

Most parents in study wish they were more involved in their child's school

Students examine parent participation in West Philadelphia High School

— by Tiffany Fogle and Lawrence Jones

The authors are student members of the West Philadelphia High School chapter of the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU). West Philadelphia is a 1,070-student school that is 98 percent Black and 80 percent from low-income families. A brand new building has been promised by the School District, and students were interested in understanding more about improving urban public high schools through increased parent participation. Five PSU students conducted a research project with support from the non-profit Research for Action.

In April and May 2006, we conducted surveys and interviews of Philadelphia Student Union students' parents from two West Philadelphia chapters. We focused on what parents think good parent participation should look like, what their own participation looked like, and what prevented them from participating. We looked at how schools treat parents, how parents participate, and why things can get in the way.

We chose parents of PSU students because we wanted to talk to parents who had children who are active in school. Thirteen parents completed surveys. We conducted in-depth interviews with seven parents.

The majority of the parents would like to be more involved in their child's public high school; however, sometimes there were things that kept them from doing so. Many people assume that if parents don't come to a meeting or a sports game that they do not care about their child, but this often is wrong.

Here are four possible reasons for low participation: 1) parents do not receive information far enough in advance to adjust their schedules; 2) parents do not have the time because they have multiple outside responsibilities; 3) possible cultural barriers make it difficult for some parents to be involved; 4) parent participation looks different in high school than in elementary and middle schools.

We found that some parents were irritated when they received information only a day or two before an event was going to happen. Parents described two types of information that they receive: general (involving class or events in school) and important (involving their child).

One concerned father described receiving general information the day before the events, which made it difficult for him to participate or attend because he had no time to think about it and/or get his finances together. More importantly, one parent was

not informed about something serious that happened to his daughter while at school.

Schedule conflicts also create a barrier for some parents. The parents we spoke with had multiple responsibilities such as work, church events, and coaching.

Another issue was differences in cultures between families and schools. An African parent reported difficulties with culture and language problems with staff.

Lastly, just because parents miss a meeting or two does not mean that they do not participate in their children's schooling in other ways.

Some parents are not involved at school but are involved through informal conversations or discussions in the home. Nine of 13 parents said they regularly ask their children about their school day. About two-thirds of the parents surveyed felt they know when their children are doing what they are supposed to, or not supposed to do, in their high school classes.

RESEARCH

Our research demonstrates that parents want to participate in meaningful ways. However, some barriers sometimes prevent them from participating formally in the things at the school itself.

Eleven of 13 parents agreed that parents should be regularly involved in their high school's Home and School Association, but only five stated that they are actually involved. Seven of 13 parents said they regularly attend high school events such as report card days and talent shows.

However, the great majority of the parents wish they were more involved in school. One said, "I like participating in those things [like Report Card Night] at my child's school.... It gives me insight on what's going on and makes me feel better when I'm not there."

Recommendations

Teachers, their children, and even other parents need to be aware of parents' multiple responsibilities so they do not assume that parents do not care.

Schools should also be flexible in their scheduling to accommodate parents' responsibilities and rethink how parents can be involved in their children's schooling and education outside of the formal school events.

One parent made the following recommendation: "I think everything is really a matter of timing and also communication. I think that parents need to be given enough time so that they can make their schedules built around

their particular Home and School Association meeting or parent-teacher meeting. If they had enough time to be able to schedule, I think that might help make more parents [participate]."

Other recommendations for:

The District

- Allow high schools to make site councils that involve parents in decision-making.
- Provide District professional development on how to treat parents with respect.
- Seek input/feedback from parents, teachers, and students on how parents are treated and when parents are available for meetings.
- Reduce class/school size, so school staff can get to know students and families better.
- Enable teachers to see fewer students so they have time to communicate with parents.

Schools

- Assign someone to show parents where to go, how to get information, etc.
- Create a parent welcome desk with easy access.
- Provide timely notices of information to families.
- Welcome volunteers to help get information out and send out monthly calendars, etc.
- Hold events at varying times around the parents' other obligations.
- Coordinate high school "buddies" to be with children during parent-related events and offer students credits as an incentive.

Parents

- Communicate with each other about the school by having formal and informal meetings.
- Communicate with children, teachers, staff, and other students.
- Contact the District if school access is limited/poor, or if teachers are not communicating.
- Let teachers know if something is affecting the student.

Students

- Stay in communication with parents or other caring adults.

Reprinted with permission from the Philadelphia Public School Notebook. Volume 14, No. 2, page 22 WINTER 2006-2007