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An Analysis of Barriers to and Strategies for Improving Parent Engagement

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

AN ANALYSIS OF BARRIERS TO
AND STRATEGIES FOR
IMPROVING PARENT ENGAGEMENT

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

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BY

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Introduction

For the past 10 years, a team of 15 mothers and grandmothers have dedicated their summers to an intensive parent outreach endeavor. The women, all members of Parents Organized to Win, Educate, and Renew – Policy Action Council (POWER PAC), are based in Chicago’s Austin neighborhood. They spend at least 3 hours a day knocking on doors, talking to people on the sidewalks, and striking up conversations at neighborhood events and local businesses. Their task is to convince other parents that they’re needed – that the schools will better serve their children if they get involved.

Geographically, Austin is Chicago’s largest neighborhood; its population is 90% Black, 90% poor, and, according to the University of Illinois at Chicago, it is “one of the most crime-ridden areas in Chicago.” Like other low-income urban communities across the nation, convincing parents to get involved in Austin’s schools has been a struggle. Parents lament that they are too busy, too tired, or just not interested in getting involved. As frustrating as it can be for the women of POWER-PAC to hear these responses, research confirms what their neighbors are saying: barriers exist that prevent parent involvement from happening, and many of these barriers are exacerbated by living in a low-income urban community. But, the group believes in the power of parent involvement and is committed to connecting parents and families to their children’s

schools. In 2011, they connected nearly 800 parents to their local schools. Next year, they hope to reach even more.

The tenacity with which these members of POWER-PAC are working to engage parents is just one approach that research suggests could successfully connect parents and schools in low-income urban communities. Because life in such neighborhoods often comes with its own set of issues – unstable housing and high rates of unemployment, for example – the circumstances that impact parent engagement and the barriers that prevent it are particular to these communities.

Traditional Parent Involvement

Parents have been asked to get involved in their children's schools for years. They have been asked to help their children finish homework, to attend parent-teacher conferences, and even to volunteer in their children's classrooms. In her article, "Parents' Reactions to Teacher Practices of Parent Involvement," Joyce L. Epstein describes this traditional model of parent involvement to include:

- Performing basic obligations at home.

Involved parents buy school supplies for their children (e.g. paper and pencils). They provide a dedicated work-space for children to use to complete their homework.

- Participating in communication from school to home.

Involved parents not only receive notes from their children's teachers, but also read them. When appropriate, they attend teacher-parent conferences.

- Assisting at school.

Parents who assist in school spend time as a classroom aide, watch children at lunch or as they play at recess, or even chaperone special events like class parties and trips.

- Assisting in learning activities at home.

This type of involvement includes reading aloud to a child, reviewing homework, taking a child to the library, or even watching and discussing educational TV shows together.

One feature to notice in this traditional model of parent involvement is its exclusive focus on the relationship between the teacher, parent, and child; it suggests that the only way a parent should be involved in his/her child's school is through his/her support of the classroom teacher. The only activity he/she is asked to engage in separate from the teacher is to perform basic obligations at home; otherwise, the parent involved in this traditional model is only asked to participate in and assist.

Another feature of the traditional model for parent involvement is its placement solely in the academic setting. A traditionally involved parent does homework with her child, provides resources to support her child's academic growth, and even volunteers in the classroom. In this academically focused space, the engaged parent is presumed to work in support of the classroom teacher. She helps her child complete homework assigned by the teacher. She buys materials that will help the child successfully complete school work. And, while in the classroom, the traditionally involved parent is an aide to

the teacher.

Parent Involvement as a Strategy for Improving Student Achievement

Many scholars agree that parents play an important role in their child's education, but the way their involvement affects student performance continues to be debated. While some argue that parents can create or even become barriers to their own child's academic success, other researchers suggest that parents have the potential to positively affect student achievement in ways that no other person can. Indeed, there are several strategies and techniques parents can use to boost a child's academic success.

One such way is a parent's unique ability to create a home environment that encourages learning. The strategies for creating these environments vary, but can be as simple as engaging in conversations at home about the importance of learning. As noted in "Perceptions of Parent Involvement in Academic Achievement," "Involvement at home, especially parents discussing school activities...has the strongest impact on academic achievement" (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007). Several studies have found similar results (Sui-Chu & Williams, 1996; McNeal, 1999; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Beyond just having discussions, parents have also been able to create home environments that encourage learning by establishing family routines that include time for learning (Clark 1983) and by modeling skills necessary to academic achievement, such as self-discipline, hard work, and goal setting (Dornbusch et al., Steinburg et al, 2005).

In addition to creating particular types of home environments, parents have been shown to positively affect their child's academic performance by building relationships with school teachers and staff. Most commonly, parents do this by being traditionally involved: participating in home/school communications, attending parent/teacher conferences, or even volunteering in the school. Interestingly, a recent study even found that the perception of the quality of the parent/school relationship can be just as influential as the actual quality of the relationship towards the likelihood of the child's academic success (McCoach et al., 2010). In other words, a child who simply thinks his parent has a positive relationship with the teacher will be more likely to succeed academically than a student who knows his parents never interact with the teacher. Research shows that, once able to perform these and other tasks, parents are likely to positively influence factors ranging from the child's attendance to his/her intellectual development (Henderson & Berla, 1989; Hart & Risley, 1995).

These are, of course, just a sample of activities that research shows parents - regardless of race, gender, income, or other distinguishing characteristic - can participate in to positively impact their child's academic performance. Important to note is that once such characteristics are considered, the ability of an adult to pursue these strategies can be affected. This paper will consider strategies for involvement that better suit the needs of low-income urban populations.

Purpose of Study

Despite changes in school governing structures, teacher qualification requirements, and many other foundations of school operation, the research and implementation of parent engagement activities have remained fairly stagnant. One illuminating example of this is the US Department of Education's (DOE) definition of parent engagement published in 2004 in its No Child Left Behind "Parental Involvement: Non-Regulatory Guidance" document:

The statute defines parental involvement as the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities, including ensuring—

- that parents play an integral role in assisting their child's learning;
- that parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child's education at school;
- that parents are full partners in their child's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child; and
- that other activities are carried out, such as those described in section 1118 of the ESEA (Parental Involvement). [Section 9101(32), ESEA.]

This definition is noticeably similar to the traditional model; parents are still asked to "assist" and are expected to demonstrate their engagement in the school building.

Fortunately, the conversation is not completely static. Researchers have begun to explore alternative methods of parent engagement; Driessen, Smit, and Slaegers (2005), for example, explore the differences between school-generated activities and parent-generated activities while Bolívar and Chrispeels (2011) consider the relationship between parent involvement and building social capital. This study will continue the conversation of parent engagement in low-income urban communities by surveying the

literature to identify both barriers to involvement and strategies for increasing parent engagement.

Defining Low-Income

According to the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), a low-income family is one whose “taxable income for the preceding year does not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount.” The following chart lists the maximum annual income a family can earn to qualify as low-income.

Figure 1. Low-Income Levels.

Size of Family Unit	48 Contiguous States, D.C., and Outlying Jurisdictions	Alaska	Hawaii
1	\$16,335	\$20,400	\$18,810
2	\$22,065	\$27,570	\$25,395
3	\$27,795	\$34,740	\$31,980
4	\$33,525	\$41,910	\$38,565
5	\$39,255	\$49,080	\$45,150

According to the US Census Bureau, 14.3% of the American population “had income below their respective poverty thresholds,” an amount that is equivalent to about 43 million people.

The fact that so many families fall below the poverty line means that issues that affect this community are issues that affect, if even just tangentially, all of America. And

if school stake-holders want to improve the public school system, then it is important to understand the issues that face this segment of the population.

Barriers to Parent Involvement in Low-Income Urban Communities

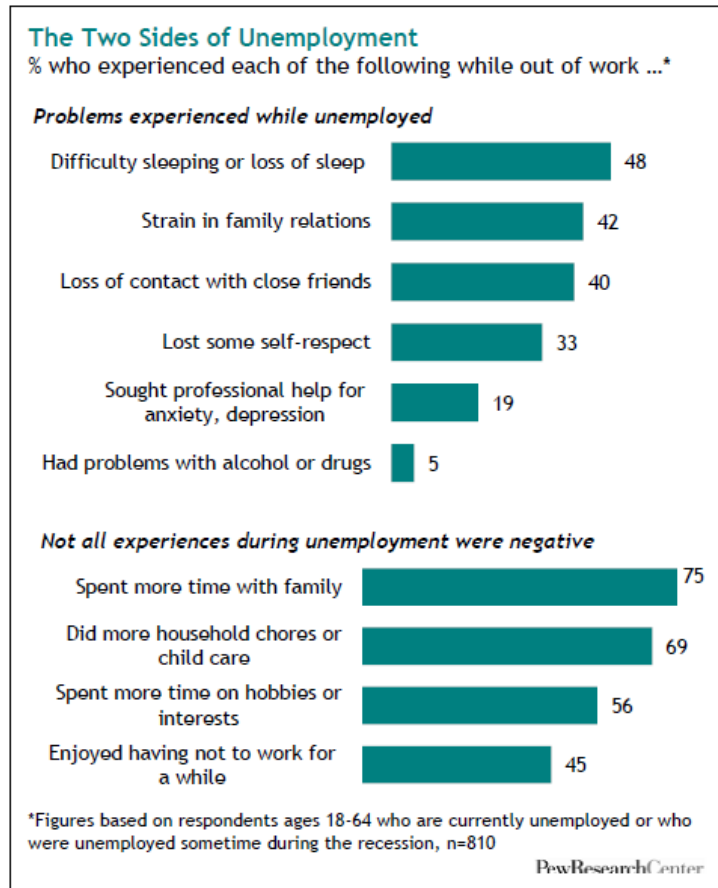
There are many barriers that make being an involved parent a difficult task for members of low-income urban communities. And while these barriers exist in every community, there are some that are much more prevalent in low-income urban communities. These include: unemployment and underemployment, lack of stable housing, family demographics, lack of transportation, and poor school/community relations.

Unemployment and Underemployment

As of August 2011, nearly 14 million Americans were unemployed. (Notably, almost the exact same number of Americans who currently live below the national poverty line.) Being without a job for an extended period of time can, and often does, have negative effects on a person's mental health. "The Impact of Long-term Unemployment: Lost Income, Lost Friends – and Loss of Self Respect," a 2010 study from the Pew Research Center makes the effects clear: over 40% of adults who were unemployed during its study reported strained family relations, another 40% lost friends, nearly half had difficulty sleeping and about 20% sought professional help for depression. 5% admitted to abusing drugs and alcohol while unemployed. The data

indicates at the very least that adults who are unemployed generally have a more difficult time maintaining healthy relationships, even with people in their immediate circles. At its worst, unemployment can even lead to depression and other mental health issues.

Figure 2. The Two Sides of Unemployment.



Interestingly, the Pew study shows that despite dwindling positive interactions, a majority of participants were able to spend more time with family and children, while also pursuing interests and hobbies. And while that could be construed as a positive side-effect of unemployment, it really just means that the quantity of time has increased.

There's no mention of quality of time. And while less than half of the study participants

enjoyed their unemployment, it remains unclear how long they were unemployed

What is clear is that over an extended period of time, being unemployed can have negative effects on one's mental health. In the study, "Some Implications of the Psychological Experience of Unemployment," Nancey Hoare and Anthony Machin write, unemployment "... restricts people's ability to exercise control over their lives and to make plans for the future, which impacts on their wellbeing" (2009). Their assertion supports the Pew Research Center's findings: a feeling of little-to-no self-efficacy and inability to plan one's own future negatively effects one's ability or willingness to create positive change in their lives.

Unfortunately, the current economic crisis means that more families are entering the world of unemployment. In 2010, The Brookings Institution pointed out that "the number of children in poverty may increase by 5 million or more as a result of the recession." According to their research, children who enter poverty during a recession are "less likely to complete high school and attain a bachelor's degree than children who weather a recession without entering poverty."

These findings indicate the effect unemployment can have on parents and children. The mental health issues that can accompany unemployment can limit a child's academic success; they can also prohibit parents from getting involved.

Unstable and Unsafe Housing

In its 2010 publication, "Basic Facts About Low-Income Children, 2009," the

National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) reported that 18% of children in low-income families moved at least once in the previous year (compared with 9% of children not in low-income families). This lack of stability can surely be linked to a decreasing amount of parent involvement in low-income communities. Families who have unstable housing conditions are less likely to invest what little resources they have – time, transportation, etc – into a school that they will probably leave within the year (Fischer and Kmec 2004).

Even families who stay in the same poor neighborhood can be negatively influenced by their living situation. In a 2002 study, researchers found a correlative relationship between living in a poor urban neighborhood and feelings of distress, anxiety, and depression (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2002). These issues, similar to those caused by unemployment, can lead to a parent's feeling of hopelessness and disinterest in getting involved in their child's schooling.

The effects of unstable and unsafe housing are compounded when coupled with the typically weak infrastructure for parent involvement that exists in many low-income urban schools. Parents who are new to a community might wish to be involved, but find the task overwhelming when the parents' support network is so weak. A low-functioning PTA, PTO, or other school-based parent organization can deter some parents from involvement, particularly those who are new to the community and who need a network with which to connect. This topic will be further explored later.

Family Demographics

The makeup of some low-income urban families can be considered a barrier to parental involvement in the schools. According to the NCCP, 52% of children living in low-income families live with just one adult in the home, while 5% live with no parent in the home at all. Data from the Administration on Aging (AOA) suggests that many of these homes are led by grandparents. As of 2010, the AOA reported that nearly 2 million elderly Americans lived in a household with one or more grandchildren; about half a million of these grandparents acted as primary caregivers to their grandchildren. In these instances, the need to pursue strategies to increase academic achievement is even greater because researchers have found a link between grandparent guardianship and decreased occurrences of academic success for grandchildren. In the 2009 study, “A Conceptual Pathways Model to Promote Positive Youth Development in Children Raised by Their Grandparents,” Oliver W. Edwards and Gordon E. Taub argue that the life events that require grandparents to take over parenting duties are often detrimental to both grandparent and grandchild. Mental health and physical health issues can arise and can eventually create barriers to academic success. They write:

Notwithstanding their grandparents’ optimism, warmth, and caring, many children raised by their grandparents experience unfavorable development trajectories and adverse home and school outcomes...

Edwards and Taub continue:

...these emotions and challenging circumstances may negatively affect the grandparents’ physical and psychological well-being and their ability to raise children who will succeed in school and life...

Furthermore, grandparents are likely to suffer health issues that could impact their ability to get involved. Diabetes and heart disease, for example, are both prevalent in low-income urban communities and can affect a person's mobility and willingness to travel to the school for involvement activities. In fact, in 2007 the Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics stated that over 40% of Medicare enrollees reported having one or more physical ailments that limited their daily activities. Nearly a quarter of these individuals reported an inability to walk two or three blocks.

Lack of Investment

There are, of course, parents who don't get involved in their children's schooling simply because they don't want to. These parents exist in every community and in every school. Unfairly, though, poor urban families are often the ones characterized as those who don't get involved (McDermott and Rothenberg 2000). This research is done with the understanding that some parents do fall into that category of lackluster involvement, but that many are held back by barriers created by life in a low-income urban community.

Strategies for Increasing Parent Involvement in Low-Income Urban Schools

The positive impact of parent involvement on academic achievement and the barriers that exist to limit involvement in low-income urban communities are both important for school stakeholders to be aware of. This knowledge can inform the allotment of resources such as space, staff assignments, and other spending. But, equally

important is a recognition and understanding of strategies that can be used to overcome the barriers – strategies that can help school decision-makers strengthen connections between parents and schools in low-income urban communities. The strategies explored in the next section are some that research suggests can be used to increase the frequency and quality of parent involvement and, as a result, students' academic success.

Utilizing Parent Involvement Coordinators

One approach for increasing parent involvement in low-income urban communities is to dedicate a staff person to managing school/community relationships, with the specific goal of connecting parents with teachers (Conley and Rooney, 2007).

Historically, teachers in these schools have been asked to facilitate the relationship building process between themselves and their students' parents (Greenwood and Hickman, 1991; Epstein and Becker, 1982). They have been expected to make phone calls, send home notes and newsletters, and even to visit the families' homes once or twice during the school year. While ideal, it is logistically very difficult. The demands of teaching in such high-pressure school systems often leave teachers with little to no time to connect with a hard-to-reach parent. Even the most well-intentioned teacher has a limited amount of time and might not be willing or able to commit after-school hours to following-up with parent (Cooper and Crosnoe, 2007).

In other instances, principals have been asked to take the lead on building relationships between the parents and the school. And while it does make sense that

principals set the tone for the relationships, it is short-sighted to expect them to plan and facilitate these interactions; similar to teachers, school principals already have many responsibilities, and, as was pointed out in a study about the facilitation of school/parent partnerships, “The principal may also be the school zealot, unbending, narrowly focused, and inflexible, especially in any matter which transgresses personal beliefs about what constitutes the “best” school organization.” (Randolph and Swick, 1979). Parents might have a difficult time building an authentic relationship with such a principal.

Furthermore, in the article, “Involving Low-Income Parents in the Schools: Communitycentric Strategies for School Counselors,” VanVelsor and Orozco point out opposing views of parent involvement that parents and school staff might have. They write:

From interviews of teachers from a low-income, culturally diverse, urban community, Lawson (2003) found that teachers viewed parent involvement from a schoolcentric frame of reference, that is, how parents can help the schools promote students' education. However, Lawson found that, although parent interviews also conveyed this school-focused theme, parents' stories further communicated a broader communitycentric frame of reference, that is, how community concerns related to the future of their children. (2007)

While all the survey participants agreed that parents play a role in their child’s academic performance, it seems that parents also connected their involvement in the school to work in the community. In other words, school staff and parents had a very different understanding of the purpose of parent involvement in the school. These differences can be problematic because, in the midst of limited resources, they create competing expectations.

Because of this, it is important that someone else in the school take on the responsibility of reaching out to parents. Who this person should be is debatable. VanVelsor and Orozco argue that it should be the school counselor because he/she is “in a unique position to provide leadership in implementing parent involvement strategies that speak to community needs.” In other words, the school counselor is able to navigate the school system, while also being sympathetic to the needs of the school’s students and parents.

Another option is to create a new position. In the study, “The Home-School-Community Coordinator: Selection and Training for Interprofessional Work,” researchers describe this position as being filled by someone who understands school programs and community/family dynamics, is able to build leadership among parents, and is willing to facilitate workshops for parents and school staff (Randolph & Swick, 1979). Researchers Cosio and Iannacone argue, on the otherhand, that while the position is important, institutionalizing it within the school system can be problematic. They write:

Thus, parent liaisons’ roles can be tenuous at best, as conflict arises from competing responsibilities: as school agents and tacit reproducers of inequality, and as partners with parents in exposing structural injustice and advocating for change. (2007)

Indeed, school employees who are accountable to both parents and school administration frequently find themselves in precarious situations because, as previously noted, the two parties often have different expectations for involvement.

One strategy used to address this potential conflict is to bring in a third-party: someone who is not employed by, nor a parent in the school (Thompson and Hong,

2011). This person is more likely to fall right in the middle of the school/parent relationship. He/she is able to navigate the school's bureaucracy without being dependent on it. This person is also able to interact with parents in a meaningful and sincere manner, often without being susceptible to peer pressure. In many instances, such a person is an employee of a community-based organization (CBO) that has contracted its services to the school. According to a 2005 study concerning the role of CBOs in increasing parent involvement, third-party contractors are in a position to focus resources exclusively on involving parents in their child's schooling. They write:

These organizations play a unique role in urban schools by engaging families with a level of intensity that schools seldom have time and resources to commit. They also work to help urban schools overcome barriers such as the lack of a welcoming climate and a deficit orientation toward poor and culturally diverse families (Lopez, Kreider and Coffman, 2005).

Their research suggests that a parent coordinator from an outside organization is in the best position to enhance the contributions of both the school and the parents – a fact that could enhance the effectiveness and quality of the relationship.

Strengthening the Parent Involvement Infrastructure

Another strategy that has been used to increase parent involvement is to strengthen its infrastructure within the school (Griffith 1998). To do this, school stakeholders first inventory the infrastructures that exist in their buildings; perhaps there is a Parent Teacher Association (PTA), Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), or other such group whose focus is to connect parents with the school. The principal, guidance

counselor, or other school leader who works with the organization can help the group fight stagnancy by inviting new members to attend meetings or other group functions.

Having the same 10 parents attend each PTA meeting might allow a school to claim strong parent involvement, but it might also send a signal to other parents that the original 10 are the only ones needed; everyone else is unwelcome.

Strengthening the group by increasing its membership is just one step used to encourage parent involvement. As New Jersey's Department of Education notes, "Many present PTA leaders come into their positions with little or no advocacy or leadership experience." While they might be good-intentioned, some parents assume leadership positions without any formal leadership training. Several organizations like PTA and No Child Left Behind Councils host trainings and workshops to address this need; the PTA, for example, hosts state-by-state leadership trainings as well as nationwide workshops on leadership development. A school who is committed to increasing parent involvement can consider investing resources into sending parents to these events. Providing opportunities for leadership development might enable existing leaders to expand the reach of the organization to include parents who have yet to be involved.

This strategy is important to consider because one way to encourage parents to get involved in their children's school is to add involved parents to their social network.

Research shows that parents, particularly young parents, develop an understanding of their role as a mother or father by learning from those with whom they interact on a social level (Sheldon 2002). This means that if a parent is surrounded by other adults

who are not involved in the school, then that parent is more likely to believe that her job does not include school involvement. On the other hand, if the parent is in social settings with parents who are involved in the school, then she is more likely to associate school involvement with good parenting. Interestingly, researchers noted this effect with the addition of just one involved parent to the network.

With this in mind, it becomes even more important that involved parents who have taken on leadership roles in the school (e.g., PTA President) be willing and able to reach out to parents who are not involved. Their presence in that parent's social network might be the push that is needed to get him/her involved in school activities.

Changing the Logistics

Yet another step that has been taken to increase parent involvement in low-income urban communities is to change the location and/or time in which involvement activities take place (Griffith 1998). Traditionally, as is pointed out in Epstein's definition of involvement, parents are expected to get involved at the school: in the classroom, in the lunchroom, on the playground, etc. This model might work in communities where families either attend schools in their neighborhoods or are at least able to easily travel between the two. In low-income urban communities, on the other hand, where families might send their children to school outside of the neighborhood or just have inadequate transportation options, limiting involvement to the school grounds can be off-putting.

According to POWER-PAC's recent study of over 5,000 low-income families found that in regards to parents sending their children to school "transportation challenges were the number one barrier identified." If transportation is a big enough issue to limit children's school attendance, then it is possibly keeping many parents out of the schools as well. As a result, some schools have begun offering opportunities for involvement in the families' own community. In the study, "Parent Involvement in Urban Charter Schools: New Strategies for Increasing Participation," a principal shared his school's strategy for success:

We are very flexible about scheduling meetings, and I think we go the extra mile, even to the point of going to the home rather than having them come here if it really doesn't work for them to come here.... If they can't do that, then we'll do it over the phone, we'll do whatever it takes to be in touch with the parents.

Being flexible with the location enabled this school to have 100% of its parents participate in parent/teacher conferences.

If an event must be held at the school, then offering transportation is a helpful consideration. Even just providing rides on a school bus could encourage some parents to participate more often. The New Jersey Department of Education writes:

To ensure effective involvement of parents and to support a partnership among the school, parents, and the community to improve student academic achievement, each school and local educational agency assisted under this part...may *pay reasonable* and necessary *expenses* associated with local parental involvement activities, including transportation and child care costs, to enable parents to participate in school-related meetings and training session.

Another common solution is to change the time of parent involvement activities.

Because each community can have unique circumstances, it is wise for a school to survey parents to find out which days of the week and times work best for them. This might mean that PTA meetings are held early in the morning, as parents are dropping off their children, or even during dinner when many people are finished working. If dinner time works best for parents, then some schools have gone so far as to provide dinner and childcare in order to maximize the number of families able to attend the event(s).

Offering Incentives

In addition to some of the aforementioned strategies, some schools have begun offering incentives to involved parents and their children. One school that participated in a 2007 study used its school uniform policy to encourage parents to participate. Students whose parents or guardians attended school meetings were given “free dress” passes, allowing them to attend school out of uniform (Smith, Wohlstetter, et. al.). Similarly, in 2010, Detroit Public Schools (DPS) launched its “I’m In” rewards program. According to a recently published press release by DPS, each time a parent attended a training session, workshop, or other event at their child’s school, his/her “I’m In” card was scanned and loaded with discounts to local stores. One principal whose schools offered incentives recounted that “...approximately 500 parents and students attend our parent education events,” which was a significant increase over non-incentivized events (Moorman 2002).

Building Relationships

Researcher M. Elena Lopez explores the importance of changing parent involvement activities to meet the particular needs of parents in low-income urban communities in her study, “Transforming Schools Through Community Organizing.” Lopez notes that parent involvement projects usually “focus on an individual child’s school success...and relate to parents as individual consumers of education...” In other words, the traditional understanding of “parent involvement” focuses on the individual parent and his/her individual responsibility to support his/her child’s individual academic success. In his article, “Home is a Prison in the Global City: The Tragic Failure of School-Based Community Engagement Strategies,” Aaron Schutz continues this conversation by describing the difficulty that can arise when parent engagement initiatives that focus solely on the individual are implemented in low-income urban neighborhoods. Schutz writes:

The fact is that, unlike middle- and upper-class citizens, poor people of color in ghetto areas of the United States generally achieve empowerment not as individuals but as collectives...the transformation of the individual lives of inner-city residents cannot be disentangled from the transformation of their communities and their relationships to each other and to those outside (p.4).

Shutz’s claim supports Lopez’s argument against an individualized interpretation of parent engagement by helping to explain why traditional efforts might have failed in so many low-income urban schools. By focusing solely on the individual parent, traditional parent engagement programs operate in a paradigm that rarely exists in low-income urban

communities. Expecting them to separately advocate for the success of their own children might be a miscalculated step.

In support of this, Lopez suggests that parent engagement initiatives in low-income urban areas spend less time demanding individual action and more time helping parents and families build relationships and collective power. At the core of this idea is the one-on-one, a foundational tool for community organizing efforts and school-based initiatives that wish to strengthen communities by increasing personal connections. According to the Marin Institute, a one-on-one is “a personal conversation with an individual community member [used] to learn about his/her concerns, level of interest and commitment for an issue, and the resources the person has to offer.” Several organizing projects have used one-on-ones to encourage parents to get involved in their local schools and have seen the positive impact they have had on parent engagement.

One such project was taken on by the Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project (EPOP) in the mid 1990s. In the article, “Keeping Parent Voices at the Forefront of Reform,” Sara McAlister, et. al. describe the use of one- on-ones in building parent interest and engagement in the schools:

EPOP’s decision to begin their outreach with relationship building enabled them to connect with and engage over 150 parents in just one school. Through the one-on-one conversations, organizers and parents uncovered a mutual frustration over the amount of drug-dealing around their neighborhood school. Because of their collective power, parents convinced the police to patrol the area more frequently. After this small success, parents felt more confident in their ability to create changes in and around their schools and soon turned their attention to academic issues.

Starting their parent engagement activities with one-on-ones enabled the school to connect with over 150 parents. The connections grew from conversations into actual participation in the school.

Providing Opportunities for Nonacademic Involvement

As Joyce Epstein pointed out (1986), the entire context for parent involvement is an academic setting; involved parents do homework with their children, provide resources to support their child's academic growth, and at times even volunteer in the classroom. But research is beginning to show that parent involvement efforts are more successful at engaging low-income urban parents when they start with nonacademic issues.

Kavitha Mediratta and Norm Fruchter explore the impact of nonacademic parent engagement initiatives on overall involvement in their article, "Mapping the Field of Organizing for School Improvement: A Report on Education Organizing in Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, the Mississippi Delta, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington D.C." EPOP's parents began their involvement by working on safety issues. Mediratta and Fruchter refer to this and other nonacademic concerns as a "presenting issue." After they won their presenting issue, EPOP's parents had the confidence to later ask for an additional bilingual teacher, a campaign that dealt with the "core issue" of teaching and instruction. Mediratta and Fruchter recount Baltimore

organizer, Howie Baum's explanation of why "presenting issues" are an important tool for increasing parent engagement: "We use [presenting] issues as a way to bring people in and win victories that will help people develop the confidence to address issues that are integral to what's going on inside the school."

EPOP is not the only group that has used this strategy to engage parents in their schools. Mediratta and McAlister share the story of People Acting for Community Together (PACT), a group of parents in Miami, Florida, in their article, "Building a Campaign for Reading Reform in Miami." PACT members began their involvement in the school system by advocating for safer conditions. After they successfully got several nearby drug-houses demolished, they turned their focus to increasing the quality of literacy instruction in their school.

In instances such as EPOP and PACT, responding to a "presenting issue" like leaky pipes is not the end-goal of engaging parents in the school, but it has been shown to successfully bring parents into the school building and to help them feel a measure of success and worth within the school community. With these feelings in place, parents are often more likely to participate in other engagement opportunities. Mediratta and Fruchter point out that "presenting issues" are not one-time events. Schools that use this strategy to engage parents often bounce back and forth between presenting and core issues, an approach that gives continued opportunities for success to parents while sustaining them through longer "core issue" endeavors.

Underlying Issues

At the heart of many of these strategies is the school community's ability to build relationships with and between parents. Incentive programs, for example, can increase attendance at a meeting or event, but the personal connections are often what encourage parents to stay and to pursue actual involvement. Furthermore, the barriers that have been earlier explored are common in low-income urban communities, but do not necessarily affect all residents at all times. Therefore, a school that wants to engage parents in meaningful involvement activities needs to focus its efforts on learning about the particular barriers that impact its parents' engagement. Building these connections can be a long and challenging task, but is a necessary one for those schools that take parent involvement seriously. At times, this process might feel unrelated to student achievement and could even be construed as a misuse of time or money, but research shows that when relationships are built, parents are more likely to maintain meaningful levels of involvement. The amount of work it might take to get to that point will vary by school, but will invariably take a long-term commitment.

In addition to creating meaningful connections with parents, school decision-makers should analyze their own school's culture; understanding the preconceptions and expectations that school staff and faculty have towards parent engagement might aide them in creating an environment that is conducive to meaningful and frequent participation. While it is important for one employee to oversee parent engagement, the efforts shouldn't come exclusively from one individual. If a school/community

coordinator, for example, invites a parent to a meeting, only to have the school secretary make that parent feel unwelcome, then the coordinator's work is, at the very least, made much more challenging.

Another element to consider is the financial commitment that might be necessary to implement many of these strategies. In almost every situation, working to increase parent engagement will require a financial investment. Whether it is used to create a new staff position or to pay for incentives, schools will need to make a financial investment. Complicating this strategy is the reality that many schools not only have limited funds, but are expected to generate quick results from the money they use. In even the best scenario, the money invested in parent engagement most often needs to be part of a long-term commitment. After all, one year of a parent coordinator or one bus ride to a meeting won't be enough to significantly increase parent engagement; money will need to be available for a long-term investment.

Ultimately, even if schools and communities implement these strategies, parents will still need to make the decision to connect with their child's teachers and to contribute enough to maintain the relationship. These strategies that have discussed here are intended to level the context for parent involvement across socioeconomic levels. Working to create a culture that normalizes parent engagement and that values the individual contributions of parents can do a lot to increase the frequency and quality of parent and school interactions.

Opportunities for Future Research

Because of the significant impact parent involvement has been shown to have on student achievement, it is important to continue to understand the dynamics of parental involvement in low-income urban schools. As the number of grandparents raising grandchildren continues to grow, it will be worthwhile to study the differences, if any, between the rate and quality of involvement between grandparents and parents. Are they more, or less likely, than parents to participate in parent engagement activities? Is one strategy more effective than another at attracting grandparent participation? Additionally, how will the privatization of many urban schools influence parent involvement? Currently, urban districts across the nation are increasing their charter school offerings; many of these schools require incoming families to sign agreements to participate in school activities. Over time, are these signed documents effective? How do they influence the relationship between the school and its parents? How do they account for the barriers to parent involvement that exist in many low-income urban communities?

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