



Parent Involvement in Public Education: A Literature Review

May 2008

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Throughout contemporary American educational circles, the involvement of parents and other caregivers in their children’s schooling experiences is becoming increasingly viewed not simply as a complement to the work of educators, but as a critical and essential support for the academic, psychological, and emotional development of youth. Within research literature, there is a growing perception of the potential of parent involvement to raise the academic achievement of all students, making it an integral component for school reform initiatives (Education Trust, 2003; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Federal mandates regarding parent involvement are also included in the No Child Left Behind Act, thus intensifying the focus on engaging parents even further. Indeed, recent research shows that a number of family and home factors are linked to student achievement, including factors related to parent involvement in their children’s education at home and at school, further confirming the importance of parent involvement (Barton & Coley, 2007). Yet despite the widespread interest in parent involvement, figuring out what parent involvement actually entails – and how to effectively achieve it – remain challenges for schools and districts across the nation even as they work to build strong partnerships between schools and families. This literature review identifies prominent themes in educational research on parent involvement in an attempt to summarize current understandings of what parent involvement is, why it is important, and the challenges associated with making it work. This review ends with several examples of effective strategies to engage parents. While not meant to be an exhaustive or comprehensive review of the literature on parent involvement, this review provides a snap shot of the current landscape around parent involvement in public education.

I. Reform context: Parent involvement and No Child Left Behind

“Parent and community involvement is an essential element in ensuring that our schools become high-performing, successful places that prepare our children to meet the challenges ahead” (The Education Trust, 2003).

Parent involvement is one of the key components of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Under NCLB, every school district is mandated to develop processes to ensure meaningful ways to engage parents. In addition, all schools are obligated to “encourage parental participation” (The Education Trust, n.d., p. 11). The requirements for parental involvement rest on the premise that

schools and school districts will not change unless they receive outside pressure to do so, and that parents acting as informed advocates are key to holding schools and school districts accountable. Although NCLB raises the stakes for engaging parents in schools, it does so without prescribing specific courses of action. As Fuhrman (2003) notes, standards-based reforms like NCLB present top-down mandates on districts without delimiting specific strategies for achieving those mandates on the local level. NCLB requires that schools “set up programs and activities to increase parent involvement” (The Education Trust, n.d., p.6) without providing the necessary tools through which this can be achieved. Thus translating parent involvement mandates into effective policies in practice present a formidable challenge for many schools.

II. Exploring impact: Parent involvement and student achievement

A central concern for educational researchers is whether parent involvement has a discernible impact on students’ academic performance. While parent involvement may indirectly affect academic achievement through its positive effects on factors such as student behavior and students’ achievement ideology (McNeal, 1999; Sanders, 1998), researchers are also investigating if more direct links exist between parent involvement and academic performance measures. Some research suggests that there is a significant, positive relationship between parent involvement and students’ educational experiences, including improved academic outcomes (Barton & Coley, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Other research, however, suggests that parent involvement may not be the most influential factor in improving academic outcomes. For instance, a study conducted in California found that while parent involvement was positively correlated with academic achievement, other factors such as teacher quality and the alignment of curriculum to state academic standards had more of an impact on student performance (Mathews, 2005).

Some literature suggests that parent and community involvement activities that are linked to student learning have a greater effect on academic achievement than more general forms of involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). More importantly, parent involvement activities may have a greater effect on academic achievement when the form of involvement revolves around specific academic needs. For example, Sheldon and Epstein (2005) found that activities that engage families and children in discussing mathematics at home can contribute to higher academic performance in mathematics when compared to other types of involvement. Additionally, while some research suggests that parent involvement may positively affect the academic performance of secondary students (Tonn, 2005), other research indicates that parent involvement has a greater impact on the academic achievement of elementary-aged students than of secondary school students (Cooper et al., 2000, cited in Jordan, Orozco, & Averret, 2001). Differences have also been reported in the effects of parent involvement on student achievement across demographic groups (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; McNeal, 1999). Taken together, these cases suggest that the impact of parent involvement on academic performance can vary across contexts.

III. Challenges to achieving parent involvement

The literature on parent involvement highlights several factors that influence parents’ involvement in their children’s education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). If not addressed, these factors can present barriers to achieving parent involvement. These factors range from logistical issues associated with parents getting out to school events to factors associated with the school culture and how welcoming the school is to parents.

Logistical Factors

Research has noted several logistical factors that influence how and when parents become involved in their children's school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Although easily overlooked, these factors can be obstacles to parents becoming involved and sustaining their involvement. Such logistical factors include childcare, transportation, and scheduling conflicts. Successful programs to engage parents can overcome these issues by providing childcare at the program, arranging carpools or providing tokens for public transportation, etc. Indeed, Starkey and Klein (2000, cited in Henderson & Mapp, 2002) found that parent programs and interventions work best when they address some of the logistical factors associated with parent involvement.

Social and cultural capital

The types and levels of parent involvement frequently vary across demographic groups. White middle class parents, for example, tend to display higher levels of involvement at school than lower income parents of color (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Some of these differences across racial and socioeconomic groupings can be explained by theories of cultural and social capital. Capital refers to the resources which parents have to draw upon when they navigate various settings. Cultural capital refers to pre-dispositions, attitudes, and knowledge gained from experience, particularly education related experiences. Cultural capital also includes one's connection to education-related objects and institutions (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Social capital refers to relationships which provide access to information and resources, and potentially can build collective political power (Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Lee & Bowen, 2006). All of these forms of capital provide parents with resources which they can draw upon when they enter their children's schools and seek to support their children's learning.

Research has found that parents with more of these types of capital are more likely to be involved with their children's schools. For instance, studies indicate that social interactions can significantly influence how parents are involved in their children's education (Horvat et al., 2003; Lee & Bowen, 2006). White middle class parents traditionally have a larger social network which they can draw upon to be effective in their involvement in schools. Part of this network includes access to key professionals who can help them advocate for their children, e.g., access to psychologists who can advocate for special needs students. This access to social capital may help to explain Lee and Bowen's (2006) finding that the types of involvement exhibited by white middle class parents have the strongest association with student achievement. By contrast, lower income parents of color generally have fewer ties to other parents in schools and less access to professionals who they can use to leverage their relationships in the schools. Research suggests that these social ties and relationships that parents maintain with other parents – or in other words, the networks that build social capital – predict parent involvement at schools (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Sheldon, 2006; Overstreet, Devine, Bevans, & Efreom, 2005). With less social capital than their white middle class counterparts, lower income parents of color are consequently not as well-positioned to become involved in schools.

Similarly, disparities in cultural capital may help to explain variations in parent involvement. For example, parents are more likely to be involved in their children's schools if they feel more confident in relationship to their children's schools (Hoover-Dempsey, cited in Tonn, 2005); if they believe that their involvement is important and doesn't interfere with the efforts of teachers or "experts" to educate their children (Hoover-Dempsey, cited in Tonn, 2005); or if they have

positive experiences with schools (Lee & Bowen, 2006). In all of these cases, parents who are more familiar with the cultural norms embedded in schools are, once again, better-positioned to navigate schools as engaged parents.

Taken together, these findings suggest the importance of parent involvement programs that help to build social and cultural capital, especially for lower income parents of color. School activities that engage parents can help build social capital by promoting families' connections with each other, with school staff, and community groups. This helps parents to become more powerful allies of the schools and advocates for public education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Research also points to the importance of establishing caring and trusting relationships between parents and school staff (Gold, Hartmann, & Lewis, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Henderson and Mapp (2002) assert that social trust or the quality of relationships is a key factor influencing whether connections among schools, families, and communities will be formed and sustained. Strong relationships help to build parents' confidence in their interactions with the school and overall can contribute to a more positive experience with the school.

School-centered approaches

“As a strategy for change – lumped in with such reforms as high standards, small schools, and performance assessment – parent involvement stands out as a simple step. But profound parent involvement means shared leadership—and that means sharing knowledge, responsibility, and most difficult of all, power” (Nichols-Solomon, 2000, p. 20).

Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges to effectively engaging parents and forging strong partnerships between schools and families is the resistance of schools to actually see parents as partners. As reflected in the quote above, the foundation of true parent involvement is shared leadership which is often difficult to establish.

Historically, the relationship between families and schools, especially in large, urban districts serving lower income students of color, has been a very strained one, marked by blame and distrust (Jehl, Blank, & McCloud, 2001; Nicols-Solomon, 2001). School personnel often perceive parents not only as unsupportive, but also as actual barriers to their children's education (Jackson & Remillard, 2005). Consequently, the parent involvement initiatives and activities that are most frequently supported tend to have a school-centered focus; the terms of parent involvement are established primarily by the school and ultimately serve school-determined interests. Generally, these forms of involvement are limited to participation in bake sales, attendance at formal school meetings, homework checks, and other activities that occur during the school day and that support agenda items predetermined by school officials (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Jordan et al., 2001; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). Ultimately, the school-centered approach to parent involvement casts parents as outsiders who need to be acclimated into school culture, rather than recognizing parents as agents with valuable resources to contribute to schools. Research suggests that parents' perception of how open the school is to their involvement and to their own ideas about involvement is an important factor that influences parents' decisions about their involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

School-centered approaches to parent involvement are one tool for maintaining a divide between schools and parents. Schools tend to be insular institutions in which community input and involvement (that are not initiated by the school itself) are often not encouraged and viewed with skepticism (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002; Jehl et al., 2001). As a result, parents, particularly lower income and/or minority parents tend to disengage from schools, frustrated by the strained

relationship. Although parents may limit their involvement in schools, some studies suggest that parents continue to be involved in their children's education at home (Epstein, 1995; Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). However, given the absence of these parents from schools, a misperception persists that lower income parents are apathetic about their children's education and do not want to be involved, further widening the divide between parents and school personnel. Research continues to challenge this assumption, noting that families of all backgrounds do care about their children's learning and are equally involved in their learning at home, although the forms of involvement may look different across race/ ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Challenges to immigrant parent involvement

The challenges to parent involvement described above are further compounded for immigrant parents. In addition to facing the obstacles to parent involvement encountered by other groups, immigrant parents must contend with significant language and cultural barriers that can significantly complicate their interactions with schools. Immigrant parents often feel even more like outsiders than other parent groups, and they often have less knowledge than others of the "invisible codes of power" embedded in school cultures (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005). As the number of students from immigrant families continues to increase, particularly in urban centers, the engagement of immigrant parents will remain a critical issue for school districts to address (Carreon et al., 2005; Pryor, 2001).

IV. Effective strategies for parent involvement

Despite considerable obstacles to engaging parents in schools, several compelling strategies for improving parent involvement are described in the research literature, and some success stories have even emerged from attempts to engage parents in various schools and districts across the nation. Many of the success stories described in the extant literature center around collaborations between parents and community-based organizations (CBOs), with noticeably fewer standout examples of district-initiated parent involvement activities. Nevertheless, strategies for parent involvement envision potential contributions from parents, schools, districts, and CBOs. These strategies, along with some examples of successful parent involvement practices, are described below.

School-level strategies

As Boethel (2003) contends, "Relationships are the foundation of parent involvement in schools" (p. 71). Strengthening the relationships between parents and schools must be a top priority in any parent involvement initiative. One strategy for improving these relationships on the school level is to abandon school-centered models of parent involvement, and to opt instead for equal partnerships between parents and school staff. Parent involvement initiatives must break away from the school-centered paradigm in which parents are supporters of school-determined agendas, and embrace a new paradigm in which parents are decision-makers and leaders (Jordan et. al, 2001). More importantly, there needs to be a shift from focusing only on *what* parents do to engage in their children's education to considering how parents understand the *hows* and *whys* of their involvement, which provides the space for parents to make their own decisions about the ways in which they would like to be involved (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004).

For this shift to occur, schools must be willing to recognize and value parent-initiated activities (Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2001, cited in Boethel, 2003).

Another school-level strategy for building better relationships is to recognize and value controversy and conflict (Nichols-Solomon, 2000). When schools begin to embrace parents as leaders and decision makers, there is inevitably going to be conflict as new roles for parents are cast, and schools are forced to challenge their negative assumptions about students and families, and work across differences in race, class, and culture (Nichols-Solomon, 2000). The theory behind community organizing suggests that conflict is an essential and necessary step in building trust (Gold et al., 2002). Developing ways to acknowledge, work through, and learn from conflict in schools may usher in new levels of trust between parents and school personnel. Of course, it becomes imperative that school staff receive training on how to effectively engage parents (Kessler-Sclar & Baker, 2000; Lopez, Kreider, & Coffman, 2005).

In addition to the strategies mentioned above, some research literature offers suggestions for increasing the involvement of immigrant parents. These suggestions include creating a space for dialogue among immigrant parents, and having parent involvement orientation programs in their native language (Pryor, 2001).

District-level strategies

The challenges to parent involvement cannot be resolved at the school-level alone. Schools “need to be readied to relate to parents as resources and partners” (Lopez et al., 2005, p. 100). Support at the district level is key to translating parent involvement goals into effective practices (Mattingly, Prislun, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). Districts can consider several strategies for supporting parent involvement throughout their schools:

- examine opportunities offered for parental decision making;
- examine communications between schools and homes such as phone calls, letters, etc.;
- evaluate schools’ need for training teachers to work with families;
- become familiar with model and nationally recognized parent involvement programs and practices.

Districts should also design evaluation processes in order to assess whether policies are translated into effective practices at the school level (Family and Community Engagement, 2006; Kessler-Sclar & Baker, 2000; Mattingly et al., 2002).

With NCLB and rising accountability expectations shaping current educational reforms, districts are required to ensure that parent involvement initiatives are in place. However, limited information is presently available on effective district parent involvement initiatives (Kessler-Sklar & Baker, 2000; Mattingly et al., 2002). Furthermore, although numerous parent involvement programs exist across the nation, attempts to assess the effectiveness of such programs have not been as common (Mattingly et al., 2002). These factors present serious implications for parent involvement efforts as districts attempt to translate national and state policies into “meaningful local policy and practice” (Kessler-Sklar & Baker, 2000, p. 102). A survey-based study by Kessler-Sklar & Baker (2000) on district parent involvement policies, and the programs in place to support these policies indicated a gap between the reported parent involvement policy goals for that district and the actual programs in place to address those goals. Also, few districts reported model, evaluated programs. More recently, a report about parent

involvement initiatives in the Boston Public School system (Family and Community Engagement, 2006) revealed that the leadership has had difficulty supporting programs to engage parents in an effective way.

Despite the general paucity of information regarding effective district initiatives, a few encouraging examples are described in the extant literature. The National Network of Partnership Schools of Johns Hopkins University is a nationally recognized group of schools and districts that offers examples of best practices to engage parents (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salanas, Jansorn, & Voohris, 2002; Jansorn, Salinas, & Gerne, 2002). Districts in the National Network of Partnership Schools help elementary, middle, and high schools develop school, family, and community partnerships. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District Partnership Team has developed plans and activities to support secondary schools such as organizing initial meetings for parents and teachers to engage in conversation. In addition, the Partnership has implemented a Parent Mentor program in which parents are trained to be mentors for students who are struggling academically. Another example of best practices is the Howard County Public School System in Ellicot City, MD. Seminars have been organized for parents, central office staff, and school based personnel which help participants build relationships with each other and develop strategies to support family involvement in the classroom.

External organizations: Building school capacity

Parent involvement initiatives should also draw on outside resources and connections, including local businesses and organizations in the community to help build the capacity to “translate family involvement goals into effective participation processes” (Lopez et al., 2005, p.79-80). Intermediary organizations can help to build capacity at the school level by training school personnel and facilitating meetings between families and schools.

External organizations: Building parent capacity

“In a system where schools hold power, parents must acquire the skills to become effective advocates for change” (Lopez, Kreider, & Caspe, 2004/2005, p. 3).

In addition to developing capacity at the district and school levels, parent involvement initiatives must build the capacity of individual parents as well. Indeed, there is a movement of parents who are taking parent involvement into their own hands by learning how to become leaders and advocates for their children, as well agents for school change. Much of the philosophy behind this type of parent leadership stems from community organizing, where a central concern is building the social and political capital of parents and community members through empowerment and mobilization. A key part of this is leadership training and learning how to ask the right questions in order to make demands and hold school officials accountable in a way that will yield positive results (Gold et al., 2002; Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2005; Jehl, Blank, & McCloud, 2001; Mediratta, 2004; Mediratta & Karp, 2003; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2008; Zachary & Olatoye, 2001).

Intermediary organizations and other external organizations can be important resources, as they can help to build capacity by training parents. In fact, there are many intermediary organizations and community based organizations that work with parents to train them to become leaders and advocates in the school. The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence and the Right Question Project (see Lopez et al., 2005) are nationally recognized examples of intermediary

organizations that provide parents with knowledge and skills, and help parents gain the confidence necessary for being an active presence in schools. Through this type of training, parents are then able to organize family involvement activities in their children's schools.

Two other nationally recognized examples include the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership and the Parent Leadership Network (a resource of Charlotte Advocates for Education). PLN is modeled after Kentucky's Commonwealth Institute. Both programs train parents to become leaders and advocates for public education. Specifically, parents gain analytical and communication skills in order to develop and carry out action plans in their schools for school reform (Faughman, K., & Wolos, C., 2004/2005; The Parent Leadership Network).

Lastly, the Parent Leadership and Engagement Academy (Hodge, 2004) and Austin Interfaith (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2008) are two other examples of education organizing groups; both stemming from larger community organizing initiatives. The focus is on strengthening parents' capacity to engage in local school reform efforts.

V. Conclusion

This review has provided a snap shot of the current landscape around parent involvement in public education. Within the context of No Child Left Behind, parent involvement is now a requirement with districts and schools facing added pressure to ensure that initiatives and activities to engage parents are in place. Despite the new requirements, however, research continues to indicate that the process of effectively engaging parents is not a simple one; instead it is filled with many challenges. Significant capacity on the individual and school level needs to be developed in order to turn rhetoric into reality. Though there is a wealth of information on parent involvement programs and parent training programs from community based organizations, there is a scarcity of information regarding district initiated activities. This has profound implications for districts and schools across the country operating in the context of NCLB. Information and examples of best practices at the district and school levels need to be continually circulated. In this way, parent involvement will move from being merely a policy on paper to a policy in practice.

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