the best interests of the students can be made (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007). This is particularly important in considering departmentalization so that the ultimate decision focuses on the needs and interests of the students—not on the needs and interests of the adults.

**Information available to stakeholders.** Finally, the information available to stakeholders has a significant influence on the resulting decision. “Decision making is affected by a person's knowledge and skills, both in terms of process (i.e., knowing how to make good decisions) and substance (i.e., the nature of a specific decision)” (Kowalski et al., 2008, p. 40). The information available to individual stakeholders is derived from their experience-based, craft knowledge and their research-based, theoretical knowledge. Factors impacting craft knowledge include the quality and level of stakeholders' formal education as well as their relevant experiences (Kowalski et al., 2008). In regard to the departmentalization decision, stakeholders' knowledge and experience with the approach will influence their perspective on the decision.

Unproven practices or fads can easily gain endorsement when the focus is not on empirical evidence (Stanovich & Stanovich, 2003). Therefore, NCLB has placed an emphasis on the need to use scientifically-based research in making educational decisions. Theoretical-based knowledge, however, is often difficult for practitioners to develop due to the variability in research quality and their limited skill in interpreting and using research (Kowalski et al., 2008).



The research-practice gap is well documented and includes issues with dissemination, utility, credibility, and applicability of research to practice (Hemsley-Brown, 2009). As noted by Bracey (2006), statistically significant research findings may not be practically significant, as well. Because research regarding departmentalization is outdated and often inconclusive, additional empirical inquiry is needed in order to best evaluate this approach in the current educational context. As noted by Kowalski and Lasley (2009), educators must recognize the need for multiple sources of evidence and use relevant data created and systematically collected at the local level in conjunction with scientific evidence.

Using data to make decisions is a skill that requires development. Kowalski et al. (2008) make the following observation about data-based decision making:

Educators who use data to make decisions begin to systematically develop purposeful questions that assist them in thinking about how to explore the multiple problems they confront each day at school and in the classroom. They also understand that there are a variety of different types of data that can be accessed, collected, and then used to better inform the practices that occur within a school. (p. 101)

Kowalski et al. (2008) suggest that, once a critical question has been established, the steps in processing the data include the following: collecting the relevant data, connecting and interpreting the data with other relevant evidence, using the data to create and act upon a plan, and confirming whether or not the action had the desired effect. Prior to and after making the departmentalization decision, locally-relevant data should be collected in relation to the decision in order to confirm the practice or to reconsider the decision.

## **Impact of Departmentalization**

One piece of relevant data that could provide insight into the departmentalization decision is the current available research. However, the research on the effectiveness of elementary departmentalization is inconclusive (Franklin & Johnson, 1967; Hood, 2009; Lobdell & VanNess, 1967). Despite the lack of empirical evidence, the literature does suggest a number of advantages and disadvantages of departmentalization as well as some alternative strategies aimed at harnessing the benefits of both approaches (McPartland, Coldiron, & Braddock, 1987).

The primary argument favoring departmentalization is that specialists are able to provide expert classroom instruction to foster deeper learning (Goodlad, 1966; McPartland, Coldiron, & Braddock, 1987). Districts can more easily and cost effectively increase teachers' content area expertise when they are able to focus each instructor's professional development on a specialized subject area. When teachers are passionate about their particular subject area, their enthusiasm is communicated to the learners. The departmentalized structure encourages teachers to maximize collaboration in order to establish shared expectations, as well as to coordinate curricula and to monitor student progress. It also facilitates a team approach to resolving students' behavioral concerns. Switching classes allows students the opportunity for movement as well as a change of scenery and exposure to another person's teaching style in order to break up the monotony of the school day. By nature of the departmentalized structure, time spent on individual subjects is fixed, protecting various content areas from being short-changed (Hood, 2009). Finally, with potentially fewer subjects on which to concentrate, teachers should have the time to develop more effective lesson plans (McPartland, 1987; McPartland, Coldiron, & Braddock, 1987).

The primary argument against departmentalization appears to be the difficulty in developing close, supportive relationships with each individual learner within a departmentalized

setting (McPartland, 1987; McPartland, Coldiron, & Braddock, 1987; Walters, 1970). Poorer performing students, in particular, may suffer academically from the lack of a connection to a consistent instructor with a deep knowledge of their individual needs (Becker, 1987). In addition, individualized instruction is more difficult to accomplish when students switch classes on a fixed time table. The rigid bell schedule places time pressure on the learners (Hamalainen, 1967; Lobdell & VanNess, 1967; Thornell, 1980) and constrains teachers who must present their course material within defined class periods. No opportunity exists for extending learning by modifying the schedule as a self-contained instructor can easily do (Walters, 1970). Departmentalized curriculum both within and outside of self-contained classrooms has been criticized as being too isolated and lacking meaningful opportunities for subject-matter integration (Goodlad, 1966; Lobdell & VanNess, 1967; Walters, 1970). The traditional model with a generalist as the instructor is seen as more easily facilitating cross-curricular connections which are more difficult in a departmentalized approach (Hood, 2009). As suggested by Lobdell and VanNess (1967), as generalists, elementary teachers unfortunately lack the preparation to serve as subject area specialists. Finally, disorganization of materials and lack of storage causes frustration with departmentalization (Walters, 1970), and the transition between classes results in the loss of instructional time (McGrath & Rust, 2002).

While the departmentalization debate is not likely to be resolved in the near future, the search continues for designs that embrace the virtue of both the self-contained and departmentalized classroom structures (Goodlad, 1966). "...intermediate staffing patterns, such as semi-departmentalization—in which a teacher instructs more than one class in more than one related subject (such as both math and science) but not in all major subjects; and team teaching—in which two or more teachers provide instruction to a shared large class of students”

(McPartland, 1987, p. 3-4) are two alternatives that fall between the extremes of pure self-containment or departmentalization. In addition, a configuration combining a team approach with modified departmentalization may provide a pupil-oriented learning environment along with specialized instruction. For example, a team of teachers could share responsibility for fifty to seventy-five students and provide these learners with instruction in a combination of curricular areas such as in math/science or in language arts/social studies (McPartland & Becker, 1985). Interdisciplinary teams reduce isolation, foster collaboration among staff, and facilitate opportunities for cross-curricular connections between subjects (MacIver, 1990). Another alternative is to maintain the multiple specialists for each subject area, but to provide the learners with the opportunity to develop a bond with a teacher through an advisor-advisee program (McPartland & Becker, 1985).

### **Summary**

While further empirical inquiry is needed to clearly determine how the departmentalization decision is being made in contemporary schools, a review of the extant literature suggests that the decision results from the interplay of multiple institutional and individual factors. The primary institutional factors impacting the decision are the current NCLB requirements and certification regulations as well as school structuring practices and norms. The departmentalization decision is unlikely to be made by an individual administrator and is more likely to be made by a group which would probably include administrators, teachers, and parents. In making the decision, the stakeholders' ideologies, interests, and information interact. Relevant ideologies are stakeholders' orientations toward a student-centered approach to instruction or a subject-matter orientated approach. A variety of interests and self-interests can be identified for all stakeholders, but ultimately the best interests of the students should be the

primary concern. This requires the decision makers to be aware of their own biases and open to acknowledging and moving beyond them in order to put the needs of the students beyond their own needs. Utilizing their own craft-knowledge as well as theoretical knowledge and relevant data enables the stakeholders to establish a strong basis for determining their decision. The institution itself (i.e., the school and district) also influences individual ideologies, interests, and access to information. It is the interaction of all of the individual factors and the individuals themselves within the context of the institution that leads to the ultimate decision.

Obviously, the decision-making process is a complicated one. The decision, once made, requires continual review and revision to ensure that the practice is effective. Empirical research is only one piece of the puzzle. Ongoing, comprehensive local data are also needed so that evidence-based decisions can be made and the practice can be continually monitored. What is convenient, familiar, or popular should not be what results. What is needed and supported by evidence from systematic data collection and empirical research will ultimately be the choice that leads to the desired results in student achievement (Kowalski et al., 2008).

## Chapter 3

### Research Design and Methodology

#### Introduction

State and federal policies have mandated that educators use empirical evidence as the basis for making educational decisions (Kowalski et al., 2008). The scientific debate continues, however, regarding how to best structure elementary schools (Franklin, 1967; Gibb & Matala, 1962; Lamme, 1976; McGrath & Rust, 2002; Otto & Sanders, 1964; Slavin, 1986). A century of discussion provides no clear direction for schools weighing the option of self-contained versus departmentalized classrooms. Yet, as Kowalski et al. (2008) note, “Administrators seldom know all that is required for making decisions, but they still have to make them” (p. 239). Therefore, in regard to elementary departmentalization, the following question remains: How do districts and administrators make this decision when a strong, current research base is not available to guide them? This research serves as an attempt to answer that question. While not likely to resolve the century-long debate, this exploration provides insight into one district’s decision-making process. The findings, while not generalizable, may prove useful to other districts in considering their own local decision regarding elementary departmentalization.

#### Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

This qualitative case study explored the decision-making process involved in determining whether or not to departmentalize in the elementary grades. Specifically, the following questions were addressed:

1. What were the institutional factors influencing the decision to consider departmentalization?
2. Who were the stakeholders involved in the decision? Why?

3. How did stakeholders' ideologies, interests, and access to information influence their decision in regard to departmentalization?
4. What elements of departmentalization were viewed as positive? Why? What elements were viewed as undesirable? Why?

### **Rationale for the Research Approach**

In the 1970's and 1980's, qualitative research won much support in the field of educational research (Donmoyer & Galloway, 2010). Rist (1982) indicates that interest in qualitative approaches increased in response to the need to recognize the impact of continual change, to consider ongoing processes, and to address current, pressing issues and questions. Qualitative inquiry removes the limitations of focusing research on the quantifiable and provides "a different way of knowing" (p. 440).

However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with randomized trials serving as the "gold standard," the qualitative movement has lost momentum (Donmoyer & Galloway, 2010). The following statement, within the Institute of Education Sciences' (IES) request for educational research proposals document, illustrates the current emphasis on quantitative study and the more supportive role of qualitative measures:

Observational, survey, or qualitative methodologies are encouraged as a complement to quantitative measures of student outcomes to assist in the identification of factors that may, for example, explain the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the intervention or identify conditions that hinder implementation of the intervention (IES, 2006, p. 67).

Donmoyer and Galloway (2010), however, suggest that the current emphasis on quantitative measures underestimates the value of the nuances of contextual variables. Qualitative research implies a focus on processes and meanings that cannot be measured numerically (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2005). It is characterized by the depth, detail, and openness of the inquiry (Patton, 2002). Creswell's (2009) definition follows:

Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participants' setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. (p. 4)

Qualitative researchers emphasize a socially-constructed reality, the relationship between the researcher and research, and the impact of context and values in shaping the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Quantitative inquiry, by contrast, requires "the use of standardized measures so that the varying perspectives and experiences of people can be fit into a limited number of predetermined response categories to which numbers are assigned" (Patton, 2002, p. 14). Creswell (2009) defines quantitative research as "a means for testing objective theories by examining the relation among variables. These variables, in turn, can be measured, typically on instruments, so that numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures" (p. 4). Researchers, taking a quantitative approach, emphasize measurement, seek causal relationships, and contend that their empirical inquiry is value-free (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Though less generalizable than quantitative results, qualitative approaches have value in heightening the understanding of *particular* cases or situations through the depth of information produced (Patton, 2002). "Asking the question, *What's going on here?* is at once disarmingly simple and incredibly complex. It is to the answer of this question that qualitative research



addresses itself” (Rist, 1982, p. 440). It is exactly such a line of inquiry into the phenomenon of elementary departmentalization that this study followed.

As indicated by Marshall and Rossman (2006), research questions that lend themselves to qualitative study include those which are exploratory and which are best addressed in naturalistic settings. Marshall and Rossman compiled a list of 10 types of research which are best suited for a qualitative approach:

- Research that seeks cultural description and ethnography;
- Research that elicits multiple constructed realities, studied holistically;
- Research that elicits tacit knowledge and subjective understandings and interpretations;
- Research that delves in depth into complexities and process;
- Research on little-known phenomena or innovative systems;
- Research that seeks to explore where and why policy and local knowledge and practice are at odds;
- Research on informal and unstructured linkages and processes in organizations;
- Research on real, as opposed to stated, organizational goals;
- Research that cannot be done experimentally for practical or ethical reasons; and
- Research for which relevant variables have yet to be identified. (p. 53)

Because this inquiry focused on the decision-making process involved in determining whether or not to departmentalize at the elementary level, a qualitative approach suited this study. The research questions suggested the need for an in-depth exploration of the influences of institutional factors and individual stakeholders on the decision. Individual ideologies, interests, and access to information, as well as perspectives regarding the positive and undesirable elements of departmentalization were all considered in regard to their influence on the decision.

Essentially, this study developed an emergent understanding of *how* and *why* one district decided to departmentalize at the elementary level. Such a study was best conducted in a natural setting where the complexities of the processes and perspectives could be fully explored and understood (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This process orientation is typical of qualitative studies and contrasts with the outcome or product orientation of quantitative studies (McMillan, 2008). Holistic understanding and inductive analysis—qualitative characteristics noted by Rist (1982)—were required in order to sufficiently address this research problem.

### **Justification for the Research Design**

Patton (2002) notes three critical themes within qualitative research design strategies: naturalistic inquiry, emergent design flexibility, and purposeful sampling. In regard to the first theme, Owens (1982) indicates that the naturalistic paradigm for inquiry is based upon two hypotheses. The naturalistic-ecological hypothesis emphasizes the influence of context on human behavior and suggests that the organizational context of schools has a powerful effect on the behavior of its stakeholders. The qualitative-phenomenological hypothesis purports the importance of understanding individuals' values, perceptions, and feelings in order to grasp the framework from which they interpret their environment so as to ultimately understand their behavior.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) address the second theme of qualitative design—the importance of emergent design flexibility—in contrasting naturalistic/qualitative inquiry to conventional quantitative research:

...the design of a naturalistic inquiry (whether research, evaluation, or policy analysis) cannot be given in advance; it must emerge, develop, unfold....The call for an emergent design by naturalists is not simply an effort on their part to get around the “hard thinking”

that is supposed to precede an inquiry; the desire to permit events to unfold is not merely a way of rationalizing what is at bottom “sloppy inquiry.” The design specifications of the conventional paradigm form a procrustean bed of such a nature as to make it impossible for the naturalist to lie in it—not only comfortably, but at all. (p. 225)

The basis for and utility of the third theme—purposeful sampling—derives from the qualitative focus on developing in-depth understanding. Purposeful sampling allows for the selection of information-rich cases from which the researcher can gain a wealth of data that informs the research purpose (Patton, 2002).

Given the qualitative approach to this study, selection of a research design that incorporated naturalistic inquiry, emergent design flexibility, and purposeful sampling was critical. The research questions within this study, explored the institutional factors and the individual factors—ideologies, interests, and information—influencing the decision to departmentalize; and, therefore, lent themselves to an exploratory case study design. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the case study is the ideal reporting mode for naturalistic inquirers. Case studies heighten understanding; achieve the continuity necessary for the continuous reporting and negotiation of outcomes; and maintain the following characteristics that are advantageous in naturalistic inquiry:

- The case study is the primary vehicle for emic inquiry.
- The case study builds on the reader’s tacit knowledge.
- The case study is an effective vehicle for demonstrating the interplay between inquirer and respondents.
- The case study provides the reader an opportunity to probe for internal consistency.

- The case study provides the “thick description” so necessary for judgments of transferability.
- The case study provides grounded assessment of context. (pp. 359-360)

While case studies have been prevalent in qualitative research since the 1970's (Donmoyer & Galloway, 2010; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1981), the current emphasis on “scientific research” (i.e., studies employing experimental or quasi-experimental designs) has resulted in case study design taking a more supportive role in educational research. The supportive functions of case study research become 1) hypothesis generation in preparation for subsequent experimental research or 2) thick description to help explain effectiveness/ineffectiveness or data anomalies revealed in quantitative studies (Donmoyer & Galloway, 2010). While, Donmoyer and Galloway (2010) agree that case study research can play a valuable role in supporting quantitative studies, these researchers also contend that relegating case study designs to the margins of education research eliminates valuable data that can contribute to understanding:

Thick-description-oriented case study research, which has the potential to cultivate insight, also matters and needs to be moved back from the margins of the field and reinstated as a viable strategy for helping practitioners understand the nuances and subtleties of educational reform. (p. 24)

McMillan (2008) defines the case study as “an in-depth analysis of one or more events, settings, programs, social groups, communities, individuals, or other ‘bounded systems’ in their natural context” (p. 288). Yin (1981) and Merriam (1998) both contend that case studies are useful when examining a contemporary phenomenon in its natural context. The design is particularly beneficial whenever variables cannot be selected out in the design phase because the boundaries between the context and the phenomenon under study are not evident. Miles and

Huberman (1994) “define a *case* as a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 25) and contend that the case itself is essentially the unit of analysis. Merriam (1998) concludes that “the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case” (p. 27). The case is a “bounded system,” a unit with boundaries. For this study, the unit of analysis was one district that has made the decision to departmentalize at the elementary level.

Case studies are selected primarily when researchers seek to interpret in context rather than test hypotheses. Case studies 1) are particularistic and, therefore, useful when a particular situation or phenomenon is of interest; 2) provide thick description to illuminate the object of study; and 3) are heuristic, bringing about new understandings and insights. Case studies are the preferred research design whenever the research questions ask “how” and “why” and the researcher is interested in process (Merriam, 1998). Donmoyer and Galloway (2010) note that contextual variables are important factors in educational decisions, and case studies provide a means of understanding the interaction of these variables.

Because of the complexity of the issue of elementary departmentalization and the interest in contemporary attitudes toward this approach to school structuring, a case study design was appropriate. An in-depth exploration of the “case” of one district’s decision regarding departmentalization was conducted. As a result of this exploration, a thick, rich description was created that provides insight into the decision of interest in one particular district, including an analysis of the various individual and institutional factors that influenced the decision.

### **Site Selection**

This study explored the decision-making process involved in determining whether or not to departmentalize in the elementary grades by examining institutional and individual factors

impacting the decision along with the stakeholders' perceptions of positive and undesirable elements of this organization structure. In qualitative studies, such as this, context matters. Therefore, the study was best "conducted in the setting where all this complexity operates over time and where data on the multiple versions of reality can be collected" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 53). Thus, the site selected for this research project was a school district with established elementary departmentalization. Specifically, the Pennsylvania school district which served as the research site included an elementary school in which sixth grade had a long-standing history of departmentalized structures. The fifth grade had recently transitioned to departmentalization, and the fourth grade was in the process of considering departmentalization.

Purposeful sampling was utilized. Purposeful sampling involves the selection of an information-rich case for study so that the researcher can gain the most insight and understanding (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990). In order to locate this information-rich site, criteria need to be established that relate directly to the purpose of the study (Merriam, 1998). The selection criteria used for this study follow: 1) the school district had to include at least one departmentalized elementary school, and 2) departmentalization had to be occurring in at least two of the school's intermediate grade levels. For the purpose of this research, *departmentalized* was defined as meaning that students receive core content instruction from at least two different teachers during the day.

As identified by McMillan (2008), the strengths of purposeful sampling include reduced time and costs, facilitation of administration, increased participation rates, potential generalization to similar subjects, and assurance of access to information necessary for the study. The weaknesses of purposive sampling include limited generalizability to other subjects, reduced representation of the population, and results that are dependent on the unique characteristics of

the selected sample. The site ultimately selected for study fit both of the applicable criteria, was accessible to the researcher, and provided a “rich mix of processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 62) related to the topic of interest.

### **Participants**

As suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2006), the research questions for the study directed the selection of participants. The size of the sample was not predetermined. Because the purpose of this qualitative study was to gain understanding, sampling continued until the information being acquired from the sample became redundant—i.e., reached the point of saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As noted by McMillan (2008), the goal of qualitative research is to gain understanding and create thick description; thus, in-depth study with a more limited sample is preferable to the superficial study of a large sample. Miles and Huberman (1994) agree that, in qualitative research, small, purposive samples are the norm.

For this study, the initial face-to-face interview participants included the superintendent, curriculum director, and school principal. In selecting teachers for interviews, all departmentalized instructors (i.e., fifth- and sixth-grade teachers) were individually interviewed along with all instructors in what the district considered to be the transition grade before departmentalization (i.e., fourth grade) as well as all special education/learning support teachers associated with the intermediate grades.

An attempt was made to secure a purposeful sample of parents from each departmentalized classroom as well as from the classrooms in the transition grade. Following a typical approach to recruiting participants, noted by Parker and Tritter (2006), a letter of invitation was sent to potential parent participants (see Appendix A). Interested participants

expressed their willingness to be involved in the focus group through their return response (see Appendix B).

### **Research Strategies and Instrumentation**

In designing and implementing a research project, attention needs to be given to how human subjects will be protected. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) and Yin (2009) communicate the need to acquire informed consent from participants, to shield participants from harm and deception, to address confidentiality concerns, and to protect any vulnerable groups (see Appendices E and F for Informed Consent Forms). Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggest the need for the researcher to “fit in,” build trust, foster positive relations, maintain sensitivity to ethical concerns, and respect the “norms of reciprocity.” An imperative first step for this research was to contact Penn State’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and obtain approval for the study.

A plan for negotiating entry into the field was established and implemented. One of the first steps was to gain access to the site and to the participants. Permission had to be obtained in advance (McMillan, 2008). This required time and sensitivity to the particular organization (Marshall & Rossman, 2006)—in this case, the school district. Connecting with the superintendent of the district of interest and, through him, with other district administrators was the strategy for gaining initial access. These acquaintances and social networks facilitated access to the research site (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Once access was gained, being introduced to staff through the superintendent and school principal and then conversing with the staff in informal situations, such as lunches and a school-community event, helped the participants learn more about the researcher. “People are usually more willing to talk to you if they know you—know where you live, where you work, who your boss is, and what your project is about” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 89). Recruitment letters from



the researcher, giving an overview of the research study, provided transparency to foster trust (see Appendices C and D). Gaining familiarity with the staff and the school community through informal conversations allowed the researcher to make connections and to build collegial relationships that facilitated the research process.

“In qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 72). The role of the researcher varies in the level of participation, revealedness, intensity of daily involvement, and duration of study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In this study, the researcher served as a revealed interviewer. Basic skills required of the researcher included the ability to ask good questions, to be a good listener, to exercise flexibility, to maintain a firm grasp of the purpose of the inquiry, and to monitor bias (Yin, 2009).

In addition, maintaining strong interpersonal skills was critical due to the importance of the researcher’s relationship with the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Establishing a rapport with the participants and gaining their trust and confidence enhanced the data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; McMillan, 2008). Glesne (2006) suggests that researchers need to consciously monitor their actions, appearance, and speech so that their behavior is acceptable to the community and enables the participants to feel comfortable with the researchers. To do this, an understanding of the community is necessary. Therefore, this researcher first completed a basic environmental scan of the school community before entering the field. Having an understanding of the community demographics facilitated the initial visit to the site as well as the research process that followed.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Qualitative research can involve a variety of data collection techniques in an effort to gain new understanding from each. The four primary means of qualitative data collection

include participation, direct observation, in-depth interviewing, and document analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Using two or more techniques for collecting data is often recommended in order to achieve greater depth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; McMillan, 2008). A systematic method of collecting data is also necessary. In this study in-depth interviews, which included individual conversational interviews and focus groups, served as the primary means of data collection. In addition, the researcher examined relevant documents.

To increase credibility and trustworthiness, data collected from in-depth interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. Notes were taken during all types of interviews in order to assist the researcher in assuring accurate transcription of the data. In utilizing documents as a data source, determining their value and authenticity was necessary once relevant documents were located (Merriam, 1998).

The qualitative researcher uses detailed interviews to capture the participants' perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). "Because thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive worlds are involved, the researcher needs to understand the deeper perspectives that can be captured through face-to-face interaction" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 53). The qualitative interview is an attempt to understand participants' views and the meanings behind their experiences (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). In-depth, qualitative interviews are structured much like conversations. In order to allow the participants' perspectives to emerge, rather than to be dominated by the researcher's views, general topics are explored within the conversation. The researcher must convey the message that the participants' perspectives are valued (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Because the research questions in this study required the uncovering of stakeholders' perspectives and subjective views, the in-depth interview was an appropriate method of data collection.

Patton (2002) describes three approaches to designing interviews: the informal conversational interview, the general interview guide approach, and the standardized open-ended interview. Because the informal “conversational interview offers maximum flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate” (p. 342), interviews with district administrators and teachers were conducted in this format. Interview guides provided general topics for initiating conversations with the various participants and for delimiting issues to be discussed during focus group interviews with parents (see Appendices G and H). Limitations of the interview as a means of data collection may include the level of cooperation of the interviewees, the researcher’s bias, and the researcher’s skills in the areas of listening, interpersonal interaction, question framing, and probing (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Focus groups provided an opportunity for parent input in the data collection process. Synthesis of current literature suggests that focus groups typically include a range of 6 to 10 participants, who may or may not be familiar with each other, and are selected upon the basis of their ability to contribute data relevant to the research questions (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Morgan, 1997; Quible, 1998). The focus group method “assumes that an individual’s attitudes and beliefs do not form in a vacuum: People often need to listen to others’ opinions and understandings to form their own” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 114). Morgan (1997) suggests that the value of focus groups is based upon the interaction between the participants producing data and insight that would be less accessible through individual interviews. Kreuger and Casey (2009) indicate that focus groups are effective whenever the “participants feel comfortable, respected, and free to give their opinion without being judged” (p. 4). Therefore, it was imperative that the researcher create a supportive environment to promote expression. The focus group format allowed flexibility and efficiency and encouraged

expression; but power dynamics, social conformity and bias can all be disadvantages of the approach (Byers & Wilcox, 1991; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

In this study, the focus group became one of the multiple methods of data collection used to gain the greatest understanding and insight from all stakeholders. The logistical difficulties in interviewing parents individually and the likelihood that parents would be more comfortable in a group conversation, as compared to in a one-on-one interview with an unknown researcher, made the focus group method appropriate for data collection from this stakeholder group. Following the recommendation of Krueger and Casey (2009), three separate parent focus groups were conducted. Securing participants, however, proved challenging. Only nine parents agreed to participate. Those nine were scheduled into three groups for the three focus group interview sessions. However, only one parent actually arrived to participate in the second session, making a total of just seven participants over the three interviews. Despite the limited parent participation in the focus groups, the data revealed that the point of saturation was achieved by the time of the third group meeting. Each consecutive focus group session elicited redundant parent responses to the interview questions. In addition, it quickly became evident that parents were not involved directly or indirectly in the decision-making process, which limited their ability to contribute to the actual research questions. Thus, no attempt was made to schedule additional parent focus groups.

Documents were purposely selected based upon their value in answering the research questions. Documents provide information on the historical context of the phenomena and an unobtrusive means of gathering data regarding the organization and participants' beliefs (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Rist (1982) suggests that documents provide a source of insight into relevant private and public perceptions and guidelines. Documents reviewed and analyzed

in determining the history, development, goals, and school-community perspectives regarding elementary departmentalization included school and district policies, PSSA results, teacher schedules, student and teacher handbooks, and the current strategic plan.

While such sources may provide rich information to support a study, the researcher needed to be cautious in making inferences and interpretations based upon the available documents. The data needed to be analyzed in combination with the information collected from the various interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Because these archival records were created for specific purposes, situations, and audiences; the context in which the documents were written had to be taken into consideration in interpreting their usefulness and relevance to the inquiry (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). Documents continued to be analyzed until the point of saturation was reached.

### **Data Analysis Strategies**

“The process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to a mass of collected data is messy, ambiguous, time consuming, creative, and fascinating. It does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is not neat” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 154). The data analysis in qualitative research is completed concurrently with data collection. Further investigation is guided by the understandings that emerge as the data are collected and analyzed (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Rist, 1982). The research questions and the literature review provide guidelines and suggest categories for the initial coding and thematic analysis of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Rist, 1982).

Organization is critical in ensuring that the data are retrievable and manageable for analysis. Continually re-reading and becoming immersed in the data assists the researcher in gaining maximum familiarity with the data. This immersion, along with reflection upon the

research questions, allows the researcher to inductively identify the salient themes and patterns (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Inductive analysis is described by Patton (2002) as follows:

*Inductive analysis* involves *discovering* patterns, themes, and categories in one's data. Findings emerge out of the data, through the analyst's interactions with the data, in contrast to *deductive analysis* where the data are analyzed according to an existing framework. Qualitative analysis is typically inductive in the early stages, especially when developing a codebook for content analysis or figuring out possible categories, patterns, and themes. (p. 453)

Throughout the initial analysis process, writing notes and insights and coding the data fosters understanding and helps forward the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Initial data analysis methods, identified by Miles and Huberman (1994), such as content summaries, descriptive coding, pattern coding, and memoing were useful in organizing the data for deeper analysis and in suggesting areas for further exploration. Basic data displays assisted in organizing data in the later stages of analysis.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) note that once salient themes have emerged and coding has begun, integrative interpretation is possible. "Interpretation brings meaning and coherence to the themes, patterns, categories, developing linkages and a story line that makes sense and is engaging to read" (pp. 161-162). However, researchers must critically challenge identified patterns and seek alternative explanations (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In discussing the efficacy of categories derived from data analysis, Merriam (1998) suggests that categories should provide answers to the research question, encompass all relevant data, be "mutually exclusive" so that each piece of data fits one and only one category, be specifically labeled so that the reader can easily determine the nature of the category, and be "conceptually congruent" (pp. 183-184).

According to Patton (2002), the actual unit of analysis is the case itself, and the analysis results in a case study report. “Thick, rich description provides the foundation for qualitative analysis and reporting” (Patton, 2002, p. 437). Owens (1982) indicates that a naturalistic research report should include ordinary language, be trustworthy and ethical, and be organized in a manner that shows the interconnectedness of themes and “takes the reader there—to provide a report that yields a rich sense of *understanding* events and of having *insight* as to their *meaning* or, more likely, *meanings*” (p. 17). The case study report provides a written representation of the inquiry which allows the reader an insider’s view of the particular case (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Data analysis for this study included rich descriptions of the individual and institutional influences on the departmentalization decision as well as stakeholders’ perceptions of such a structure. The detailed description provided a comprehensive view of the complex process of making the elementary departmentalization decision in one school district.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

To avoid biased data, the naturalistic researcher attempts to establish trustworthiness through intensive study of the data related to a phenomenon. The research strategy begins as a broad exploration and narrows as the researcher gains understanding (Owens, 1982). Prolonged engagement in the field and extensive data gathering allows the researcher to become immersed in the community and the issue at hand in order to gain deeper understanding and increase the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Owens, 1982). Inaccurate or incomplete data is a threat to developing valid descriptions (Maxwell, 1996). Therefore, this researcher used audio recordings and transcription of interviews to heighten the accuracy of the data collected. Time in the field was extended until the point of saturation of the data was reached.

Because the researcher is the instrument in qualitative studies, the skill of the researcher and the distractions within the researcher's life impact the credibility of the findings (Patton, 2002). In assessing the credibility of this study, the amateur-nature of the researcher and the researcher's concurrent commitment to a full-time principalship limited the study's credibility.

Qualitative researchers gain credibility for their study by continuously triangulating the data throughout the inquiry process. Triangulation, or "the use of multiple methods," assists the researcher in gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5). Also, Rist (1982) suggests that the interaction of multiple methods increases the accuracy of research, provides a more holistic presentation, and avoids concerns with the "all or nothing" limitations of a single-instrument. Owens (1982) contends that triangulation also allows themes to be cross-checked across multiple data sources to confirm accuracy. In this study, multiple data collection methods—individual interviews, focus groups, and document analysis—allowed for triangulation.

Credibility is improved by member checks, peer examination, and clarification of researcher bias (Merriam, 1998). Member checks allow participants to review the researcher's interpretations as they develop (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, member checks were used to verify the data collected in interviews and to involve the respondents in the interpretations. Peer examination improves credibility by allowing colleagues to critique the findings as they emerge (Merriam, 1998). The nature of the dissertation process allowed for these critical reviews. Recognition of the researcher's biases from the onset reduces their impact on credibility (Merriam, 1998). Having never taught in a departmentalized situation, this researcher was limited and biased by the self-contained perspective on school organization. The researcher



also had a vested interest in the findings of the study given the interest of her staff in exploring the potential of elementary departmentalization.

Theoretical validity is improved by searching for discrepant data and considering alternative understandings (Maxwell, 1996). As the data were collected and analyzed, the researcher needed to be open to new perspectives and to be willing to recognize and accept emerging categories for data analysis that may compete with the researcher's expectations. Finally, explicitly describing the research process—leaving an “audit trail” by which the research could be replicated—improves credibility, as well (Merriam, 1998).

### **Limitations of the Research Design**

“The case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon. Anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences” (Merriam, 1998, p. 41). Case studies have proven particularly useful in studying educational innovations, processes, problems, programs, and policies. Case studies are limited, however, by the researcher's personal bias and lack of training in observation and interview procedures (Merriam, 1998). By design, a case study focuses on creating understanding and thick description of a particular case. Therefore, findings from a case study are not typically generalizable (McMillan, 2008; Merriam, 1998). This study was particularly narrow because of the limitations of studying a single case. Readers need to exercise caution in considering the applicability of the findings outside the particular district of study. In addition to generalizability concerns, Yin (2009) suggests there are concerns regarding the rigor of case study research, the time it takes, the unwieldiness of the

resulting report, and the lack of respect for non-experimental methods given the current emphasis on “gold standard” experiments.

For an inquiry into the contemporary decisions regarding elementary departmentalization, however, the case study offered the best design, despite the noted limitations. The complexity of the issue made it impossible to identify specific variables and to form hypotheses at the onset of the study. In addition, with the lack of current literature on the subject, there was a need to delve deeply into a real-life situation in order to gain insight into the decision-making process. The results of this case study, while not generalizable, offer critical evidence to support and complement further research.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

#### Introduction

This study explored the decision-making process involved in determining whether or not to departmentalize in the elementary grades. Specifically, the research addressed four questions:

1. What were the institutional factors influencing the decision to consider departmentalization?
2. Who were the stakeholders involved in the decision? Why?
3. How did stakeholders' ideologies, interests, and access to information influence their decision in regard to departmentalization?
4. What elements of departmentalization were viewed as positive? Why? What elements were viewed as undesirable? Why?

Data collection took place over a two-month period in the fall of 2010, and included individual conversational interviews with educators, focus group interviews with parents, and analysis of a variety of relevant documents. The research questions served as the framework for analysis. Data were organized, in relation to the research questions, into three broad categories: 1) the institutional factors influencing the decision to departmentalize, 2) the influence of the various stakeholders on the decision to departmentalize, and 3) the perceived impact of departmentalization. This case report ultimately provides a rich description of one district's long-standing experience with departmentalization in the sixth grade as well as its recent decisions to expand departmentalization to the fifth grade and to explore departmentalization in the fourth grade. The description provides insight into the institutional and individual factors influencing this district's decision. In addition, the report reveals the perceptions of relevant

district stakeholders regarding the benefits and limitations of this horizontal organizational pattern.

**Description of the site.** A small, rural Pennsylvania school district served as the unit of analysis for this research study. Ethnicities other than “White (non-Hispanic)” represented less than two percent of the student enrollment. Approximately 43% of the students qualified for free and reduced lunches. The district took pride in having the lowest real estate taxes in the county, while typically achieving the highest PSSA test scores. Adequate Yearly Progress had been consistently maintained in all categories since the inception of the PSSA.

The district was comprised of two buildings: one K-12 complex and one small, outlying elementary school. The K-12 facility encompassed an elementary school serving kindergarten through sixth-grade students, a junior-senior high school serving seventh through twelfth grade students, and the administration office. Although the elementary and secondary classrooms were located in different areas of the building, no physical barrier actually separated the two schools in the K-12 complex. The outlying elementary building housed one classroom per grade level of kindergarten through fourth-grade students. Departmentalization was not employed in the outlying building. Therefore, all data collection took place at the K-12 facility—referred to, within this report, using the following pseudonyms: Renaissance Elementary School and Renaissance Junior-Senior High School.

The Renaissance School District was in the process of undergoing a \$23 million renovation project, focused primarily on improvements to its two buildings’ infrastructures. In the months before data collection began at the K-12 complex, various classroom improvements had been completed, including replacements of floors, ceilings, white boards, light fixtures, and clocks. At the time of data collection, workers were busy outside of the facility throughout the

day drilling wells for the new geothermal heating and cooling system. Once dismissal began, however, construction workers swarmed the building's interior for further aspects of the installation of the geothermal system, as well as for additional facility upgrades such as renovations to the auditorium and construction of new administrative offices.

The Renaissance School District was organized vertically in a traditional, graded pattern. Although the outlying elementary school, Carolingian Elementary, consistently maintained a self-contained structure by default (as a result of having only one teacher per grade level); the horizontal organization of the Renaissance Elementary School had varied over the years. At the time of this study, kindergarten through second grade classrooms and one third-grade classroom maintained self-contained structures. These grade levels, however, grouped homogenously for reading, which required some students to switch classrooms for instruction. In the remaining two third-grade classrooms, as well as in the fourth through sixth grades, varying degrees of departmentalization occurred. High school classes were fully departmentalized with seventh- and eighth-grade students experiencing seven class periods per day of lengths between 44-54 minutes each and ninth through twelfth graders having eight 42-44 minute class periods per day.

The grade levels of particular interest for this study, however, included the intermediate grades practicing departmentalization. When initially making arrangements to conduct this study, the researcher understood that the district had been departmentalizing in sixth grade for an extended time period, fifth grade was just beginning their second year of departmentalization, and fourth grade was considering the possibility of departmentalizing in the future. Third grade was understood to be self-contained. During the interview process, however, clarifications were made regarding each grade level's horizontal dimension of organizational structure. The likely cause of the initial confusion rested in the varied definitions of the term "departmentalization."

Given the researcher's definition—an organizational pattern in which students receive core content instruction, such as language arts, math, science, and social studies, from at least two different teachers during the school day—the fourth through sixth grades and two of the third-grade classrooms at Renaissance Elementary were departmentalized. None of the intermediate grade levels, however, were fully departmentalized like the high school. Each grade level was organized by a different semi-departmentalized structure.

Due to Carolingian Elementary being a K-4 school, Renaissance Elementary included only three classrooms per grade level for its third and fourth grades, but then required four classrooms to serve all of the fifth- and sixth-grade students. Within the three third-grade classrooms, two teachers elected, due to their own subject area preferences, to switch their students between the two rooms so that the one teacher, who had a high interest in science, could teach science to both classes and the other could teach social studies. The third teacher maintained a self-contained classroom. Because the researcher was not aware of this practice prior to conducting data collection in the field and, therefore, had not included third-grade teachers in her research proposal or her request for IRB approval, she did not interview the third-grade teachers. The only information gathered regarding the third-grade structure came from the administrators and teachers in the other intermediate grades. Because this grade level was not a focus of the study, the research findings presented here emphasize the departmentalization practices and decisions in the fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade levels.

Unlike the primary grades and all three third-grade classrooms, which all grouped homogeneously for reading; none of the fourth-, fifth-, or sixth-grade classrooms practiced homogeneous ability grouping. Homogeneous grouping had been initiated for reading in the fifth grade in 2008, with a class that was expected to be particularly challenging academically and

behaviorally. They extended the practice to math in 2009-10. Sixth grade then followed the fifth-grade lead and also attempted homogenous grouping in 2009-10. Both grade levels, however, abandoned the practice after that year, indicating a preference for a more diversified classroom. One teacher made the following observation about her grade level's homogenous grouping experience: "It became a grueling thing for the teachers....You really didn't see a lot of progress, and there weren't good examples to follow....All the time it felt like you were just hammering those kids." She presumed that the students were discouraged, as well.

Each of the intermediate grade levels had its own unique practice and history regarding its horizontal organizational pattern. The fourth grade had consistently maintained heterogeneous grouping. However, in regard to departmentalization, the researcher quickly discovered that this grade level had recently moved beyond merely *considering* the structure. At the start of 2010, just weeks before the data collection for this study began; the fourth grade began piloting an approach to departmentalization during one class period. The three teachers each took one of three subjects—science, social studies, and writing—and provided a week of lessons within that subject to one class. In the following two weeks, each teacher repeated the same week of lessons with the remaining two classrooms. Thus, each student received one week of writing, science, and social studies within a three-week period. Initially, teachers allotted 45 minutes for the departmentalized class period; but, in order to reduce the impact on the time scheduled for mathematics instruction, the length of the departmentalized period was reduced to approximately 35 minutes per day. Given this structure, each teacher held responsibility for planning reading, spelling, and mathematics instruction, along with one of the three departmentalized subjects (see Table 1 for the general schedule). A fourth-grade teacher noted that, due to the limited time, writing instruction continued to be integrated into other subject

areas. Another teacher, when asked about the impact on instruction from the limited length of the departmentalized period, provided a defense for the schedule by explaining that science and social studies instruction had been alternated in their previous self-contained classrooms: “The science and social studies on our previous schedule, when we were self-contained, were split time. We had science for about a half of a nine weeks and social studies for about a half of a nine weeks.” With the departmentalized structure, approximately three weeks were allotted. He shared that, although it appeared that students were losing 1.5 weeks of instruction from the change, he felt that having the dedicated period in their schedule for those subjects had actually resulted in greater instructional time: “Any time we had a special program or something had to be cancelled, it was always science and social studies time that got the ax and now that won’t happen because of the rotation.”

Table 1

*Grade 4 General Schedule for the 2010-11 School Year*

Time	Subject
8:20-8:45	Homeroom
8:45-9:22	Art, Music, Library, Physical Education, or Swimming (rotated daily)
9:22-9:40	Snack
9:40-11:30	Reading
11:35-12:05	Lunch
12:05-12:40	Recess
12:45-1:55	Math
<b>1:55-2:30</b>	<b>Science, Social Studies, or Writing (rotated weekly)</b>
2:30-3:00	Study Period

*Note.* Boldfacing indicates class periods in which core subjects are departmentalized.

In describing fifth-grade’s structure, some interviewees indicated recollecting that fifth grade had departmentalized at various times over the years. Renaissance, however, until 2009-10, had not been departmentalized at the fifth-grade level since the time of the inception of the PSSA. The fifth-grade team’s experiment with homogenous grouping, in 2008-09, helped



initiate dialogue regarding departmentalization. One teacher explained, “We got a little taste of switching classes and things then. Then the next year we, as a group, just talked about departmentalizing.” In an effort to reduce the pressure they felt from having to plan multiple subjects, as well as from continually striving to improve student achievement as measured by the PSSA, they decided to try departmentalization. One teacher recalled the following:

Before we planned the departmentalization, we were just like, “I am dying because I just got done with this; and now I’ve got to go on to this, and plan this, and get all the reading stuff put away, and get all the math stuff out now.” It was physically tiring.

The fifth-grade teachers elected to only departmentalize for math and reading and assigned two teachers to each subject. They rationalized their subject selection as follows:

We just felt that there was so much content to be taught in both of those areas for the PSSA testing, and there were times leading up to the PSSA testing where there was so much that we felt we had to get done.

Their method of departmentalizing, however, also included homogenous grouping in 2009-10, and then a random, heterogeneous re-shuffling of the class assignments in 2010-11, so that the learners had the opportunity to spend time with a different peer group during the day. Therefore, depending upon how learners were grouped, a fifth-grade student could potentially be assigned only two teachers per day (i.e., one teacher for either math or reading and their homeroom teacher for all of the remaining subjects) or three teachers per day (i.e., one teacher for math, one for reading, and their homeroom teacher for all other subjects). In addition to teaching two classes of either math or reading, each teacher was responsible for instructing their homeroom for writing, science, and social studies. Due to time constraints, science and social studies were

scheduled for the same time period within the day and lessons were alternated by unit (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Grade 5 General Schedule for the 2010-11 School Year*

Time	Subject
8:20-8:50	Homeroom
8:50-9:25	Writing
9:25-10:02	Art, Music, Library, Physical Education, or Swimming (rotated daily)
10:02-10:15	Snack
10:15-11:20	<b>Period 1: Math or Reading</b>
11:30-12:00	Lunch
12:00-12:30	Recess
12:30-12:50	Sustained Silent Reading
12:50-2:00	<b>Period 2: Math or Reading</b>
2:00-2:30	Science/Social Studies (alternated by unit of study)
2:30-3:00	Study Period

*Note.* Boldfacing indicates class periods in which core subjects are departmentalized.

Finally, the sixth-grade structure extended the departmentalization. At the time of the study, each of the four sixth-grade teachers taught one of four subjects: reading, communications (i.e., writing, grammar, spelling, listening, speaking, and critical thinking), science, or mathematics. The elimination of recess at that grade level maximized instructional time. Each teacher taught their assigned subject during four 55-minute periods to four different student groups. All teachers taught social studies to their own homerooms (see Table 3). Social studies lessons were cooperatively planned, so that all four classes received consistent instruction.

The organization of departmentalization at the sixth-grade level had varied over the years primarily in response to class size. For example, at one point the enrollment supported having five teachers at that grade level; and all five core subjects were departmentalized. At another point, the five core subjects were combined into four: language arts, science, social studies, and

math; but this structure overburdened the language arts teacher. During a year when staffing dropped to three teachers, the core subjects included language arts, math, and social studies; and the math and social studies teachers co-taught science, allowing a double period for language arts. While multiple variations occurred over the years, Renaissance maintained a commitment to departmentalization at that level. No stakeholder indicated a desire for self-contained sixth-grade classes. One sixth-grade teacher, who had previous experience in a self-contained classroom, stated, “I really like it [departmentalization]. I could never see us going away from it...I couldn’t go back. I really, truly could not go back to self-contained.” Another teacher agreed, commenting, “I would never want to go back to teaching everything, especially in the upper grades because you want to get deeper into everything. You don’t want to just cover the surface anymore.” A third teacher expressed an inability to imagine “going backwards to a self-contained classroom” and contended that departmentalizing facilitated teachers’ development of resources to allow for a greater depth of content in instruction. No one could definitively establish when the sixth grade had begun departmentalizing. Respondents, however, ascertained that variations on horizontal grouping structures including homogenous grouping and departmentalization had consistently occurred for more than thirty years.

Table 3

*Grade 6 General Schedule for the 2010-11 School Year*

Time	Subject
8:20-8:50	Homeroom
8:50-9:45	<b>Period 1: Communications, Math, Reading, or Science</b>
9:45-10:40	<b>Period 2: Communications, Math, Reading, or Science</b>
10:45-11:22	Art, Music, Library, Physical Education, or Swimming (Rotated Daily)
11:25-11:55	Lunch
12:05-1:00	<b>Period 3: Communications, Math, Reading, or Science</b>
1:00-1:55	<b>Period 4: Communications, Math, Reading, or Science</b>
1:55-2:30	Social Studies
2:30-3:00	Study Period

*Note.* Boldfacing indicates class periods in which core subjects are departmentalized.

**Description of the interview process and participants.** Entry into the field was facilitated by the researcher's association with the district superintendent through graduate study. From this connection, the researcher became aware of the district's practices regarding elementary departmentalization, secured permission for the research study, and became acquainted with the elementary principal and the district curriculum director. The elementary principal introduced the researcher to the classroom teachers and assisted her in gaining consent for participation from the teachers and parents as well as in scheduling the interviews. Four visits to the site were made over a two-month period from September to October 2010.

The first site visit enabled the researcher to tour the K-12 complex and to meet a number of district faculty and staff. In addition, this visit provided the opportunity to interact with the school community through participation in a school fair. An annual event, organized by the senior class, the fair was attended by the student body and was also open to the community at large. During the first site visit, recruitment letters were provided for all teachers and parents of students in grades four through six. In addition, conversational interviews were held with three administrators (identified by pseudonyms): Ms. Margaret Metzger, the elementary principal; Mr. Stephen Kelly, the K-12 curriculum director; and Mr. Charles Coleman, the superintendent.

The elementary principal, Ms. Margaret Metzger, was interviewed first. Ms. Metzger served as principal of both Renaissance Elementary and Carolingian Elementary. She had attained 29 total years of experience with 27 of them being in the Renaissance School District and 18 of them being in her current administrative role. Her interview took place in a temporary office that had been established for her off the elementary library due to the renovations that were underway within her school. Despite the organized chaos of ongoing renovations, Principal Metzger appeared very calm and self-assured. As a principal of two elementary schools, she

clearly had numerous responsibilities demanding her attention. Ms. Metzger, however, demonstrated great flexibility and hospitality in blocking out over two hours of her schedule in which she met with the researcher, participated in the conversational interview, helped coordinate a plan for future interviews with teachers and parents, introduced the researcher to various faculty and staff, and joined the researcher for lunch at the school fair. Multiple comments from her staff throughout the interview process alluded to the teachers' appreciation of Ms. Metzger's leadership style. Ms. Metzger described herself as giving her teachers "a lot of latitude in trying things to see what works" and "trusting their professionalism." Teacher responses confirmed that Ms. Metzger does, in fact, do just that and her teachers appreciated the "leeway" she gave them. One teacher commented, "She is a wonderful woman to work for."

Mr. Stephen Kelly, district curriculum director, was interviewed next. Mr. Kelly's experience totaled 19 years with only 5.8 years in the Renaissance School District. In addition to his curriculum role, he held multiple other responsibilities involving technology, transportation, and grant coordination. Mr. Kelly's interview took place over a 45-minute period in his small, temporary (as a result of construction) office within the high school office. Mr. Kelly was clearly a "go-to" person for the district; and, therefore, the interview was interrupted multiple times by people seeking his advice or assistance.

Finally, an interview with Superintendent Charles Coleman culminated the first visit. Mr. Coleman was a Renaissance alumnus, having returned to his alma mater to assume the role of superintendent for the most recent 11 years of his 28.38 total years in public education and administration. As an experienced superintendent, Mr. Coleman had clearly developed strong verbal communication skills. His interview transcript amazingly read more like an edited textbook than like a conversation. His responses, though concise, were eloquent, informative,

and insightful. It was evident that Superintendent Coleman had established a culture of high standards and continual improvement in the district, and he viewed his district's involvement in this research project as yet another opportunity for Renaissance to improve upon their current practices and maximize student achievement.

The second site visit, scheduled two weeks after the first, served merely to continue establishing a rapport with the participants, to determine the willingness of the various teachers and parents to participate in the study through their responses to the recruitment letters, and to communicate the interview and focus group appointment schedule to those indicating an interest in participating. All fourth- through sixth-grade teachers and parents were invited to participate. Each of the 13 teachers consented to participate; and 9 parents agreed to participate, although only 7 actually attended a focus group meeting.

The third and fourth site visits, scheduled for exactly one week and two weeks after the second visit were comprised of an intensive schedule of conversational interviews with teachers along with parent focus group meetings. In order to successfully complete all of the teacher interviews in a period of two days, arrangements were made—at the researcher's expense—for a roving substitute teacher to cover the classroom while each teacher participated in the interviews. During the third site visit, six teachers were interviewed within the school day, one parent focus group consisting of three participants was held during the late afternoon just prior to dismissal, and another parent focus group met in the evening. Although the evening focus group was expected to have three participants, only one parent attended that session. Attempts to reschedule with the two non-attending parents were unsuccessful. The fourth site visit consisted of seven teacher interviews and one evening focus group with three parents participating.

The participating teachers included all three fourth-grade teachers, all four fifth-grade teachers, all four sixth-grade teachers, one learning support teacher assigned to provide services for third- and fourth-grade students with disabilities, and one learning support teacher assigned to provide services for fifth- and sixth-grade students with disabilities. Ten of the 13 teachers had spent their entire educational career in the Renaissance School District. Only two of these staff members were fairly new teachers (i.e., 3 years and 4 years of experience), and one staff member had significant experience (i.e., 26 years). The experience level of the remaining 10 teachers fell between 6.5 and 19 years. The average of all 13 teachers' total years in education equaled 11 years and the median equaled 9 years. The seven parents participating in the focus groups included one fourth-grade parent, three fifth-grade parents, and three sixth-grade parents.

### **Institutional Factors Influencing the Decision to Departmentalize**

In exploring the decision-making process involved in determining whether or not to departmentalize in the elementary grades, the researcher sought answers to the following question: *What were the institutional factors influencing the decision to consider departmentalization?* In Renaissance, the data revealed that federal/state regulations, district/school policies and procedures, structures, and norms all influenced the departmentalization decisions in the fourth and fifth grades and/or the continued acceptance of the practice of departmentalization in the sixth grade.

**Federal/State regulations.** In examining the impact of state and federal regulations in relation to Renaissance's departmentalization decisions, the influence of NCLB was immediately apparent. More accurately, what was evident was the influence of the high stakes Pennsylvania System of Student Assessment (PSSA) exam required by that law as well as the associated pressure to make continued Adequate Yearly Progress. All of the Renaissance administrators

and 12 of the 13 teachers mentioned the PSSA test's impact on the interest in departmentalization; and even a few parents made reference to the test.

For sixth grade, the PSSA served as one means of justification for the district's continued commitment to departmentalization at that level. Referencing the sixth-grade PSSA results as evidence of the success of departmentalization; one teacher touted, "Our PSSA scores have been really good." She continued, "Our PSSA scores have always been good since we have done departmentalization....We have made AYP for the last seven years." Another sixth-grade teacher felt that departmentalization improved PSSA results because it allowed her the time—not available when teaching multiple subjects—to formulate PSSA-style questions. "I am giving the kids the kind of practice they need for the PSSA. I am able to do things that I know I would never be able to do if I was teaching all the subjects."

In regard to the fifth-grade decision to departmentalize, one sixth-grade teacher observed that the fifth-grade teachers were continually stressed by the pressure of performing well on *three* PSSA assessments: reading, math, and writing. A fifth-grade teacher's comments confirmed this observation: "Because of the PSSA and the pressure that seems to be on everybody, we were thinking of ways to better enable the students to perform well, not just on the test, but in the classroom." A sixth-grade teacher reflecting on the fifth-grade decision suggested that departmentalizing "was the answer...for the teachers to have that time" to develop excellent instructional plans. A fifth-grade teacher agreed:

We could stay focused on a core subject area and maybe spend more time making more appropriate lessons, more differentiated lessons, and things like that so we could really get into the nitty-gritty of lesson planning and make our lessons better by doing that as opposed to being stretched so thin with having to make four or five different lessons. We



thought that [departmentalizing] could improve our teaching that way. In addition, with the PSSA tests we kind of felt like, if we could have two teachers focus on math and two teachers focus on reading, perhaps that would give our students a better possibility of succeeding on the test because we felt we would be better prepared to teach our students, and then they would be better prepared to learn from those better lessons.

Another teacher indicated that because fifth grade is tested on math and reading, the team felt focusing on those subjects would allow them the opportunity to develop lessons that were more involved:

It got to be overwhelming as far as our plans, and...we felt that sometimes our lessons were more touching the surface of things and not being able to get in depth with things because it seemed like we were rushed to do things. We thought that, if we separated one of those core subjects of math or reading out of our planning time, and then we would just plan for reading or just for math; maybe it would improve those lesson plans, and we would get more in depth lessons and more meaningful lessons as opposed to [the] more surface lessons we did because we needed to touch on that topic [for the test]...We felt that would give us a better time frame. That was why we chose to do that with math and reading.

Although one fifth-grade teacher did not concur that the team's decision to select math and reading as the subjects to departmentalize was motivated by the fact that those subjects were assessed, she did agree that the pressure placed on the grade level as a result of PSSA-related factors was draining. From her perspective, the team selected the two subjects requiring the most intensive planning in an effort to relieve some of the pressure they were feeling—pressure which stemmed from the PSSA. By eliminating the need to plan for one of those core areas, teachers could dedicate more time to preparing better lessons in the other areas for the benefit of

the students. The superintendent recognized the fifth-grade teachers' motivation to departmentalize as being related to improving student achievement and PSSA results:

I think they are very much trying to continue to increase student achievement and performance on the PSSA tests....We are not just looking at a test. We are looking to improve student achievement and once we do that, we will do well on the test. Let's be honest, that's the measuring stick we are out there up against, and I think that was a driving force. We were looking at the data, and seeing their students' performance; and they [the fifth-grade teachers] were saying, "How can we more effectively teach the students and keep raising them up like we need to, not only for achievement, but also growth?" They are very much in tune to both aspects; both achievement and growth. They saw that [departmentalization] as a more effective way to accomplish that.

While also impacted by the PSSA, fourth grade's thought process in selecting areas for departmentalization differed from fifth grade's. One fourth-grade teacher noted that the team elected to departmentalize for science, social studies, and writing because "we are doing so well [on the PSSA] we just don't want to mess with the language arts and math thing right now....No need to...our scores are so good." He noted that the fourth-grade team made the "safe" choice in selecting subjects that do not count toward AYP for their departmentalization pilot because "the bottom line is our scores." All three teachers noted that, in addition to a desire to reduce planning time, a motivation to assist fifth grade in improving the PSSA writing scores was a factor in their decision. By departmentalizing for writing, the fourth-grade writing teacher "could coordinate with fifth grade and that way every fourth grader would be fed with the same writing style and structural delivery so that way it wasn't a hodgepodge when they came to fifth grade." Another fourth-grade teacher expressed, "The ultimate goal is to reduce the amount of

work they [fifth-grade teachers] have to do in order to get those kids ready for their PSSA writing test.”

While the PSSA test had a significant impact on the interest in departmentalization, current Pennsylvania certification requirements appeared to have little influence on the decision in Renaissance. However, certification clearly facilitated the ability to establish this structure. Although many of the departmentalized teachers had a special interest or additional background in the content area which they were instructing, only two actually held related content-area certifications in addition to their elementary certification. One teacher who held dual certification in elementary education and English indicated that having English certification assisted her in acquiring her position because the interview team recognized that her academic preparation and her experience as a secondary English teacher would be valuable for the position available at the time, which primarily entailed teaching communications. She noted, however, that the position was not advertised as requiring any certification other than elementary education.

When asked if he was concerned about finding specialists to fill openings for elementary departmental positions, the superintendent responded that certification issues were not a limitation because “every elementary teacher is certified to teach every subject.” One teacher noted that a colleague who had previous experience in the science field before beginning his career in education was “not any more qualified to teach science than I am because of his certificate, but based on his background and previous life experiences, we felt he was more qualified.” Mr. Kelly, district curriculum director noted that elementary-certified teachers “do not receive specific [content-area] training in their college preparation programs.” For example, an elementary-certified, sixth-grade science teacher in a departmentalized elementary school and

a seventh-grade science teacher in a departmentalized junior high school would have totally different preparations. Mr. Kelly indicated that due to the generalized approach to elementary certification/preparation programs, he had attempted to offer as much specialized professional development as possible for Renaissance teachers; and departmentalization had enabled him to better direct the limited pool of funds.

Clearly, the breadth of content that a teacher holding a Pennsylvania elementary education certificate is qualified to teach in the intermediate grades enabled departmentalization to be more easily accomplished in Renaissance. In addition, departmentalizing allowed the district to cost-effectively provide these generalists with more targeted professional development to build upon their initial preparation programs.

**District/School policies and procedures.** Policies in Pennsylvania public school districts are established by their boards of directors. Boards have considerable latitude in the extent to which they develop policies; and, therefore, variation exists between districts in regard to the number of policies and their expanse. Because district policies govern the operation of a district and can only be adopted and revised by school boards, policies can create “roadblocks” for districts when changes are desired, if the proposed changes violate policy. In such cases, board involvement and policy revisions must take place before desired changes can be implemented. In Renaissance, however, district policies were not an obstacle in making organizational structure decisions. The only district policy which was found to be relevant to the decision was “Policy No. 206 Assignment Within District.” The “Purpose” and “Delegation of Responsibility” sections of this policy within the *Renaissance School District Policy Manual* defined the following expectations:

The Board directs that the assignment of students to classes and schools within this district shall be consistent with the educational needs and abilities of students and the best use of district resources....The building principal shall assign students in the school to appropriate grades, classes or groups, based on consideration of the needs and abilities of the student, as well as the administration of the school.

Given the broad nature of this directive, the administration held the necessary authority to make various changes in horizontal organization structures, such as ability grouping and departmentalizing, without the need for Board involvement in the decision.

In addition to this policy, several other district and school procedures provided insight into the decision to departmentalize and the potential for departmentalization to be successful in the district. First, the elementary teacher handbook outlined the expectation that lesson plans be posted on the district server weekly and include the appropriate State standards or anchors along with objectives, instructional methods, and assessment measures. As one teacher noted, the expectation for such detailed planning, though “rightful,” added to her feeling of being “inundated.” “We were doing the same thing, but having more paperwork....We were always...making sure we covered all of the standards anyway, but now we actually have to document that we are doing it.” To her, departmentalizing became a way of eliminating some of the planning so that the remaining plans could be more detailed and effective.

Superintendent Coleman alluded to another district practice that impacted the success of departmentalization, as well as the success of every Renaissance initiative: “hiring good staff.” He explained that the district had established a process which it followed every time an opening arose and that in each situation the most qualified candidate was recommended for the position. “No other factors go into who we hire other than, ‘Let’s find the best person.’” As a result of

this practice, the Board had hired candidates just entering the field, as well as teachers with significant experience requiring a salary at the top step of the pay scale. Because Renaissance hiring decisions were based on the candidates' capabilities, rather than on politics; Superintendent Coleman believed that the quality of instruction was augmented. Better instruction then impacted the success of district initiatives, such as departmentalization.

Principal Metzger offered another practice that facilitated the success of departmentalization efforts. She required grade-level teacher teams to meet together a minimum of one time per week for joint planning and for dialogue regarding students' academic, social, and emotional growth. Although only one meeting per week was required, Metzger contended that many grade levels elected to meet more frequently. She built time into their schedules to allow them to do so. One teacher touted the importance of such team meetings and offered this advice to principals considering departmentalization:

I would definitely make sure that the staff is aware that communications and meetings are essential to make it work. When you go from self-contained to a departmentalized situation, the staff has to be willing to do those meetings. I know at times it can be hectic because you want to use that time maybe to run off copies for your class and things like that, but sometimes you just have to meet to discuss things and sometimes that takes a little extra preparation to do that.

Finally, school procedures regarding homework completion and class preparedness impacted the success of departmentalization at Renaissance. The student handbook notified parents of the importance of homework completion and communicated the fact that late or incomplete homework would be reflected in students' grades. Disciplinary action could also be taken in addition to the expectation that the work be completed. Both fifth- and sixth-grade

teachers expressed the importance of consistency across the grade level in enforcing the homework policy. Both grade levels established procedures and defined sanction hierarchies for incomplete assignments, which were consistently applied across the classes. In addition, all teachers expected students to come to class prepared with the necessary materials. Both grade levels established a “grace period” at the start of each year for learning routines and expectations. Once the grace period had passed, fifth-grade students continued to be permitted to return to their homerooms for whatever necessary materials had been left behind, but lost five minutes of recess for each infraction. Sixth-grade students were no longer permitted to return for materials and instead faced a scale of increasing consequences each time they were unprepared. Within their grade level, teacher teams demonstrated consistency in enforcing the relevant procedures to foster student responsibility.

We agree on a set of procedures and routines making it easier for the kids. I don't have one set of expectations in my class, and she has a different set here. You know as far as homework requirements and those sorts of things, we are all on the same page so that helps the kids understand those basics that then we can practice with them.

Obviously, a variety of policies and procedures influenced the ability to departmentalize and the success of the practice.

**Structures.** Two structural factors—the size of the school and the resources available—also served as institutional influences on departmentalization. In considering the impact of school size, enrollment played a critical role as did the physical closeness of the classrooms. As noted by the superintendent, having grade-level teams of approximately 80-90 students and common schedules created the necessary intimacy for teachers to work collaboratively and to learn to know all of their students well. These grade-level teams provided an advantage for

elementary departmentalization not able to be easily achieved in a high school departmental structure. At the secondary level, students have greater options in scheduling and no longer matriculate through the same block of classes as a cohort making it more difficult to achieve the team collaboration that naturally occurred at Renaissance Elementary. In addition, because Renaissance had only three or four classes per grade level, which were all located near each other within the building, transitions occurred quickly. Rapid transitions reduced behavioral concerns as well as the impact on instructional time.

In regard to resources, a number of supports facilitated departmentalization. For one, the availability of sufficient staff for related arts classes (i.e., art, music, library, physical education, and swimming) allowed a daily common planning block to be scheduled for each grade level. While teachers were not required to hold team meetings more than once per week, the mere availability of the time encouraged more frequent meetings. Thirty-seven-minute related arts classes were consistently scheduled, Monday through Friday, allowing the fourth-grade team to maintain a daily common planning block from 8:45-9:22, fifth grade from 9:25-10:02, and sixth grade from 10:45-11:22. Having this consistent time not only encouraged joint planning and consistency across the grade-level team, but also eliminated scheduling conflicts, making departmentalization possible. In order to maintain the necessary staff to provide this support, related arts teachers held dual roles. For example, the music teacher also provided instrument lessons along with directing the band and choir; the art teacher held responsibility for gifted and ESL instruction; the librarian was involved with the Accelerated Reader program; the physical education teacher taught in the high school in addition to the elementary; and the swimming teacher covered some physical education classes, as well.



To further facilitate scheduling, the fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade teachers all allocated time for a 30-minute study period at the end of the day from 2:30-3:00. In addition to providing time for studying and individualized tutoring, a variety of special activities were scheduled during this time block, including student council, the student newspaper, band, and choir. Title I math and reading teachers attempted to schedule services during this block as much as possible. This study period alleviated past issues with large numbers of students being pulled from classes during core instruction. One teacher explained that incorporating the study period eliminated the need for teachers to continually re-teach core content to students who were absent from instruction, noting that previously “we would lose 50% of our kids because they were going to whatever the special was.”

Teacher expertise played a part in the various grade-levels’ decisions. Principal Metzger acknowledged that decisions regarding which subjects to departmentalize over the years had been dependent “on the expertise of the teachers at the time.” She also recognized the need to consider teacher strengths and weaknesses in making staffing assignments. In order to support and develop the necessary teacher expertise, Renaissance provided focused professional development to the extent possible with the available funds. For example, science teachers had recently received *Science: It’s Elementary* training, and language arts teachers enjoyed the opportunity to participate in *Reading Apprenticeship* training.

Finally, new clocks proved to be a seemingly simple, but highly effective resource. Synchronized clocks, installed as part of the renovation project, facilitated the transitions between class periods; and, therefore, maximized instructional time and reduced opportunities for misbehavior. Essentially, synchronized clocks, teacher expertise through background and training, a study period for tutoring and special activities and services, common planning time,

and a sufficient related arts staff all served as resources supporting the success of departmentalization.

**Norms.** Finally, the accepted practices and traditions of Renaissance influenced the elementary departmentalization decision. The fact that Renaissance Elementary had a long-standing history of departmentalization in sixth grade and also had previous experience with departmentalization in the fifth grade, likely made the practice more acceptable in the community. One parent fondly recalled being a fifth-grade student 25 years ago and switching classes for “science and several other subjects,” indicating that “it gave you a feel for the different teaching methods of all the teachers.” Another parent expressed the following: “Having come through this school myself...I just assumed it was just something that worked all those years ago and that was why they were continuing.”

History also impacted the ultimate decision regarding the fifth-grade’s current departmentalized structure. One teacher shared that her father had taught science at Renaissance when fifth grade was departmentalized previously and indicated that this history was a consideration in her team’s recent decision to departmentalize, as well as in the extent to which departmentalization was implemented at that level. Reflections related to this past practice included, “Why did they quit? Why didn’t they continue that? Why aren’t we doing it right now? We looked at that, and we thought. Actually, that is one of the reasons why we didn’t completely departmentalize.” In addition, the homogenous grouping for reading in the primary grades helped accustom students and families to switching classrooms and further contributed to the acceptance of departmentalization. Renaissance Elementary School’s past practice with various grouping patterns helped the community view the recent moves to departmentalization in fourth and fifth grades as “business as usual.” These norms for the school community along with

the school structure, policies and procedures, and federal and state regulations all served as institutional factors influencing the elementary departmentalization decision.

### **Stakeholders' Influence on the Decision to Departmentalize**

As noted by Weiss (1995), institutional factors influence the individual stakeholder; and, in turn, the individual's ideologies, interests, and access to information affect the decision-making process. In determining the influence of the individual on the decision to departmentalize in Renaissance, the first determination which needed to be made was the following: *Who were the stakeholders involved in the decision and why?* Once the stakeholders were identified, the following question remained: *How did stakeholders' ideologies, interests, and access to information influence their decision in regard to departmentalization?* This case report provides insight into each of these individual factors in relation to their influence on the Renaissance Elementary School's departmentalization decisions.

**Stakeholders' involvement.** In considering the stakeholder involvement in the departmentalization decisions at Renaissance, the data revealed that classroom teachers, with cooperation from the administration, were heavily engaged in the decisions. Other stakeholders were far less involved. Although the decisions had a direct effect on the elementary students, no respondents indicated any attempt to secure student input in the decision-making process. However, given the age level of the learners (i.e., fourth, fifth, and sixth grade), the lack of student involvement was not unexpected or inappropriate for such a decision.

Evidence suggested, however, that students at least leveraged indirect involvement in the decision to continue departmentalization once it was implemented. A number of teachers and parents reported students' receptivity to the practice as justification for continuing it. One fifth-grade teacher observed, "I think the kids are pretty well satisfied with it." Another contended,

“If you took a poll, I would think most of them [the students] like it.” In support of this statement, she offered that students’ had expressed, at the end of each year, disbelief in regard to how fast the year had gone. In addition to the school year seeming to move faster, she noted that students also find the school *day* to move faster. One teacher, who had a niece in fourth-grade at Renaissance Elementary, described her niece’s reaction to departmentalization: “She likes having different teachers and seeing different faces.” In regard to her students’ reaction to the practice, she stated, “The kids are positive about it. We almost never have a kid who says, ‘I would rather have the same teacher all day long.’” She shared that, after the first month of school, she typically holds a discussion with her sixth-grade class in regard to how the year is going. In that conversation, students are “always very positive” about switching classes for the various subjects. One fifth-grade teacher admitted to having had “a couple kids through the years that said they wished they could stay in one room,” but she noted that, overall, she felt the students enjoyed the opportunity “to get a new perspective from somebody else.” One parent who indicated having “five clients in the sixth grade” found it intriguing that all five of these children had enthusiastically expressed, “We love sixth grade!” She attempted to explain their enthusiasm: “I think it is a new experience, and they think, ‘We are growing up and having a little more responsibility.’ and they get a little more excited about it.”

Although the limited student involvement in the decision was expected, the lack of parent input into the decision was somewhat more surprising. The data revealed that no attempt was made to involve parents in the decisions through meetings, questionnaires, or other methods of seeking input. In addition to not receiving solicited input, most interviewees indicated that they also received no voluntary feedback—positive or negative—from parents, even in regard to the recent implementation of departmentalization in fourth and fifth grade. One fifth-grade teacher

concluded that “the fact that we haven’t heard negative” provided evidence of parental support “because no one holds back usually if they don’t [approve]. I haven’t heard us being slammed for that [departmentalizing].”

In regard to why parental input was not offered, one parent noted, “They never asked for it [input], and so I never really told them.” Another parent explained that, as a PTC member, she typically received “a heads up before most other people would,” but she felt the departmentalization decisions in both fourth grade and fifth grade were made and implemented without a lot of parent involvement. She shared the following observation:

I don’t know how most schools go, but here I know when changes are made education-wise and program-wise...there is not a lot coming home to ask the parents, “Do you think we should do this?,” “How do you think this will impact your kids?” There is not a lot of that at all. Then all of sudden we get these papers. This is all changing, and we are going, “What?”

Despite her criticism of the lack of parent involvement, she expressed that the changes implemented by the district were usually positive. Another parent echoed agreement with that assertion. One teacher, who also happened to be a parent of children within Renaissance Elementary, stated the following from her combined parent and teacher perspectives:

I don’t really feel like I have a say in, “Hey, I don’t want my kid to go to this class or that class.” This is a school; and I think if they [the school staff] decide this, that is the deciding factor. I don’t really feel I should have that power to say, “I don’t want my child to go to this class.” Because, if they [teachers] are employed...they should be good teachers. I don’t think it is an issue. We didn’t send a letter home saying, “I hope the parents are okay

with this.” They should be okay with this because we made a decision based on their child’s benefit in the end.

Another stakeholder group not directly invited to participate in the departmentalization decision was the School Board. Given that district policy did not require Board approval for an organizational change such as departmentalization, there was no requirement for School Board involvement in the decision. Administrators agreed that it was typical in Renaissance for decisions of such nature to be made without Board involvement, noting that the Renaissance Board of Directors traditionally trusted the expertise of the educational professionals in curricular decisions.

Teacher involvement varied by assignment and by decision. First, special education teachers indicated no involvement in the decision. One noted, “I didn’t have any say in that [departmentalization] occurring. They just told me at the beginning of the year.” Both special education teachers indicated, however, that despite their lack of involvement in the decision, they were willing to cooperate with the decisions and worked their schedules out accordingly.

Given that the sixth-grade decision to departmentalize was made prior to their employment at Renaissance, no teachers at any level indicated involvement in that decision. In addition, none indicated ever being asked to reconsider the practice of departmentalizing at the sixth-grade level, and none expressed an interest in moving to a self-contained approach.

The process of making the fifth-grade decision, however, involved teachers and administrators. Both groups agreed, however, that the *teachers* initiated the dialogue. Formal and informal discussions amongst the fifth-grade teaching team—over what may have been a period of a couple years—during grade level meetings, in-services, and lunches planted the seed. No fourth-grade teachers indicated entering the discussion. A couple of sixth-grade teachers

noted some informal dialogue with fifth-grade teachers, but no direct involvement in the decision-making process. One fifth-grade teacher acknowledged that the sixth-grade model indirectly influenced their decision:

We looked at their situation, and how they were doing it. We kind of felt like everything is kind of a building block in elementary. You go from one grade level to the next; and we felt that if they are exchanging for every class to prepare them for the junior high, maybe if we just exchange for math and reading—which are our two stress subjects for the PSSA—that would give them some preparation for sixth grade plus give us what we felt we needed to improve our kids' abilities to perform on that test...so indirectly they influenced us in that way.

Conversations between the fifth-grade team members revolved around the potential advantages and disadvantages of departmentalization as well as possible schedules.

Although they believed Principal Metzger was aware they were considering departmentalization, they waited until they had developed a formal plan before presenting the notion to her. Ms. Metzger met with the grade-level team and discussed the pros and cons with them. Teachers indicated that their principal appeared open to the idea initially, but did not immediately approve the request. A couple teachers presumed Principal Metzger likely presented the concept to the superintendent and/or curriculum director before giving final approval. The curriculum director recalled an informal meeting with Ms. Metzger regarding the potential change and recounted deciding collaboratively with Ms. Metzger to support the teachers' request. Beyond this, his involvement in the decision fell on the technical side, rather than the curricular side, through the establishment of classes for online grading/data management systems.

After aligning with Mr. Kelly, Principal Metzger informed Superintendent Coleman of the recommendation, which he then ultimately approved. Coleman noted that he had questions, but felt comfortable with their recommendation:

The strongest point that was made to me was that it was the recommendation from the teachers starting at the classroom level. There was ownership from the ground up...which made me think it had a good chance of succeeding. Then based upon the answers I got from the administrators, not only did I think...there was buy-in by the teachers, but I also felt that pedagogically it was going to work. It was going to be a good decision.

While one fifth-grade teacher relayed the team's belief in the importance of involving the administration in the decision-making process as a "respect and chain-of-command kind of thing," she also recognized that the buy-in for the decision came from the fact that the teachers felt ownership of the decision:

We were not asked to do it, and being asked to do it and not wanting to do it might have been different. I might have had a different attitude at the beginning, but this is something that we as teachers wanted and asked, "Can we do it?" So if it were presented from maybe the top down like the principal saying, "I want you guys to departmentalize," we might have said, "Wow, this might be something that we really need to plan for." We had asked for it so I guess it is a bit different than being asked to do it.

Principal Metzger made the team aware that she "was available for anything that they needed" in order to prepare for the change, but she noted that "they took off with it," working collaboratively even on their own time over the summer to ensure the success of the initiative.

In examining fourth-grade's decision, the development of the desire to departmentalize and the process of making the decision differed from that of fifth grade. While the consideration



of departmentalization was again initiated by the teachers and again involved ongoing dialogue over a period of a couple years, the decision entailed significantly less administrative involvement. In discussing teachers' involvement in the development of an interest in departmentalization at the fourth-grade level, one teacher indicated that it was his hope, from the onset of his career in 2007, that the grade level would eventually departmentalize. He noted that openness to departmentalization resulted from staff changes. When a former sixth-grade teacher was transferred to fourth grade in 2008, the transfer became "a catalyst" to bring departmentalization to that level. Serious discussions regarding a potential pilot, however, did not take place until 2009. In the second half of that year, the former sixth-grade teacher developed a potential schedule; and, after further dialogue, the team of three teachers agreed to proceed with departmentalizing for writing, science, and social studies during one period of the day. The fourth grade had just begun their departmentalization pilot in the fall of 2010, when data collection for this research was taking place.

Administrative involvement in the decision was limited to one of the three teachers approaching Principal Metzger at the end of the 2009-10 school year to secure her approval for the fall implementation:

I told her that we were considering doing some things with science, social studies, and writing. I asked her if she would have a problem if we would just departmentalize for just a short block with those three subjects areas. She said, "By all means. I trust what you are doing, and you are doing well."

Principal Metzger described the fourth-grade initiative as "nothing formal," calling it an "experiment." Superintendent Coleman mentioned being aware that fourth-grade was currently considering some degree of departmentalization, but indicated that he was not privy to the

specifics of the current experiment. Mr. Kelly articulated that the fourth-grade decision was “a complete surprise” to him. He only became aware of the decision when he received an email in the fall from a teacher requesting assistance in establishing the online grading for the departmentalized student groups. “When they approached me, they already had Principal Metzger’s approval. We didn’t really have a big discussion on it.” Mr. Kelly indicated having questions about the motivation behind the change and the extent of dialogue that went into the decision, but also noted that the extensive building renovations taking place at the time had been consuming much of everyone’s attention and, therefore, could have contributed to his limited involvement in this grade level’s decision.

While each grade level’s situation was unique, clearly the classroom teachers sustained the most significant level of involvement in the decision to departmentalize. Administrators held an ancillary role, primarily granting approval of the decisions. Students, parents, and board members held no direct involvement in the decisions; however, feedback from students may have indirectly influenced the continued practice.

**Stakeholders’ ideologies.** Among the interviewed stakeholders, ideologies varied. While no one expressed a definite preference for the more student-oriented, self-contained approach, several noted their tendency to prefer a more content-oriented approach representative of departmentalized structures. A few interviewees indicated having no preference given their belief that each model had its own unique benefits, and the superintendent touted the value of a melding of both orientations. Although no one clearly expressed a desire to remain self-contained or argued the need for a more student-centered orientation to instruction, Principal Metzger revealed that she initially “had a rather strong philosophy” preferring the student-oriented approach to instruction facilitated by self-contained structures. She stated, “I felt that

kids needed to have connections with one teacher...[who] would be aware of that child from the minute they came in the room to the minute they left...to take care of all their needs—a more whole-child focus.” She explained that staff changes and No Child Left Behind had led to her openness toward elementary departmentalization, but noted that she probably would not have accepted it 10 years ago. She expressed the need to “evolve with the changes,” but warned that maintaining an awareness of students’ “social and emotional growth” was necessary in departmentalized situations.

The curriculum director, however, with a secondary background, confessed that he held a definite bias toward departmentalization. Having begun his career teaching science at the seventh-grade level, Mr. Kelly believed he would have struggled as a new teacher to be able to successfully teach multiple content areas. Recognizing the importance of student-orientation, however, he admitted that having fewer students enabled teachers to really learn to know their students. He said, “If you teach 120 kids, you teach the subject too much.” Like Mr. Kelly, all four current sixth-grade teachers and one fourth-grade teacher, who had formerly taught sixth grade, indicated a preference for the content-area specialization that departmentalizing allowed. One of these teachers indicated that she had taught in both types of structures and preferred departmentalization because “you can really get deep into the subject area, where if you are teaching everything, you can’t.” A fourth-grade teacher with previous experience in the science field also indicated an orientation toward content specificity. While all teachers were open to departmentalization, a few noted advantages and disadvantages of both approaches; and a couple indicated having no preference. One shared, “It didn’t matter to me one way or the other. I am kind of global. I can go with it. I had pros and cons from both sides.”

The superintendent's ideology demonstrated great insight into the potential value of elementary departmentalization. From his experience teaching self-contained elementary classes as well as departmentalized high school classes, he had seen the benefits of both content specialization and student-orientation. "I think either end of the spectrum isn't where we need to be. I certainly think that at the secondary level we...tend to teach content. Elementary, I think, teaches kids. I think this [elementary departmentalization] is a good melding of that." Coleman continued to explain that by taking elementary teachers who are traditionally "focused on teaching kids" and providing them with the opportunity to specialize "in certain content areas and deliver instruction in a more effective and efficient way," the effect is instructors with strong ownership of both the students and the content-area results. While he professed that there was no question that self-contained classroom teachers could also be highly effective; he noted that, from his own secondary experience with more limited content preparations, he had evidence of how departmentalization allowed teachers to "go more in depth," to gain "a better understanding" of the content, and to deliver higher quality instruction.

**Stakeholders' interests.** A variety of interests influenced the departmentalization decision in Renaissance. These primarily included organizational interests in cost efficiency and teacher/student productivity, as well as teachers' self-interests. The superintendent and curriculum director were the stakeholders primarily interested in cost efficiency. In discussing the staffing necessary to maintain the common planning times which facilitated the potential for success of departmentalization, Superintendent Coleman articulated a need "to meet the middle ground between what we have to do for kids and what we have to do for our taxpayers." Essentially, Coleman felt it was his responsibility to ensure that "the benefits justify cost." Similarly, the curriculum director maintained responsibility for the professional development

budget. He noted that departmentalization allowed for a better investment of professional development funds because he could target the teachers for training based upon their areas of specialization, therefore, limiting the number of teachers in need of each of the various trainings.

Administrators and teachers shared an interest in teacher/student productivity. Student achievement and test performance were primary concerns of both groups. For example, Superintendent Coleman conveyed that his staff maintained an interest in “both achievement and growth” and indicated, in regard to the fifth-grade decision to departmentalize, that the teachers saw departmentalization as “a more effective way to accomplish” both goals. “They were going to try to increase student achievement and meet the standards and provide a better education for the students by departmentalizing.” Principal Metzger agreed that these teachers were attempting to heighten student achievement with their decision, particularly in reading because that was the area in most need of improvement. She contended that a primary goal of departmentalization for fifth grade was to better address the assessment anchors in order to give the students the necessary skills to experience success. The curriculum director also indicated an interest in improving the reading scores, noting that, while reading scores were not low, math scores were definitely higher. He believed the fifth-grade teachers also “wanted the scores up” and had departmentalized for that reason.

In regard to the fourth-grade decision to departmentalize, those teachers indicated that their “ultimate goal” was to benefit fifth grade by better preparing the students for the writing PSSA. By having “just one teacher” provide writing instruction, coordination between grade levels could be improved and instruction could be streamlined. While the potential to improve writing test scores served as one of the motivations for departmentalizing in fourth grade,

ironically, maintaining their currently high test scores in reading and mathematics was precisely why the team elected *not* to departmentalize those subjects.

Taking a different angle in regard to teacher performance, the superintendent noted that new teachers can be overwhelmed by what they have to accomplish. He suggested that departmentalization maximized the productivity of new teachers by allowing them to specialize in one area, as opposed to five. From another perspective, the curriculum director expressed his belief that, by allowing teachers to instruct in an area they enjoy, their performance improved; and, in turn, their students benefited.

Teachers agreed, expressing their own self-interests in teaching subjects of greater interest to them. One former sixth-grade reading teacher had requested a transfer from the principal in order to teach math. She declared, “For me, I like the teaching of the math.” She then continued to enthusiastically describe her most recent mathematics lesson on prime and composite numbers.

For fifth grade, a desire to reduce the burden of planning, while simultaneously increasing the impact of their lesson plans on student achievement and test performance, was a motivation for departmentalizing. One teacher explained:

We thought that we could actually do a better service to the kids [by] preparing better lessons. I could take that half hour I was going to plan for math and put that toward that same reading lesson. We could do more things and have more activities and be more creative with what we were doing rather than spreading ourselves too thin. So it was kind of for us and for the kids at the same time. If we make it easier for us, then we are making it better for the kids. It wasn't like we were trying to shirk, truly, what we were doing. We were trying to make what we were doing better. That is truly what the

motivation was. We were making it easier and better at the same time. It didn't lessen the work. It just made it different a little bit.

Deciding who would teach each fifth-grade subject was determined within grade-level meetings. "It wasn't an easy decision because, of course, you get four teachers together; and you are bound to have more than one person or two people who like a certain subject area." Another teacher explained the difficulty of the decision:

I think that the big hesitation with some of us was that we didn't want to be stuck teaching something that we didn't really like. Like for example, I'm not a real science person so I would not feel real comfortable teaching science all day long.

One teacher had a background in accounting, so she was assigned to teach math. Another noted enjoying language and, therefore, felt it was an "easy fit" for him. A third teacher really enjoyed mathematics; therefore, her preference was to provide the math instruction. However, she knew that the remaining teacher also wished to teach math. To avoid conflict, she agreed to take reading. Her experience as one of the two departmentalized reading instructors, however, changed her perception of that subject. She admitted that she had not really liked teaching reading when self-contained, but that her experience with reading instruction through departmentalization had led her to love it. "I am really glad that I have what I have now."

The team members all wanted everyone to be happy with their subject area and with the approach. They made a "pact" at the onset to try it for one year; and, if anyone was dissatisfied with the arrangement or unhappy with their subject, then the team would return to their self-contained structure. The teachers, however, felt satisfied after the first year and agreed to continue the practice. One teacher explained, "I just feel better about it; it is more comfortable for me." Another noted the following:

For us, this works; and sixth grade is totally different with it, and fourth grade is totally different. All I can say is if you are going to departmentalize, it has worked for us that each grade level has been allowed to say how they want it to work for them. It hasn't had to be that everybody does the same thing or we don't do it at all.

In the fourth grade, teachers' self-interests made it "tricky" to determine 1) whether or not to departmentalize, 2) which subjects to departmentalize, and 3) who would teach each subject. An example of one of the struggles with the fourth-grade decision was shared:

The problem was nobody really wanted to do the writing because it was so much more work having 60 or 70 students write essays, and then you are responsible to check all of those essays as opposed to just having your own class. That was kind of a put-off for all of us. We had grown comfortable in our lesson planning and the amount of work that we had to do, and nobody really wanted to tackle that little bit of extra stuff.

Eventually the decision was made based upon teachers' special interests and backgrounds. One teacher indicated having a minor in reading. He explained that another team member had a background in environmental science, and the other had "a strong passion for social studies." Therefore, "it seemed like a natural fit" to try departmentalizing for writing, science, and social studies. That same teacher found departmentalization more comfortable because his teaching performance was improved in departmentalized situations over self-contained due to the multiple opportunities to repeat the lesson with a new group of students. Given these examples, teachers' self-interests clearly played a role in their openness to departmentalization.

**Stakeholders' access to information.** Among the various stakeholders at Renaissance, access to information varied. Information communicated with students was limited to reviews of procedures and routines. For example, sixth-grade teachers mentioned holding a whole class



meeting at the start of the school year during which they outlined the various rules and expectations so that “kids are hearing the same exact explanation.”

Information shared with parents varied by grade level. No grade level indicated sharing specifics regarding the concept of departmentalization or their reasons for employing it. One fourth-grade teacher admitted to having communicated no information whatsoever to parents regarding the new structure. In response to a question regarding whether or not information had been shared, he replied, “It is funny you would say that. No there wasn’t. We just went ahead and did it, and it probably would have been a good idea. We should have informed parents, but we didn’t.”

Parents who had students in fifth grade in years when that grade level was departmentalized did not agree on whether or not a letter had gone home to them. This confusion possibly resulted from varied practices between teachers or school years. For example, one teacher explained that he sends an annual note to the parents of students in his classes indicating that he will be their child’s teacher and providing contact information. Another fifth-grade teacher indicated that she had sent a letter the first year, but not the second. She reasoned, “I guess 99% of the kids were here last year, and they are here again; and they see what goes on.” She indicated that a letter had gone home the first year just “for clarification so they [the parents] knew what the kids were talking about” when the students mentioned having different teachers. Another fifth-grade teacher agreed that a letter went home the first year, but could not recall if a letter went home the second year. A fourth member of the team provided a copy of a letter which she indicated was sent home with all fifth-grade students each year, but that letter only outlined the grade level’s homework policy and did not communicate any information regarding how the grade level was structured. This same teacher explained that

parent-teacher conferences offered another opportunity to share information with parents. She noted that conferences were held, to the fullest extent possible, with all members of the teaching team participating. That practice proved beneficial in communicating with parents, but frustrating in scheduling.

Sixth grade appeared to be more consistent in its communications. One parent expressed this observation and queried, “Do you think it is because that [departmentalized] is how sixth grade has always been so they are learning what works, what doesn’t work, [and] how organized they need to be?” One sixth-grade teacher, describing her team’s shared communication practices, explained the following:

We send a newsletter home at the beginning of every school year so that the parents understand what our structure is and how we work as the sixth-grade team. If any parents have any questions, we give them our email address and our phone numbers so they can contact us.

Sixth-grade teachers also mentioned posting mathematics homework online and holding parent-teacher conferences as a team. Parents confirmed receiving the letter along with having knowledge of the team conferences. They also expressed appreciation of the homework page and of being provided with a copy of their child’s daily schedule, as well.

The stakeholder group which was provided with the least information in relation to elementary departmentalization proved to be the Renaissance Board of Directors. Given the fact that the Board was not involved in making the decision and that the community had not reacted negatively to the change, there was essentially no need for extensive communication with the Board regarding the decision. One fifth-grade teacher mentioned giving a brief report to the Board regarding that grade level’s implementation of departmentalization during their annual

board presentation in 2009-10: “Once a year we go to the Board—every one of the classes—and we told them we were doing that [departmentalizing]. We told them our reasons for it. We weren’t really questioned on it at all.” No administrator gave a report to the Board regarding the change from self-contained to semi-departmentalized in either grade four or grade five. In reflecting on why she had not included this information in any of her board communications, Principal Metzger indicated that apparently she had just viewed the change as “business as usual.”

Teachers indicated that the information used in making the departmentalization decision primarily came from collegial dialogues, often focused on how to improve test scores. While teachers relayed extensive knowledge of their PSSA performance data, no teachers indicated reviewing any research in relation to their departmentalization decisions. When one teacher was asked directly if she was aware of any research or data regarding departmentalization being utilized in making the fifth-grade decision, she responded, “Not really. Maybe that would be a good answer if I said, ‘Yes,’ but I don’t believe so.”

In reflecting on the fifth-grade implementation, Superintendent Coleman noted that after the first year of departmentalizing at that level, his administrators had made him aware that the teachers wanted to continue the practice. “They obviously felt that it was being effective, and our performance would indicate that.” He noted that both the PSSA and PVAAS data were demonstrating the effectiveness of departmentalization, and that “anecdotally, the teachers think that, too.”

Principal Metzger indicated relying primarily on craft knowledge and professional experience in decision making, stating: “I think it’s whatever the teachers think will work. I think it is experience that has told me that.” The curriculum director noted that, generally, the

district is “probably not the very best on what does research say.” He indicated that during the time when departmentalization was being considered for fifth grade, he had spent “one to two hours on the internet” to get a sense of the research weighing self-contained vs. departmentalized structures and could find studies arguing both sides. Thus, “common sense” told him departmentalization was better. He noted that all teachers on the fifth-grade team wanted to departmentalize; and, therefore, preventing that would have required overriding the entire team. Given his knowledge that the fifth-grade team was truly motivated to make the change in order to improve student achievement, he could not justify standing in the way of their request. In summary, teachers and administrators used their general craft knowledge, experiences, and informal conversations as information to assist them in the decision-making process. Stakeholders who were non-educators received limited access to information, and communications with these groups focused on basic procedures and practices.

### **Impact of Departmentalization**

A final, multi-part research question—*What elements of departmentalization were viewed as positive? Why? What elements were viewed as undesirable? Why?*—addressed the impact of departmentalization in an effort to glean, from those having current experience with the approach, an understanding of its advantages and disadvantages. Although the specific benefits and limitations that were revealed varied, all interviewees clearly felt that the benefits outweighed any limitations.

**Limitations of departmentalization.** When asked to discuss the disadvantages of departmentalization, many respondents struggled to supply any. Some offered what they felt were potential limitations, but then indicated that their suggested concern had not presented a problem at Renaissance. Others provided limitations couched with explanations of why the

drawback could also be viewed as a benefit. A few interviewees simply indicated that they could not identify *any* disadvantages, noting that their experience with the practice had been that positive. The limitations that were shared addressed concerns which fell under five broad categories: specialization, teacher-student relationships, transitions, time, and scheduling.

First, specialization resulting from departmentalization presented a variety of concerns. For one, subject areas became further isolated. For example, one teacher explained that, if a teacher specialized in math, she viewed herself as a math teacher and, therefore, maintained that sole area of focus. Departmentalized teachers indicated little or no integration across subject areas. Fifth-grade teachers described one cross-curricular unit, a “Nature’s Fury” unit integrating science and reading. Sixth-grade teachers admitted to having eliminated their only cross-curricular unit, “The Kite Project,” which had integrated all subject areas through research and development of historical and conceptual understanding of various scientific and mathematical concepts related to kites and aeronautics. While a variety of structures, such as common planning time, were in place to allow for curricular integration; one teacher revealed that the main obstacle was likely the teachers’ own attitudes of resistance toward integration in order to maintain their single-subject-area concentration.

Further addressing concerns regarding specialization, the curriculum director noted that teachers in departmental situations typically concentrated their own professional growth on that one, specialized area and received applicable professional development in that area, as well. While that practice enabled them to become an expert in their area of specialty, an issue could potentially arise whenever a transfer needed to be made. Requiring an instructor to teach a different content-area subject could become a challenge because the investment had not been

made in developing that teacher's expertise in any area other than the one in which he/she had specialized.

Similarly, a teacher expressed that individual strengths were a critical factor when assigning teachers in departmental situations. She admitted:

I would be a horrible science teacher. If they made me teach science, I would have to hit the books really hard every night because it is not my thing, and it's not my interest, so the kids would not receive the benefit from that. I think it is really important to match the person with that content and have that person excited about that content area that he or she is expected to teach all day long.

Despite her admission that she would be a poor science teacher, her certification qualified her to teach elementary science; and, therefore, the potential for her to have to do so existed. One other teacher noted that monotony from repeating the same lesson was another potential limitation of content specialization, but said he had not noted monotony being a concern in his experience. Finally, another lamented that specialization placed greater accountability pressure on the teacher. "When the PSSA scores come back...it comes back on me, so it is my responsibility at that point."

In regard to the second category of concerns with departmentalization—teacher-student relationships—a number of interviewees noted apprehension that departmentalization limited teachers' opportunities to gain deep knowledge of their students. However, most conveyed that, while they saw this as a potential issue regarding departmentalization, teacher-student relationships had not deteriorated in Renaissance. Principal Metzger admitted that the possibility of "losing the kids" with a more content-focused approach had occurred to her, but she noted that Renaissance teacher teams communicated frequently and maintained a good

knowledge of their students. Mr. Kelly recognized that, as the number of students assigned to a teacher becomes greater, the teacher typically becomes less concerned about individual students' learning styles and needs. Like Ms. Metzger, however, he contended that this potential concern was not applicable to Renaissance Elementary. A teacher who had been moved at one point in his career from a departmentalized position to a self-contained setting admitted that he was able to develop stronger bonds with his students in the self-contained structure, but felt he was still able to bond well with students in departmental classes. A sixth-grade teacher stated, "I think we know them well enough. We just don't know them intimately like you would if you had them for a whole day." One math teacher noted that she knows her students "mathematically" better than she knows their reading abilities, but indicated that, if she were teaching all subjects, she would know their math abilities less well.

In considering the potential concerns from reduced familiarity with the students, one parent believed it would take a teacher longer to recognize that a student was struggling in a departmentalized structure. Another noted that students would probably be less comfortable seeking assistance from the teacher in a departmentalized setting, especially if it was necessary to go to a different classroom for the required support. One teacher also expressed a concern that departmentalization made it harder to support the weaker students. "That is the one thing that kind of bothers me. I don't get to see that kid hands-on enough." She explained that departmentalizing made it more difficult to target struggling students for ongoing individualized support throughout the day, such as for quick tutorials during free moments, because the students may be in another classroom whenever an opportunity to assist them arose.

Transitions were the third limitation articulated by the interviewees. Again, however, most interviewees indicated that, while the potential for concern existed, transitions were not a

concern in Renaissance. One fourth-grade teacher noted that the potential of issues from transitions were a critical consideration in their departmentalization decision. He noted that, in determining how much to departmentalize, the developmental and maturity levels of the students needed to be considered. “Kids will kill so much time picking books up and going to another class, transitioning....It is seven, eight solid minutes before you are actually calmed down and ready to roll.” Another teacher described the difficulty some students have with transitioning:

I know some students do have difficulty with having to do the switching. They find it difficult. They do forget things, so it would probably be easier for some kids to stay in one environment, which they are used to, and just focus on one teacher and have their little desk with all their books.

One parent expressed concern that having desks, instead of lockers, created issues whenever students switched classes, indicating that her child complained of other students looking through her belongings at her desk.

The curriculum director alluded to another potential transitioning problem specific to the fourth-grade departmentalization decision. Mr. Kelly explained that the solitary fourth-grade class at Carolingian Elementary, which would move to Renaissance Elementary for fifth grade, would enter not having had the same departmentalization experience as the Renaissance fourth graders. Kelly suggested that this situation potentially placed Carolingian students at a disadvantage in their transition to fifth grade.

The fourth category of concern revolved around time factors. Several teachers expressed concern with losing the “teachable moment” as a result of the defined schedule. One teacher lamented that when he taught in a self-contained classroom, he was able to “carry over” instruction by adjusting the schedule whenever students failed to grasp a concept—a luxury that



was lost through departmentalization. An anecdote shared by another teacher provided an illustration of the lost flexibility to extend learning in response to students' needs and interests:

There would be a question at the end of the period, and it would be time to go. I would say, "We'll talk about that tomorrow," and the kids would go. The next day sometimes it would be brought up, and sometimes it wouldn't. You lose that teachable moment a little bit.

Fourth-grade teachers, in particular, felt the pressure of time constraints. The science teacher noted that the time constraints were an "injustice" to the inquiry-based approach to science. "You no sooner get your results starting to show...and I'm saying, 'Okay. Talk it over with your group.'" He noted that to save time, he asks a lot of "right there" questions. "I don't get to get into the deeper questioning that really starts to show kids synthesizing and at the higher-level thinking that you really want with new information like that." Another fourth-grade teacher questioned the time they had allotted for both writing and science, indicating he was anxious to see how the PSSA test results would fall in those areas. While he seemed to suggest that greater time needed to be dedicated to those subjects, he also noted that the time allotted was appropriate given their grade level's primary focus on reading and math. The lack of time for holiday projects and crafts was communicated by a sixth-grade teacher. "We don't have time for that because of our schedule."

Finally, scheduling issues were noted, by some, to be a limitation. Principal Metzger conveyed that teachers do lose some scheduling flexibility in a departmentalized approach, particularly when adjustments need to be made, like after a weather delay. One teacher explained that adjusting the schedule for picture day or special programs required changing the entire day and coordinating the changes with the entire teaching team, including support staff. In

addition, in situations in which one teacher wanted to do a special project that affected his/her schedule, all of the classes were impinged upon by the change.

Departmentalization impacted special education schedules, as well. For sixth grade, in particular, the practice tended to have a negative impact on the services offered to special education students. The special education teacher indicated that students receiving pull-out reading support were excused from their general education reading or communications classes at the same time that other students who required support for math were excused from their math classes. This approach forced the special education teacher to instruct one group of sixth-grade reading students and another group of sixth-grade math students simultaneously, making it difficult to give these students with disabilities the support they needed. One final scheduling concern—the coordination of parent conferences—was described as “a nightmare” due to efforts to hold team conferences with parents, although the conferences themselves were noted to be more beneficial as a result of this approach.

**Benefits of departmentalization.** When asked to discuss the benefits of departmentalization, respondents were eager to share. In fact, in most cases, due to the conversational nature of the interviews, the interviewees enthusiastically volunteered multiple benefits of departmentalization throughout the discussion even before being asked by the researcher to present these advantages. Ironically, the identified benefits fell under four of the same categories as the limitations—specialization, teacher-student relationships, transitions, and time. Collaboration was noted to be a fifth benefit.

First, the specialization resulting from departmentalization was noted to provide multiple advantages. The superintendent expressed, “It is the best of both worlds of the elementary and secondary. The secondary specialization in content; and also we still have the elementary

mindset, intimacy, and focus on the child, not just the content.” Numerous respondents articulated that departmentalizing allowed teachers to focus on a subject area and “gain more knowledge about it” in order to develop their expertise. They felt student achievement results were positively impacted as a result of getting to “delve deeply” into the content. As support for this statement, administrators contended that the school had continued to maintain its AYP status, and fifth-grade scores had improved in their year of the implementation of departmentalization.

Mr. Kelly noted the benefit of being able to “hone their professional development” in relation to their subject area due to the specialization. One fourth-grade teacher stated, “We are hoping that the benefit is going to be that we get better at what we are doing; and, because we are better, the students are engaged more. We can supply them with a greater amount of information in a shorter time period to make it more beneficial for them.” Parents also indicated that by focusing their attention on a subject, teachers were better able to make their instruction more interesting for the learners. One parent suggested that teachers could better differentiate instruction because “they feel comfortable with that subject.” Another claimed, “When the student sees a teacher getting excited about a subject, that excites the student as well.”

Teachers also expressed lesson planning benefits from specialization. “I have 20 minutes to plan a reading lesson as opposed to 20 minutes to plan my reading lesson and math lesson. In that [sic] 20 minutes I can get one really good reading lesson.” She expressed taking more time to find resources and putting more effort into planning. Another teacher noted that specializing protects a subject from being short-changed, noting that was often the case with science and social studies before specialization. A sixth-grade teacher agreed, indicating that their structure ensured that all subjects receive due attention. She noted that because the instruction of science

and social studies was alternated by unit in other grade levels, sixth grade was the first time students experienced every content-area subject on a daily basis. Finally, a few felt they were better able to perfect their craft through the opportunity to re-teach their lessons to multiple student groups. “You learn from your morning class...and maybe try to get the afternoon to go more smoothly.”

Surprisingly, teacher-student relationships were seen as the second area of benefit from departmentalization. A number of teachers indicated that departmentalizing had allowed them to get to know the whole grade level as opposed to just their own classroom group, explaining that contact with students outside their own classroom had been limited under the self-contained model. One explained, “Now I know every kid’s name. A lot of them I have had a chance to talk to beyond just an academic level.” Another teacher recognized that having a connection with all of the students helped with situations like playground supervision. In addition, these connections allowed teachers to better assist substitutes with various concerns because they now had greater knowledge of all of the students and their histories.

Third, the interview dialogue revealed benefits related to transitioning. It was felt that students benefited from the opportunity to get out of their seats, to move to a new environment, and to experience varied teaching styles. One teacher noted, “The kids like it because they get to see other kids, and they get to see other teachers. It is a chance for them to move.” Parents, in particular, felt it was important for their children to have the opportunity to move and regroup in order to better attend to the lessons. One parent shared that she had seen her child’s social skills improve tremendously from the opportunity to spend time with different peer groups. Principal Metzger expressed that, by departmentalizing in sixth grade, students were better prepared for high school; and, additionally, the fifth-grade practice was “like a segue way into sixth grade.” It

was noted that transitioning helped students to gain responsibility and be more accountable for their materials. One sixth-grade teacher stated, “I think it’s a benefit to the kids in terms of helping them to become organized, helping them to become ready for more responsibility as a seventh grader.” To avoid lost time and behavioral concerns, teachers communicated that they kept transitions moving quickly. They explained that having their rooms in close proximity to each other, having synchronized clocks, and “incorporating a lot of bell ringers” facilitated successful transitions.

Despite the more structured departmentalized schedule, some teachers noted time as a fourth benefit of the practice. One teacher explained, “We are not spread so thin....We feel like we have more time to introduce concepts, to practice, to develop, attend to problems, and to talk together.” Another also described time-related benefits:

Ninety-nine percent of the time it is a benefit, I would say, because it does keep me on my toes. I have this many minutes, and I need to get this, this, and this done and possibly this, if I can. It does kind of keep things rolling. Otherwise, I’m like, “Well, I can just extend this today.”

Finally, teachers disclosed benefits of collaboration in relation to departmentalization. Some respondents indicated that collaboration was critical to the success of departmentalization. Common planning time was maintained in order to achieve this collaboration. Teachers worked as a team and pooled their resources and ideas. Fifth grade noted, “We stay on the same page as far as what we are teaching, down to the homework that we are assigning, down to the tests that we are giving.” She explained that this consistency helped assist substitute teachers, as well, since the teachers were well aware of each other’s plans. In addition, when a child struggled, team members supported each other in an effort to assist the learner in achieving success.

Holding parent-teacher conferences as a team improved teacher confidence. “Reputations precede some of the parents, and you are half afraid to meet with some of them.” Holding team conferences enabled the parents to get a better picture of their child, as well. Hearing the same message from two, three, or even four teachers was more convincing for parents and facilitated parent cooperation. Ultimately, the collaboration built consistency. “Everybody is on the same page. Everybody is doing the same thing.” Not only did consistency facilitate lesson planning and teacher conferencing, but one teacher suggested it improved student behavior, as well. “We deal with everything as a team, and the kids kind of get to know that. They are like, ‘We don’t want to go there with them all!’”

**Assessment results.** Renaissance Elementary School’s 2009-10 school-wide PSSA results showed a slight decline in proficiency from 2008-09. Specifically, mathematics proficiency dropped 1.7% from 87.8% (i.e., the 2008-09 proficiency level) to 86.1%. Reading proficiency dropped 0.7% from 73.6% to 72.9%. However, viewing the results by grade-level as shown in Table 4, fifth-grade—once departmentalization was implemented in 2009-10—improved slightly in math (+3.4%) and significantly in reading (+12.6%). Given, however, that the 2008-09 class was described by interviewees as a consistently low-achieving cohort, it was impossible to determine to what extent, if any, the PSSA improvement could be attributed to the change in grouping patterns that year. In addition, any attempt to attribute the improvement to departmentalization was further complicated by the fact that homogeneous grouping was simultaneously implemented.

Table 4

*Renaissance Elementary Math and Reading PSSA Proficiency History*

Year	Math	Reading
Grade 4		
2006-2007	88.5	87.2
2007-2008 <sup>a</sup>	81.4	70.6
2008-2009	92.3	71.8
2009-2010	93.4	81.2
4-Year Average	88.9	77.7
Grade 5		
2006-2007	74.4	54.4
2007-2008	93.8	78.8
2008-2009 <sup>a,b</sup>	80.4	58.8
2009-2010 <sup>b</sup>	<b>83.8</b>	<b>71.4</b>
3-Year Average (Self-Contained Years)	82.9	64.0
4-Year Average	83.1	65.9
Grade 6		
2006-2007	<b>79.4</b>	<b>73.8</b>
2007-2008	<b>79.8</b>	<b>64.5</b>
2008-2009	<b>92.5</b>	<b>85.0</b>
2009-2010 <sup>a,b</sup>	<b>79.5</b>	<b>67.6</b>
4-Year Average	<b>82.8</b>	<b>72.7</b>

*Note.* Boldfacing indicates the percent proficiency achieved in departmentalized years.

<sup>a</sup>Interviewees described this cohort of students as consistently low-achieving. <sup>b</sup>The grade level grouped homogenously during this school year.

Despite the improvements in proficiency at the fifth-grade level, PVAAS data indicated that fifth grade actually just missed the goal of a year's growth in both reading and in math. Fourth and sixth grades, however, exceeded that goal. Renaissance Elementary's fourth grade, which had not yet begun departmentalizing in 2009-10, achieved the highest scores in the district in mathematics and the third highest scores in reading, falling behind only the Carolingian Elementary's third and fourth grades—two self-contained classrooms (see Table 5).

Table 5

*District-wide Percentages of Students Achieving PSSA Proficiency in 2009-10*

Grade	Math	Reading	Writing	Science
Carolingian Elementary				
3	89.5	84.2		
4	93.0	<b>86.6</b>		86.6
Renaissance Elementary				
3	89.7	70.0		
4	<b>93.4</b>	81.2		<b>91.7</b>
5	83.8	71.4	63.5	
6	79.5	67.6		
Renaissance Junior-Senior High School				
7	91.0	81.0		
8	70.5	76.8	82.5	46.4
11	57.5	70.8	<b>84.8</b>	38.1

*Note.* Boldfacing indicates highest proficiency level in the District for each subject area.

As shown in Table 4, the data from sixth grade with its long-standing practice of departmentalization showed a general trend of growth in math and inconsistent scores in reading. In both subjects, however, proficiency dropped significantly from 2008-09 to 2009-10, the year in which the lower-achieving student cohort matriculated through sixth grade.

In general, data collection revealed that both teachers and administrators were well aware of the available data regarding both student achievement and growth, as measured by the PSSA and PVAAS. Due to a variety of variables, however, the available assessment data were not sufficient to definitively measure the impact of departmentalization.



## Chapter 5

### Conclusions and Recommendations

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the decision-making process involved in determining whether or not to departmentalize in the elementary grades. Specifically, the case of one small, rural school district was examined. Renaissance School District was purposively selected because of its long-standing history of departmentalization in the sixth grade and its recent decisions to expand the practice to other intermediate grade levels. The study sought to provide insight into the decision-making process as well as to reveal the benefits and limitations of departmentalization from the perspective of those currently experiencing the practice. One-on-one conversational interviews with educators, focus group meetings with parents, and document analysis served as the primary methods of data collection. The findings of the study identified the following in response to the research questions: the institutional factors influencing the decision to consider departmentalization; the stakeholders involved in the decision; the stakeholders' ideologies, interests, and access to information influencing their involvement in the decisions as well as their perspectives regarding departmentalization; and the benefits and limitations of departmentalization.

An initial review of the extant literature regarding elementary-level departmentalization revealed a void of relevant, contemporary studies of the practice. Thus, schools facing the departmentalization decision had limited and dated research to draw upon in an era demanding evidence-based decision making. This study was intended to address this void through insight into one district's decision-making process in the current NCLB policy context. The findings and conclusions drawn from this research project add to the limited research base in an effort to

assist districts currently considering elementary departmentalization in making a responsive decision.

Weiss's (1995) decision-making model served as the conceptual framework for this study. Weiss proposed four "I's"—interests, ideology, information, and institution—as factors influencing decision making. Specifically, her study investigated teacher involvement in decision making in schools with and without shared decision-making models. Conclusions drawn by Weiss included the following:

- Administrators, more than teachers, initiated and encouraged innovation regarding school organization and curricula.
- The institution heavily influenced teachers' receptivity to innovation.
- The institution shaped the knowledge and beliefs that teachers used in decision making.
- Teachers' self-interests in maintaining status quo and their disregard for external information, such as research and professional literature, reinforced the continuation of current practices over innovation.

The conclusions drawn from the findings in Renaissance were examined in relation to the conclusions drawn by Weiss.

### **Summary of the Findings**

In examining the Renaissance School District's decision-making process in regard to elementary departmentalization, the evidence suggested that a variety of institutional factors impacted the departmentalization decisions in the fourth and fifth grades as well as the continued acceptance of the practice of departmentalization in the sixth grade. As noted by Weiss (1995), institutional factors—rules, structures, and norms—shape decisions by molding individuals' interpretations of self-interests, beliefs, and knowledge. The "rule" with the most significant

impact on the Renaissance departmentalization decision was the federal regulation, No Child Left Behind. In particular, the PSSA test, required in Pennsylvania in relation to that law, placed significant pressure on teachers and served as a motivating factor in encouraging departmentalization. In addition, School District policy and procedures also influenced the departmentalization decision in Renaissance. For example, the lack of restrictive Board policies facilitated the process. In addition, district lesson-planning requirements fostered teachers' interest in departmentalization in an effort to relieve some of the pressure on themselves. Renaissance's hiring practices also influenced the success of departmentalization by heightening the quality of instruction. Mandated, weekly, grade-level meetings encouraged collaborative planning and team dialogue regarding students' academic, social, and emotional growth. Finally, consistent school procedures regarding homework completion and class preparedness impacted the success of departmentalization at Renaissance.

In addition to the rules influencing the decision, structures also had an effect. The size of the school and the resources available in Renaissance were key factors. Renaissance Elementary was large enough in size to be able to departmentalize, but small enough that the teachers could still know all the students well and could work closely with their grade-level colleagues. Having rooms located adjacently facilitated transitions, as well. Some of available resources which helped make departmentalization possible included a daily common planning block for each grade level (which was able to be scheduled due to the availability of sufficient support staff), a 30-minute study period at the end of each day (for various enrichment activities and intervention services in order to avoid disruptions to the core instruction), varied teacher expertise (allowing for the maximum exploitation teachers' strengths), and synchronized clocks (to facilitate smooth transitions).

Finally, the accepted practices and traditions of Renaissance (i.e., the norms) influenced the elementary departmentalization decision. The long-standing history of departmentalization in Renaissance most likely improved the community's receptivity to the practice and influenced the teachers' decision-making process, as well.

As noted by Weiss (1995), institutional factors influence the individual stakeholder; and, in turn, influence the individual's beliefs, interests, and knowledge utilized in the decision-making process. In Renaissance, the teachers were the primary stakeholders involved in the decision-making process with the cooperation of the administration. Board members, parents, and students had no direct involvement in the decision.

The ideologies of the Renaissance stakeholders fostered their receptivity to departmentalization. No interviewee expressed a preference for the more student-oriented, self-contained approach, but several noted a tendency to prefer a more content-oriented structure. Others indicated having no preference given their belief that each model had its own unique benefits, and one recognized the value of melding both orientations.

The primary interests influencing the decision included organizational interests in cost efficiency and teacher/student productivity, as well as teachers' self-interests in teaching subjects which they enjoyed and felt comfortable with as well as reducing their work load through more focused planning.

Finally, the information available to stakeholders' influenced their perceptions regarding departmentalization. In Renaissance, parents received varied information that mostly addressed basic procedures, and the Board received no more than one brief mention of the change to departmentalization by fifth grade teachers in a board report. Information shared with students, like that shared with parents, emphasized procedures and routines. Teachers primarily used craft

knowledge in making the departmentalization decision. Specifically, collegial dialogues regarding student achievement and test performance data provided much of the information that served as the impetus for the change.

In addition to the institutional and individual factors influencing the decision to departmentalize, the impact of departmentalization received attention. Although Renaissance offered little empirical evidence to support their decisions, it was evident from conversations with administrators, teachers, and parents alike that the stakeholders' of Renaissance believed the benefits of departmentalization to clearly outweigh the limitations.

Many stakeholders struggled to suggest any limitations of departmentalization. The limitations that were suggested were typically expressed as *potential* concerns found either to not be applicable to Renaissance or to be, in actuality, more of a benefit than a limitation in Renaissance's experience. The few true limitations that were shared addressed minor concerns regarding subject isolation in relation to specialization, time constraints, and the loss of flexibility in scheduling.

Respondents were far more excited about sharing the benefits of departmentalization. Identified benefits included instructional advantages from content specialization, improved teacher-student relationships, exposure to varied teaching styles, opportunities for student movement, preparation for the transition to next grade level, better use of instructional time, and increased collaboration among colleagues.

Assessment results from Renaissance demonstrated that, while the school-wide PSSA results declined slightly in the year fifth grade implemented departmentalization, that grade level's scores improved somewhat in math and significantly in reading in that year. The

available assessment data were not sufficient to definitively measure the impact of departmentalization.

## **Conclusions**

In examining these findings from Renaissance, two primary conclusions can be drawn. First, as also found by Weiss, the institution exerts a significant influence on the decision-making process, stakeholders' receptivity to innovation, and the ultimate decision. Second, a semi-departmentalized organizational structure may effectively reduce many of the limitations typically associated with departmentalization by balancing a student-centered orientation with a subject matter focus.

In regard to the first conclusion, Weiss (1995) suggests that the institutional context shapes individuals' interpretations of their own beliefs and interests, as well as of the information available to them in making their ultimate decisions. In addition, "features of the organization such as hierarchy, specialization, and internal division of labor, control of information, and standard operating procedures have an effect on how individuals' stands are negotiated and organizational decisions reached" (p. 574). Weiss describes how this negotiation takes place as follows:

People in an organization define what their interests are within the constraints of a particular institutional setting. They activate one strand of their (often diffuse) value orientation in terms that fit with the organization in which they work. And they call upon certain kinds of knowledge, and not other kinds, because of the constraints and opportunities embedded in the organization. (pp. 576-577)

The institution clearly provided a powerful influence over the desire for and receptivity to departmentalization in Renaissance. The NCLB policy context and the associated PSSA

pressures were significant factors in the desire to consider departmentalization. District and school policies and procedures facilitated the ability to departmentalize, as did structures such as the school size and available resources. In addition, the long-standing history of departmentalization in the district and the commonality in Renaissance of changes to various grouping patterns over the years increased the school-community receptivity to the change.

In considering the role of individual stakeholder in the decision-making process, four sub-conclusions can be drawn regarding the influence of the institutional context on the ultimate decision. First, the institution exercises a strong influence on the level of involvement and power of each stakeholder in the decision-making process. Weiss (1995) noted that “organizational arrangements affect the decision process itself, such as who is empowered to make decisions” (p. 574). In Renaissance, students, parents, and the Board of Education had little opportunity for involvement in the decision-making process. Much research touts the importance of parent involvement in decision-making and the need for broad access to information to reflect the democratic voice of our society, increase political acceptance, improve parent-school relationships, and increase student achievement (Epstein, 1992; Kowalski et al., 2008). Yet, such was not the “norm” in Renaissance and the community accepted that it was not. Instead, teachers held almost sole influence on the decision. As noted by Smylie (1992), teacher participation in decision making heightens their commitment to the ultimate decision and their motivation for successful implementation. In Renaissance, the leadership style of the principal, in particular, and the value placed on bottom-up decision making by the entire administrative team established an institutional culture that facilitated the acceptance of such a high level of involvement from the teachers.

While the influence of the institution on teachers' receptivity to innovation was similar to the findings of Weiss (1995), the involvement of the Renaissance teachers in developing this receptivity through initiating and encouraging the innovation contrasted sharply with the teachers in Weiss's study who refrained from innovating, favored status quo, and demonstrated resistance to change. Weiss found, "In every case but one...the push toward innovation came from the principal—against the wishes of a considerable bloc of the teachers" (p. 579). Given this, Weiss concluded that administrators were more likely to demonstrate a desire for innovation, while teachers were more likely to conform to the values and norms of the school environment. The findings from Renaissance, however, suggest that when the values and norms of the school environment encourage teacher leadership and bottom-up decision making, teachers may be more open to innovation.

A second sub-conclusion drawn from the Renaissance study refers to the influence of the institutional context on individuals' ideologies. Weiss (1995) contended that the institution shaped the beliefs teachers used in decision making. The evidence from Renaissance would support this conclusion. The ideologies of the Renaissance stakeholders were clearly defined by their institutional experiences. For example, in general it appeared that the more extensive a teacher or administrator's experience with departmentalization, the stronger held his or her beliefs were in the practice. Teachers who had spent most of their career in a self-contained classroom and recently switched to a departmentalized structure tended to indicate that they were open to either approach and saw value in each. Parents expressed their acceptance of departmentalization based upon their experience with the long-standing practice in the district.

Third, the institution influences individual interests in relation to innovation. While Weiss (1995) found that teachers' self-interests in maintaining status quo hindered innovation; in



Renaissance, teachers' self-interests encouraged innovation. Teachers expressed a number of interests that encouraged them to decide to departmentalize. For example, teachers indicated a desire to concentrate on a subject(s) which they enjoyed and felt comfortable instructing. In addition, they were motivated to reduce the pressures they felt in regard to planning and preparation for instruction, while still maintaining their focus on student achievement and growth. Because Renaissance administrators' shared the belief that an approach supported by the teachers was likely to experience success, the administration allowed teachers much freedom to pursue their own interests. When the teachers' desired innovation—in this case, departmentalization—aligned with the organizational interests' in cost efficiency and teacher/student productivity, administrative support was achieved.

The final sub-conclusion in regard to the institutional influence on decision making focuses on the impact of the institution on the individual stakeholders' use of information. The findings from the Renaissance study suggest that craft knowledge, anecdotal evidence, and—to a limited extent—assessment data were more significant factors contributing to the support of the decision to departmentalize rather than research findings. Thus, as concluded by Weiss (1995), the institution shaped the knowledge used in decision making; and external information sources, such as research and professional literature, were disregarded.

Much of the knowledge that people bring to bear on a decision comes from their direct experience. Long personal immersion in the environment provides particularly salient learning. Some information is craft lore—the product of education and training in a professional field and exposure to the codified wisdom of practice. Secondary reports and informal contacts make up a share of decision-relevant information. The organization also provides formal data; schools, for example, supply statistics about

graduation, attendance, and achievement test scores. Then there is the information that comes in from outside—from friends, consultants, “experts”—and from the professional and mass media. Research and analysis often play a tiny part in the informational *mélange*. (Weiss, 1995, p. 576)

NCLB legislation places emphasis on the use of scientifically-based research in making educational decisions. Therefore, in regard to the decision to departmentalize, a review of the available empirical research along with systematically-collected local evidence would be expected to provide a valuable contribution to the decision. However, as Kowalski and Lasley (2009) contend, Evidence-Based Practice is not widely accepted by educators because 1) it is connected to NCLB, 2) schools lack resources to support it, and 3) practitioners have a limited understanding of the concept. As noted by Hemsley-Brown (2009), the research-practice gap is well documented and includes issues with dissemination, utility, credibility, and applicability of research to practice. Theoretical-based knowledge is often difficult for practitioners to develop due to the variability in research quality and their limited skill in interpreting and using research (Kowalski et al., 2008).

In Renaissance, craft knowledge served as the primary source of information in the fourth- and fifth-grade departmentalization decision. Anecdotal evidence was essentially the sole means of support for the continued practice of departmentalization at the sixth-grade level. Thus, the findings from Renaissance align with the conclusions of Weiss, Kowalski and Lasley, and Hemsley-Brown regarding the reliance of practitioners on craft knowledge and the existence of a gap between research and practice.

To summarize, the institution provided a powerful influence over the decision-making process and the ultimate decision regarding departmentalization. Various rules, structures, and

norms of the current institutional context influenced individuals' perceptions of their own interests, ideologies, and knowledge used in the decision-making process. The institutional context in Renaissance led to the high-level of teacher empowerment in the decision-making process and shaped teachers' beliefs which impacted their decisions. Teachers' self-interests encouraged innovation; and their craft knowledge and available anecdotal evidence, rather than research-based data, served to support their decisions.

In addition to the first conclusion and the four sub-conclusions drawn from it, the findings in Renaissance also revealed that many of the limitations of departmentalization, as suggested by the extant literature, may be overcome by the establishment of a semi-departmentalized organizational structure. Reports by McPartland (1987) and McPartland, Coldiron, and Braddock (1987) suggest that educators need to balance the trade-offs between the high quality content-area instruction that departmentalization is designed to achieve and the positive teacher-student relationships fostered by self-contained structures. Superintendent Coleman also noted that "either end of the spectrum isn't where we need to be." However, the line between self-contained and departmentalized classrooms is not as sharply drawn today as it was in the past. In contemporary education, even classrooms deemed self-contained tend to receive instruction in subjects such as art, music, and physical education from specialized instructors. The absence of clear definitions of the terms *self-contained*, *semi-departmentalized*, and *departmentalized* complicates analysis of the extant literature.

Research, while limited in regard to *elementary-level* departmentalization, suggests a number of benefits and limitations of a departmentalized approach in general. The findings from Renaissance offer both support for and contradictions of the relevant research. Because the departmentalized structures established in Renaissance Elementary allowed for content

specificity while still maintaining a strong connection to the individual child, the findings suggested that a semi-departmentalized approach may maximize the benefits of a subject-area focus, while minimizing the potential limitations. From the review of relevant research literature, the primary arguments in favor of departmentalization included 1) the ability to provide expert instruction and foster deeper learning through specialization, 2) the enthusiasm for the subject area communicated by specialized instructors to their students, 3) dedicated time consistently scheduled for each subject area, 4) the opportunity to develop more extensive and effective lesson plans, 5) the cost-effectiveness of professional development, 6) collegial collaboration, 7) opportunities for student movement, and 8) exposure to varied teaching styles (Goodlad, 1966; Hood, 2009; McPartland, 1987; McPartland, Coldiron, & Braddock, 1987). All of these benefits were also noted to be advantages of departmentalization by the stakeholders of Renaissance.

Limitations identified in the extant literature included 1) difficulty in developing strong teacher-student relationships, 2) less support for weaker students, 3) rigid time schedules, 4) subject-matter isolation, 5) a lack of appropriate specialized preparation on the part of the instructors, 6) student disorganization of materials, and 6) lost instructional time from transitions (Becker, 1987; McGrath & Rust, 2002; McPartland, 1987; McPartland, Coldiron, & Braddock, 1987; Goodlad, 1966; Hamalainen, 1967; Hood, 2009; Lobdell & VanNess, 1967; Thornell, 1980; Walters, 1970). While many of these limitations were discussed by the Renaissance stakeholders, few stood out as true concerns. Teacher-student relationships were actually noted to have improved through departmentalization due to teachers' increased knowledge of the entire grade level population. Less opportunity for support of weaker students was offered, by a few respondents, as a concern; but structures, such as the study period, had been established to help

counteract this disadvantage. While some stakeholders mentioned concern with the rigidity of the time schedule and the loss of “teachable moments,” the tight schedule was also noted to have the benefits of heightening emphasis on effective use of time and of protecting subjects from being short-changed. The ability to focus professional development on an area(s) of emphasis rather than on every subject, in coordination with the breadth of elementary certification, addressed the potential concern regarding availability of specialized instructors. Finally, potential transitioning concerns, such as disorganization of materials and loss of instructional time, had not proved to be an issue in Renaissance.

Subject matter isolation was the only area which Renaissance teachers described as truly in need of improvement, suggesting that the incorporation of more cross-curricular units would be of value. Given the evidence from Renaissance, a well-developed semi-departmentalized structure appears—at least at the elementary level—to provide the opportunity to overcome most of the potential limitations of departmentalization through the melding of a content-area emphasis with a continued focus on individual child.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

After considering the findings and conclusions drawn from the study of Renaissance School District’s decisions and experience, several recommendations can be made for those considering elementary departmentalization. Weiss (1995) suggests the need to “take steps early in the development of a venue-changing reform to learn the values, interests, and knowledge of those who will become participants in decisionmaking [sic] and the institutional press of their environments” (p. 589). Given the influence of institutional factors (i.e., rules, structures, and norms) on the individual and, ultimately, on the decisions that are made; districts considering departmentalization should initially take a reflective look at each of these influencing factors as

relative to the departmentalization decision. Specifically, decision makers need to be aware of the applicable rules, structures, and norms of the institution and how these have impacted individuals' interests, beliefs, and background knowledge regarding departmentalization. By giving consideration to these factors, steps which may be necessary in order to gain acceptance of a potential change and to facilitate its success can be determined early. For example, in a community where the norm has been a self-contained model, far more information sharing may need to occur in order to lay the groundwork for acceptance of the change in comparison to what was necessary for acceptance in Renaissance.

Next, the district must have a structure in place to support the success of the change. Adequate staffing levels, common planning time, convenient room locations, and appropriate subject-area expertise/interests among the available teachers are all examples of resources needed to support the success of departmentalization. As noted by Coleman, "When you are doing something, you set yourself up for success. You want to have a quality structure that will enable you to achieve the things you are trying to achieve." Without the necessary structures for support, frustration and/or failure are inevitable.

Third, teacher buy-in is critical for the success of departmentalization. In Renaissance, the bottom-up decision-making process ensured that the faculty members were open to the concept of departmentalization, had ownership of the ultimate decisions, and were committed to achieving success with the structure. As alluded to by a few of the teachers, however, a more top-down approach without the necessary teacher buy-in could have sabotaged the initiative.

Fourth, a one-size-fits-all approach may not be the best design. In Renaissance, each grade level was able to create its own structure based upon factors such as the expertise and interests of the teachers, the applicable state testing, the maturity level of the students, and the

structure of the previous and following grade levels. A gradual progression of increasing departmentalization, as established in Renaissance, may be the best approach to facilitating the students' success with factors such as organization and transitioning.

Fifth, consideration needs to be given to the impact of departmentalization on other programs and services beyond the core. For example, special education and Title I interventions along with extra-curricular activities that occur within the school day, such as band and choir, need to be taken into account in the decision-making process and in the design of the structure. Plans should be made to maximize the potential of each program in order to avoid establishing structures which have a negative impact on any particular subgroup of students, such as that which was noted in regard to the sixth-grade special education population in Renaissance.

Additionally, districts with "feeder schools" should take into account the need for structural consistency across the grade levels in the various schools in order to maximize the success of the transition to the next school. If students have differing levels of experience with departmentalization from the various feeder schools, the merger may prove more challenging.

Finally, the isolation of content areas, heightened by departmentalization, needs to be recognized and addressed. The development of cross-curricular units should be strongly encouraged and fostered in order to allow opportunities for integration and to reduce the impact of this isolation.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Given the single case-study design of this research, the conclusions drawn are specific to the findings from Renaissance School District. Generalizations cannot definitively be extended beyond the district of study. Therefore, in order to better determine whether or not the

conclusions of this study are applicable to other districts, additional research is necessary. Four recommendations are suggested for further study.

First, additional studies should involve a larger sample of districts in order to gain a broader perspective regarding how the elementary departmentalization decision is being made. Evidence from Renaissance suggests that the school's structure—specifically its size and available resources—impacted departmentalization. In addition, the administrative leadership styles—particularly that of the principal—impacted how the decision was made and who was involved in the process. Would the decision-making process look different in another setting? Would the initiative have been as well received if it came from a more top-down administration but still incorporated efforts to gain teacher buy-in?

Second, assessment data, such as PSSA results, as well as other systematically-collected, local evidence should be gathered over an extended time period in order to better determine the impact of departmentalization on student achievement and to provide evidence-based data to support the practice. In Renaissance, there was not enough available, longitudinal data to definitely determine the success of the departmentalization at the time of this study. Because the population of the school was small, factors such as a lower-achieving student cohort may have also significantly impacted the available results.

Third, a more in-depth examination of the research on the effects of both teaming and departmentalization at the middle-school level may be helpful. While studies regarding elementary departmentalization are few, the literature includes far more studies regarding the organizational structure of middle schools. Further examination of the successes and concerns at that level may prove valuable in trying to avoid pitfalls and to establish successful practices at the elementary level.



Finally, the horizontal structure at Renaissance Elementary was not *fully* departmentalized at any grade level. Full departmentalization did not begin until students entered the Junior-Senior High School. How much did the semi-departmentalized structure contribute to the perceived success of departmentalization at Renaissance? Was this structure a critical factor in the ability to balance content specificity with a strong focus on the individual learner? Would a fully departmentalized approach in the intermediate grades be more or less effective than semi-departmentalization?

Clearly, many questions for further investigation still remain. Additional research will be needed in order to more definitively establish districts' methods of making the decision to departmentalize in elementary schools in the current institutional context as well as the ultimate effect that this approach has on student achievement.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Letter for Parents



Betsy A. Baker, Graduate Student  
589 Sportsman Road  
Martinsburg, PA 16662  
(814) 793-2901; bab173@psu.edu

Dear Fourth, Fifth, or Sixth Grade Parent:

I am a principal in the Spring Cove School District and a student in the Educational Leadership Program at Penn State University. I am currently working on a research project as part of the requirements of my doctoral program. The title of my project is *The Role of Institution, Ideology, Interests, and Information in the Decision to Departmentalize in Elementary Schools*, and the purpose of the study is to explore the decision-making process involved in determining whether or not to departmentalize (i.e., switch classes for at least two core subjects, such as language arts, math, science, and social studies) in the elementary grades. In particular, the study will examine who is involved in the decision to departmentalize and what factors influence their decision, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of departmentalization.

Your district has an interesting history when it comes to departmentalization at the elementary level. Departmentalization has occurred over time, starting with the sixth grade and moving some years later to the fifth grade, with fourth grade considering this possibility for the future. Therefore, your district is an ideal site for my research study.

As part of this research, I would like to hold focus group discussions with parents at the school site on October 20, 2010, at 2:15 PM; October 20, 2010, at 6:00 PM; and October 27, 2010, at 6:00 PM. I need each group to include six to ten parents of students in grades four, five, or six. Therefore, the purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in one of these focus groups, during which nine questions would be asked to guide the discussion. An audio tape would be made in order to more accurately capture the conversation. The length of the focus group discussion would vary depending upon the extent of the group members' responses, but would be expected to take no longer than 45 minutes. Each group would meet only one time.

Your participation in the research would be confidential. No personally identifiable information would be shared with anyone or in any publication or presentation of the research. Pseudonyms and/or general role descriptions would be used to mask the identity of all participants and of the site. You would receive a \$10 Walmart gift card for participating in the study. Your decision to participate would be voluntary and you could withdraw at any time. You would not have to answer any questions that you did not wish to answer.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please return the attached *Date Selection Form* to the school principal who will collect these for me. If you are not interested in participating, no forms need to be returned. For those who do agree to participate, you will be asked, at the onset of the focus group interview, to complete an *Informed Consent Form* (which is also attached to

this letter for your review) in order to verify your willingness to participate. Note: If too many parents volunteer to participate, names will be drawn randomly from each grade level.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me. I appreciate your consideration of this request and hope that you will agree to be involved.

Thank you,

Betsy A. Baker  
D. Ed. Candidate, Penn State University

## Appendix B

### Date Selection Attachment for Recruitment Letter for Parents



### Date Selection Form for Participation in Parent Focus Group Interviews

**Research Project:** *The Role of Institution, Ideology, Interests, and Information in the Decision to Departmentalize in Elementary Schools*

**Researcher:** Betsy Baker, Penn State University D. Ed. Candidate

*Please return this form to your building principal by October 5, 2010.*

*Note: If you are not interested in participating, this form does not need to be returned.*

\_\_\_\_\_ **I am interested in participating in one of the focus group interviews being held at my child's school. I would be available at any of the times checked below.**

*Please check all dates below that would suit you to participate. You will then receive confirmation of your assignment once all groups have been established.*

\_\_\_\_\_ **October 20, 2010, at 2:15 PM in the elementary art room**

\_\_\_\_\_ **October 20, 2010, at 6:00 PM in the elementary library**

\_\_\_\_\_ **October 27, 2010, at 6:00 PM in the elementary library**

**Parent Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Grade Level(s) of Student(s):** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Recruitment Letter for Educators



Betsy A. Baker, Graduate Student  
 589 Sportsman Road  
 Martinsburg, PA 16662  
 (814) 793-2901; bab173@psu.edu

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ (*Name of Educator*) \_\_\_\_\_ :

I am a principal in the Spring Cove School District and a student in the Educational Leadership Program at Penn State University. I am currently working on a research project as part of the requirements of my doctoral program. The title of my project is *The Role of Institution, Ideology, Interests, and Information in the Decision to Departmentalize in Elementary Schools*, and the purpose of the study is to explore the decision-making process involved in determining whether or not to departmentalize (i.e., switch classes for at least two core subjects, such as language arts, math, science, and social studies) in the elementary grades. In particular, the study will examine who is involved in the decision to departmentalize and what factors influence their decision, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of departmentalization.

Your district has an interesting history when it comes to departmentalization at the elementary level. Departmentalization has occurred over time, starting with the sixth grade and moving some years later to the fifth grade, with fourth grade considering this possibility for the future. Therefore, your district is an ideal site for my research study.

As part of this research, I would like to individually interview various district employees who I have purposely selected based upon their ability to contribute to my study. Your name was suggested as someone who has had experience with and/or is knowledgeable about this issue. The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in a one-on-one interview with me during which four questions would be asked to initiate a conversational discussion. An audio tape would be made in order to more accurately capture the conversation. The length of the initial interview would vary depending upon the extent of your responses, but would be expected to take no longer than 45 minutes. If necessary, a second, follow-up interview might be scheduled for clarification purposes and, again, would be expected to take no longer than 45 minutes.

Your participation in the research would be confidential. No personally identifiable information would be shared with anyone or in any publication or presentation of the research. Pseudonyms and/or general job titles would be used to mask the identity of all participants and of the site. You would receive a \$10 Walmart gift card for participating in the study. Your decision to participate would be voluntary and you could withdraw at any time. You would not have to answer any questions that you did not wish to answer.

I will be contacting your superintendent and principal soon in order to schedule the interviews. Please complete the attached *Expression of Interest Form* and place it in your principal's mailbox by October 5, 2010. An interview time will be scheduled for those who express an



interest in participating. At the onset of the interview, you will be asked to complete the attached *Informed Consent Form* if you are willing to participate.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me. I appreciate your consideration of this request and hope that you will agree to be involved.

Thank you,

Betsy A. Baker  
D. Ed. Candidate, Penn State University

## Appendix D

### Expression of Interest Attachment for Recruitment Letter for Educators



### Expression of Interest Form for Participation in Educator Interviews

**Research Project:** *The Role of Institution, Ideology, Interests, and Information in the Decision to Departmentalize in Elementary Schools*

**Researcher:** Betsy Baker, Penn State University D. Ed. Candidate

*Please complete this form and place it in your building principal's mailbox by October 5, 2010.*

*Check one option below:*

\_\_\_\_\_ I am interested in participating in the educator interviews regarding elementary departmentalization. Please schedule an interview time for me.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am not interested in participating in the educator interviews regarding elementary departmentalization. Please do not schedule an interview time for me.

**Teacher Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Grade Level:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

### Informed Consent Form for Parents



#### Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research (Parent Focus Group Participant Form)

The Pennsylvania State University

**Title of Project:** The Role of Institution, Ideology, Interests, and Information in the Decision to Departmentalize in Elementary Schools

**Principal Investigator:** Betsy A. Baker, Graduate Student  
589 Sportsman Road  
Martinsburg, PA 16662  
(814) 793-2901; bab173@psu.edu

**Advisor:** Dr. Nona A. Prestine, Dissertation Advisor  
204E Rackley Building  
Penn State University  
University Park, PA 16802  
(814) 863-3762; nap11@psu.edu

1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research study is to explore the decision-making process involved in determining whether or not to departmentalize (i.e., switch classes for at least two core subjects, such as language arts, math, science, and social studies) in the elementary grades. In particular, the study will examine who is involved in the decision to departmentalize and what factors influence their decision, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of departmentalization.
2. **Procedures to Be Followed:** You will be asked to participate in a focus group interview, led by the researcher, which will include no more than ten parents of fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students. Nine questions will be asked of the group. An audio-recording of the interview will be made.
3. **Duration/Time:** The length of the focus group interview will vary depending upon the extent of the group members' responses, but is expected to take no more than 45 minutes. The group will meet only one time.
4. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The interview data will be stored and secured on a flash key which will be kept in a locked safe. Data will be destroyed by the year 2015. Other than during the initial interview transcription by a paid transcriber, the data will only be accessible by the researcher. No personally identifiable information, such as participants' names or school district, will be shared with the paid transcriber or in any publication or presentation of the research. Pseudonyms and/or general role descriptions will be used to mask the identity of all participants and of the site.

If you speak about the contents of the focus group outside the group, it is expected that you will not tell others what individual participants said.

5. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Betsy Baker at (814) 793-2901 with questions, complaints, or concerns about this research. Questions about research procedures can also be answered by Betsy Baker.
6. **Payment for Participation:** You will receive a \$10 Walmart gift card for participating in the study.
7. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be involved in this research is voluntary. You may stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Withdrawing from this study will not result in the loss of your \$10 gift card. Your decision whether to participate will have no effect on your child's standing in the school.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study as outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

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Participant Signature

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Date

---

Person Obtaining Consent

---

Date

## Appendix F

### Informed Consent Form for Educators



**Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research (Educator Interview Participant Form)**  
The Pennsylvania State University

**Title of Project:** The Role of Institution, Ideology, Interests, and Information in the Decision to Departmentalize in Elementary Schools

**Principal Investigator:** Betsy A. Baker, Graduate Student  
589 Sportsman Road  
Martinsburg, PA 16662  
(814) 793-2901; bab173@psu.edu

**Advisor:** Dr. Nona A. Prestine, Dissertation Advisor  
204E Rackley Building  
Penn State University  
University Park, PA 16802  
(814) 863-3762; [nap11@psu.edu](mailto:nap11@psu.edu)

1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research study is to explore the decision-making process involved in determining whether or not to departmentalize (i.e., switch classes for at least two core subjects, such as language arts, math, science, and social studies) in the elementary grades. In particular, the study will examine who is involved in the decision to departmentalize and what factors influence their decision, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of departmentalization.
2. **Procedures to Be Followed:** You will be asked to participate in a conversational interview with the researcher. Four questions will be asked to initiate a conversational discussion. An audio-recording of the interview will be made.
3. **Duration/Time:** The length of the initial interview will vary depending upon the extent of your responses, but is expected to take no longer than 45 minutes. If necessary, a second, follow-up interview may be scheduled for clarification purposes and, again, is expected to take no longer than 45 minutes.
4. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The interview data will be stored and secured on a flash key which will be kept in a locked safe. Data will be destroyed by the year 2015. Other than during the initial interview transcription by a paid transcriber, the data will only be accessible by the researcher. No personally identifiable information, such as participants' names or school district, will be shared with the paid transcriber or in any publication or presentation of the research. Pseudonyms and/or general role descriptions will be used to mask the identity of all participants and of the site.

If you speak about the contents of the focus group outside the group, it is expected that you will not tell others what individual participants said.

5. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Betsy Baker at (814) 793-2901 with questions, complaints, or concerns about this research. Questions about research procedures can also be answered by Betsy Baker.
6. **Payment for Participation:** You will receive a \$10 Walmart gift card for participating in the study.
7. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be involved in this research is voluntary. You may stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Withdrawing from this study will not result in the loss of your \$10 gift card. Your decision whether to participate will have no effect on your standing in the school.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study as outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

---

Participant Signature

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Date

---

Person Obtaining Consent

---

Date

## Appendix G

### Interview Protocol for Educators

For the purpose of this research, *departmentalization* will be defined as an organizational pattern in which students receive core content instruction (i.e., language arts, math, science, social studies) from at least two different teachers during the school day.

1. This district has an interesting history when it comes to departmentalization at the elementary level. Departmentalization has occurred over time, starting with the sixth grade and moving some years later to the fifth grade, with fourth grade considering this possibility for the future. What can you tell me about how this occurred over time?
2. How were you involved in the decision to departmentalize at the elementary level?
3. What factors influenced the decision to departmentalize?
4. What are the benefits and limitations of elementary departmentalization?

## Appendix H

### Parent Focus Group Protocol

For the purpose of this research, *departmentalization* will be defined as an organizational pattern in which students receive core content instruction (i.e., language arts, math, science, social studies) from at least two different teachers during the school day.

1. This district has an interesting history when it comes to departmentalization at the elementary level. Departmentalization has occurred over time, starting with the sixth grade and moving some years later to the fifth grade, with fourth grade considering this possibility for the future. What can you tell me about how this occurred over time?
2. What are the benefits of elementary departmentalization for your child?
3. What concerns do you have with elementary departmentalization?
4. What impact does elementary departmentalization have beyond your child (ex. impact on teachers, school, test scores, etc.)?
5. What information, if any, has been shared with families regarding elementary departmentalization?
6. What input, if any, have you provided in the elementary departmentalization decision-making process?
7. What was your initial reaction to the decision to expand departmentalization to fifth grade?
8. Has your opinion changed? If so, how?
9. In which elementary grade levels would you view departmentalization as being appropriate? Why?



## VITA

Betsy A. Baker  
589 Sportsman Road, Martinsburg, PA 16662

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### EDUCATION

#### *Degrees*

**D.Ed.**, Educational Leadership, Penn State University, 2011

**M.Ed.**, Curriculum & Instruction/Language & Literacy, Penn State University, 1996

**B. S.**, Elementary Education, Shippensburg University, 1993

#### *Non-Degree Post-Graduate Studies*

**Principal Certification Program**, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2004

**Reading Recovery Certification Program**, Shippensburg University, 1999

#### *Certifications*

PA Letter of Eligibility, 2010

PA Curriculum/Instruction Supervisor, 2010

PA School Administration (K-12), 2004

Reading Recovery, 1999

PA Reading Specialist (K-12), 1997

PA Elementary Education, 1993

PA Early Childhood Education, 1993

### EMPLOYMENT

*Spring Cove Elementary Principal*, Spring Cove School District, 2009-present

*Federal Programs Coordinator*, Spring Cove School District, 2006-present

*East Freedom/Roaring Spring Elem. Principal*, Spring Cove School District, 2005-2009

*Roaring Spring Elementary Principal*, Spring Cove School District, 2004-2005

*Literacy Coach/Administrative Intern*, Spring Cove School District, 2003-2004

*Reading Recovery/Title I Reading Teacher*, Spring Cove School District, 1998-2004

*Fifth-Grade Teacher*, Spring Cove School District, 1995-1998

*Long-Term Substitute Teacher*, Spring Cove School District, 1993-1995

### PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

ASCD/PASCD

IRA

NAESP/PAESSP

PAFPC

PSBA

### PRESENTATIONS

“Towards an Ethical Distribution of Pennsylvania’s Educational Resources,” Oct. 2009,  
International Values & Leadership Conference, State College, PA