Using a Community-Based Participatory Research Model to Encourage Parental Involvement in Their Children's Schools

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Parental engagement with their children's education has been shown to have positive effects for children's academic outcomes; thus, learning ways to increase parental engagement can be beneficial for students. Because of the importance of understanding schools in the context of the community and the essential role that community can play in supporting schools, community-based participatory research (CBPR) may be a particularly effective approach to data collection because it engages community partners as well as parents and school personnel, and it gains information that leads to meaningful interventions. This study explored the use of CBPR within an economically and ethnically diverse school community with the intent of developing strategies to foster increased parental participation in their children's education. Social workers and social work students facilitated focus groups with parents and community stakeholders to explore ways to increase parental engagement in their children's school and to identify barriers to engagement. The article identifies next steps based on the recommendations of participants and describes the outcomes of preliminary implementation of these steps.

KEY WORDS: *community-based participatory research; diversity and equity; parental engagement; public schools; relationship and community*

The institution of the school is one of the most important and influential in a child's development. Family and community fill out the context of a child's life. When these three systems work collaboratively, outcomes are more positive for all and include enhanced achievement for children and youths, increased social and political capital for parents, and greater capacity for school and community partners to work together (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The importance of parent involvement has been well established (Blair, 2014; Jeynes, 2007; LaRocque, 2013; Toso & Grinder, 2016), but as schools are becoming increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, traditional models of parental involvement may not be as effective or relevant. In addition, some parents may feel alienated from schools for a variety of reasons. Many parents, particularly those of color, may find it difficult to engage with schools but still remain deeply invested in their children's learning (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). There may be additional barriers to traditional models of engaging parents. School social workers may be uniquely suited to address issues around family engagement and to develop and support models to strengthen collaboration among school, families, and community.

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE SCHOOLS

The benefits of parental engagement in their children's education are wide reaching and include the domains of academics, behavior within and outside of school, and attitudes that affect educational and noneducational outcomes. From an ecosystems perspective, children grow and develop within systems—the most important being family, school, community, and society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). When there are multiple points of contact among systems, it provides a rich web of support for the developing child (Garbarino & Ganzel, 2000). If the child is the only point of contact between systems, such as family and school, that child is at greater risk than if there are multiple points of contact. Parental engagement in the school setting provides additional connections among family and school systems, leading to a richer context for development. Direct and indirect academic benefits to parental

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engagement include improved academic outcomes and educational attainment (Blair, 2014; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003, 2007), better school attendance, stronger parent–teacher relationships, and improved teacher morale and school climate (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018).

Nonacademic benefits that are related to both school and home include positive attitudes toward school and improved behavior and mental health of children as well as increased parental confidence and satisfaction (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). Hampden-Thompson and Galindo (2017) suggested that parental satisfaction with the school is positively correlated with children's behavior and academic performance but depends on both parental involvement and the degree to which school personnel encourage and welcome participation. Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that parental engagement had an effect on behaviors of children and youths at home and at school, such as lower rates of substance abuse and teenage pregnancy, stronger social skills, and more effective adaptation to the school environment (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Parental engagement, suggested Domina (2005), benefits children and families in three significant ways: first, by socializing children to the importance of school. Students see their parents engaged and are more likely to engage and to value education themselves. Second, parents who are engaged at school form relationships with teachers and other parents, giving them greater capacity to monitor their children. Third, parents who are engaged in school have increased access to "insider information" in the sense that they communicate with teachers and other school personnel and thus hear about any concerns sooner so they can address those concerns sooner (Domina). Based on mothers' completion of the Behavior Problem Index (Zill, 1991), which measures such behaviors as cheating, lying, argumentativeness, bullying, disobedience at home and school, and difficulty getting along with other children, Domina found that children whose parents were engaged in school through monitoring homework completion, helping with homework at home, and volunteering in the classroom were assessed as having fewer of these behavior problems.

Parental engagement with their children's education also promotes positive health behaviors, resulting in decreased risk for unhealthy eating practices, school disengagement, suicide attempts or thoughts, and emotional distress (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). In addition to benefits of family engagement, collaboration with community partners can enhance positive outcomes. "When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 7).

ROLE OF CULTURE IN PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Although schools have demonstrated increased efforts in encouraging parental involvement, participation in schools may be more difficult for families who feel excluded or dismissed because of race, ethnicity, immigration status, or socioeconomic status (Toso & Grinder, 2016). In a study of middle-school parents, Hill, Witherspoon, and Bartz (2018) found that parents value education and want their children to be successful in school. Latinx families described the sacrifices they have made for their children to have the opportunity to attend school in the United States. They reported wanting their children to learn as much as they could, to take advantage of all their opportunities, and to aspire to work in a profession and not just a job (Hill et al., 2018). This valuing of education and making sacrifices for the next generation is true of many immigrant populations. Similarly, African American parents demonstrated concern for and a focus on keeping their children on the right track with the fear that any mistake or failure would jeopardize their future, thus reflecting an awareness of structural racism and inequality and the daunting task of overcoming barriers to success for students of color (Hill et al., 2018).

WHAT DOES INVOLVEMENT LOOK LIKE?

Broad definitions of involvement include ways that parents assist and interact with their children and ways that schools encourage the children's success (Blair, 2014). Parents may have a different understanding of involvement based on their own story, cultural background, and socioeconomic status. Because school demographics and families have changed, to reflect this diversity, an understanding of parent involvement must expand beyond the traditional attendance at Parent–Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and volunteering at school.

Blair (2014) found cultural differences in definitions of "involvement," noting that more collective cultures may engage with their children differently. In some cultures, direct communication with teachers may be seen as disrespectful, and parents may view parental presence in the classroom as a burden for teachers (LaRocque, 2013).

Goodall and Montgomery (2014) recommended moving from a focus on the school and the unidirectional sharing of information to a mutual exchange of information between parents and school. For example, back-to-school nights, although helpful, generally represent communication *from* the school *to* parents; parent–teacher conferences can represent more of a dialogue. The authors further suggested that parents engage directly with their students' learning rather than with the schools, which can be most beneficial for the student "so that work with parents can move from school directed (which is useful) to fully engaged (far more useful to students)" (p. 407). Moreover, encouraging a focus on their students can help those parents who had negative experiences in their own schooling or achievement to feel more engaged and even more confident.

Blair (2014) found that assisting with homework, attending school events together, and volunteering at school represented actively involved parents who are highly invested in their children's success. When exploring parental involvement, though, Hill et al. (2018) noted that both parents and youths talked about the importance of creating a routine and structure at home. These activities were not identified by teachers as a form of parental involvement, pointing to the need to broaden the understanding of what engagement may look like. Hornby and Blackwell (2018) asserted that when school staff considers a broader understanding of parental involvement, they may be better equipped to engage parents, including through uses of technology.

BARRIERS TO INVOLVEMENT

Even with a broader understanding of engagement, there can be many barriers to involvement. In one study (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018), school staff identified barriers to parental involvement, categorized as (a) parental factors that included their own negative experiences in school and current life issues, (b) societal factors, and (c) practical factors. LaRocque (2013) found challenges to family involvement also being related to constraints facing teachers, because teachers may feel like it is additional work to include parents. Other barriers may be related to specific family challenges, including parents' work schedules or personal issues, whereas others may be "related to language, cultural, and socioeconomic dissonance between families and schools" (LaRocque, 2013, p. 112), increasing the potential for miscommunication and misunderstandings. Parents may not know how to navigate the school system, and school personnel may inaccurately assume that all parents are familiar with school processes (LaRocque, 2013).

Implicit bias within the schools as well as more blatant forms of discrimination can present barriers to family engagement. Hill et al. (2018) found that Latino and African American "parents and youth are well aware of the differential treatment. They are aware of this, while they were equally likely as Euro-Americans to endorse the school" (p. 23). Chang et al. (2013) posited that contextual challenges of immigrants (for example, language barriers, discrimination, fewer economic opportunities, fear) may lead them to prioritize meeting family needs over civic participation. Language challenges can further lead to a lack of hope and lowered expectations, which also can affect participation (Chang et al., 2013). Ishimaru et al. (2016) noted that parents and families from nondominant communities may feel devalued, excluded, or unwelcome. Thus, lower rates of parental participation among marginalized populations may not be surprising.

Essentially, though, education is a relational venture and thus is central to understanding family–school partnerships (Hill et al., 2018). One of the many activities of school social workers is to make connections among community, schools, and families (National Association of Social Workers, 2012), knowing that parental engagement is critical to children's success and that most parents want to be involved and supportive but do not always know how or may not feel comfortable in the school setting. The unique skill set of school social workers allows them to address barriers to involvement and build connections across systems.

In the present study, following the procedures of community-based participatory research (CBPR), a university–school district team worked in full partnership to identify a research question and develop

strategies to collect and interpret data. Essentially CBPR involves the community as equal partners through each step of the research process (see Allen-Meares, Hudgins, Engberg, & Lessnau, 2005; Branom, 2012; Hacker, 2013, for more complete descriptions of CBPR). District administrative staff identified an interest in learning the most effective ways of increasing parental engagement in their children's education, beginning with an elementary school. Essentially, the research question they posed was, "What are the things that we, as school district staff, can do to increase parental/family engagement in their children's education?" District staff further suggested focus groups as a way of reaching and ensuring meaningful participation by the largest number of parents, and they formulated questions for those focus groups.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

School Information

The elementary school selected by the school district had an enrollment of 404 students (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction [OSPI], n.d.; see the 2019–2020 data). Of those students, 54.2 percent were female; 60.9 percent, Latino; 14.9 percent, White; 11.1 percent, multiracial; 5.4 percent, Black; 4 percent, Asian; 3.5 percent, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; and 0.2 percent, American Indian and Alaska Native. English language learners made up 37 percent of the school population, and 88 percent of the students were designated as low income, thus qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch (OSPI, n.d.). In addition, the school began a dual language program in 2017, beginning with kindergarten, and has added a grade each year; in the program, students receive instruction in all subjects in both English and Spanish.

Community Information

The school principal and counselor noted that parents and families as well as residents of the immediate and neighboring communities may not have a clear sense of the community surrounding the school. The school is located in an unincorporated area adjoining a larger urban area, and the school may be the unifying tie within the community. Table 1 provides more of the community context by using the county in which the school district is located for comparison. As the table shows, children in the school district were facing challenges, including income and housing stability. At this particular elementary school, approximately 90 percent of the children came from renter households. The district's annual turnover rate was about 35 percent, but this school's rate might be slightly higher (P. Elery, principal of Harvard Elementary School, Tacoma, Washington, personal communication, January 24, 2019).

Although some may see deficits, this school and community presented a number of resources. The dual language program is an asset because, in addition to language learning benefits, it ensures communication in Spanish and English, that children hear Spanish spoken in classrooms and hallways, and that someone is always present in the building who is fluent in Spanish. Across the street from the school are a church, a food bank, and an assisted-living facility. Staff from each of those organizations meet monthly with the school principal and counselor to coordinate activities. For several years, the church has provided a community dinner every month during the school year to serve school families and offer opportunities for socializing and recreation. Church members prepare and serve food donated by the food bank, and kitchen staff at the assisted-living facility prepare dessert. In addition, the school counselor has a care team of students who make birthday and other greeting cards for residents of the assisted-living facility. Those residents, in turn, sew small comfort pouches that the counselor distributes to students as needed. The food bank also operates a clothing bank that families at the school use, and the clothing bank attempts to procure specific items, such as shoes or coats.

Hacker et al. (2012) recommended having a broad definition of community to include stakeholders, target population, community liaisons. In this study, the nearby church, food bank, senior housing, and monthly community partner meetings provided a window into some of the community's resources. Clearly, this school has a broad base of community support fostered by the efforts of school staff and community partners.

METHOD

Development of Research Tools and Strategies

In keeping with a CBPR approach, initial meetings with school district staff (including the public information officer and family engagement coordinator [FEC], who is a bilingual–bicultural social

Table 1: Comparison of Housing and Poverty Status in the Study's School District and the County

Housing and Poverty Status	County %	School District %
Poverty rate: Percentage under age 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018b)	14.5	20.1
Percentage living in households receiving SNAP, SSI, or other public assistance (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018a)	24.5	32.9
Percentage living in owner-occupied housing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018c)	61.7	55.2
Percentage living in renter-occupied housing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018c)	38.3	44.8

Notes: SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [U.S. Department of Agriculture's (n.d.)]; SSI = Supplemental Security Income program (https://www.ssa.gov/ssi/).

worker) identified general focus group questions to gain information about parental involvement and communication from the school district. Partnerships were created with staff, parent leaders, and other community stakeholders. Through conversations with these partners, the focus group guide was refined and revised multiple times to include questions about the community as well as the effectiveness of the school and district's current communication strategies (see Appendix A for the final focus group questions).

The district/university team attended community/school dinners to gain a better sense of the community, to be more visible, and to develop trust. Parent leaders recommended using PTA family night, community/school dinners, and a letter to all parents from the principal to recruit participants. They noted the communication challenges in a school that is split fairly evenly between two primary languages. The original recruiting script and letter were modified to reflect the recommendations of this group of parents as well as district partners, and verbal and written communications were in English and Spanish. Facing challenges in recruiting research participants that were representative of the diverse school community, we, through partner input, adapted our initial research plan to make focus groups more accessible and convenient for participants by holding them as a part of regularly scheduled school and community events.

Data Collection

Data collection tools and strategies included focus groups, interviews, and participant observation and involved university faculty, students, school district staff, and parents. Focus groups were facilitated separately in English and Spanish. Facilitators included two social workers, one from the district and one from the university, and three social work students, one of whom was a district intern. At least two members of the research team were present in each focus group: one who was the primary facilitator and one who was a secondary facilitator and notetaker. Focus groups were audiotaped.

We conducted 10 focus groups in total with 49 participants representing 46 families. Of those families, 26 were Spanish speaking, 19 were English speaking, and one was Cambodian (Khmer speaking). The school population consisted of 228 families, so the convenience sample represented approximately 20 percent of these families. Participants in focus groups were 67.4 percent female and 32.6 percent male. They identified race or ethnicity as Latinx, 50 percent; African American, 17.4 percent; White, 21.7 percent; multiracial, 6.6 percent; and Asian American, 4.3 percent.

Data Analysis

Three researchers independently reviewed focus group notes and transcripts to look for themes. Each researcher listed parent responses under the broader areas around the four focus group questions: (1) general ideas about parental engagement, (2) positive feedback (what's working), (3) barriers to involvement, and (4) suggestions for improvement. Each then grouped responses according to subthemes. We compared findings and refined themes. We again independently read and coded transcripts and notes after identifying the themes. All findings were discussed among the entire research team, which also included the district FEC.

FINDINGS

Broadly, parent participants were enthusiastic about desiring to share their perspectives and build a stronger school community. The importance of commu-

nication, relationships, and community were recurring themes across all groups.

VIEWS OF PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

All parent participants expressed valuing parent involvement, in general, and valuing it for themselves, personally. Most parents stressed the importance of communication between parents and teachers as well as the need to work together and create positive relationships. In addition to the benefits of this collaboration to supporting children's learning, parents identified this collaboration as a means for teaching values and for "being on the same page" as well as holding children accountable.

Every focus group identified volunteering in the classroom as one example of involvement, something they valued and wished to engage in even if they did not do so currently. Parents noted that they felt welcomed by some teachers but not others. One English-speaking father stated, "I personally would like to have more time in the classroom." The second most frequently noted way of engaging with their children's education was helping at home with homework, although many parents indicated that they did not always know the best ways to help or did not always understand their children's homework. Also identified was volunteering at school events, and some expressed disappointment that there were not many opportunities to help or that they were not aware of how to volunteer at events or did not feel encouraged to do so. Parents consistently noted the important role they play. One of the Spanish-speaking parents stated that it is the "parents' responsibility to teach youth how to achieve their goals." Another, in the same focus group said, "Much of the education happens in the home."

With regard to the community itself, parents commented on the lack of children playing outside after school, suggesting that doing so was unsafe for children because of the large, busy roads and community crime. They also noted a lack of places to play, identifying the absence of a community center. Some thought that parents' work schedules prevented children from playing outside. Parents often defined the "community" as the church because of the monthly dinners, but noted that, outside of those events, there was not much of a sense of community. Participants also stated that they would like to see more events like the dinners but commented on the lack of teachers in attendance. Spanish-speaking parents, in particular, expressed a desire for more opportunities to be able to connect with others. Relationships with school staff and other parents were important to them.

STRENGTHS: WHAT'S WORKING

Participants expressed strong positive feelings toward the school principal and counselor as well as most of the teachers, citing communication from the school as a strength. Some noted specific types of communication from teachers, including daily reports and e-mails. They valued what they saw as a small school community in which people knew each other and in which staff and teachers knew their children. One parent in a Spanish-speaking group noted, "The teachers and principal seem to know the students well." Many parents identified the value of the monthly community dinners; specifically, they appreciated all opportunities to meet and talk with other parents. A few parents noted that some school staff were aware of the additional challenges faced by Spanish-speaking students, viewing this as a positive first step. Another parent said, "It's a great school, and I love how inclusive the school is."

BARRIERS

Focus group data revealed several challenges to parental involvement, the greatest being language. A Spanish-speaking parent said, "We want to be involved but feel we can't based on the language barrier." Participants identified a lack of Spanish-speaking office staff and opportunities for Spanish speakers to participate in school events, such as PTA meetings. Time and work obligations were also identified as barriers to involvement, including families with two working parents or parents working irregular hours as well as having multiple children engaged in a variety of activities. In addition, the lack of warmth and welcoming from the office staff was identified as a barrier to involvement, specifically in the Spanish-speaking focus groups. This identified challenge reinforces the finding that the language barrier between staff and families hinders relationships. In one particular focus group, Spanish-speaking parents remarked that the language barrier makes it difficult for their children to feel included and supported, even though they make up the majority of the school's population. A lack of encouragement to become involved in the classroom was identified by participants as a

barrier to involvement. One father stated, "I'm going to be honest: I don't feel like there was a lot of encouragement to participate."

Parents identified a number of communication challenges beyond language differences. Several commented on fliers not getting home, voice mails coming too late, and notices of events being sent home without adequate time for parents to plan. In addition, although there is an online platform for communicating with parents, several parents expressed dissatisfaction with it. Communication may be more difficult for those families who may not have access to a cell phone, e-mail, Internet, and the like. Several parents expressed dissatisfaction with PTA events, noting that they could be "chaotic" or that the meeting time was inconvenient.

Parents as well as school and community partners identified additional barriers to parental involvement, including background checks for volunteers, discomfort in school settings, families feeling stretched across many obligations, transportation, and child care. Extending to the geographic community, school partners identified community-level barriers, including lack of (a) identification with the community, (b) services in the immediate geographic community, (c) collaboration with other community institutions, and (d) opportunities for children to see adults in the community as role models in a variety of settings. Community partners also noted challenges in encouraging Latinx parental participation given the political climate at the time of the study as well as in attempting to connect the institution of the school with a population in which relationships and trust take precedence and in which there may be a well-founded mistrust of institutions. Parents stressed the importance of bidirectional communication and trust; they also suggested changes in communication strategies, but also identified strengths of staff and existing community–school activities.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Perhaps most helpful in terms of guiding future directions are the specific recommendations and suggestions parents made. Very broadly, parents wanted increased and more frequent communication from school staff as well as more opportunities for ways to both get involved at school and, especially, to meet other parents. A few parents commented on the need for clearer channels of communication with the office staff; some stated that it is difficult to get through by phone. Several parents from both English- and Spanish-speaking focus groups noted the need for someone in the office who speaks Spanish as well as for office staff to be more welcoming.

Parents also seemed to value opportunities for creating informal connections for both parents and children. They mentioned summer activities and even suggested a book or reading group that could help both parents and children with language acquisition and reading skills. Some parents suggested creating an online tutorial for new parents (with kindergarteners as well as others enrolling for the first time). They also wanted greater explanation of homework in both English and Spanish, with instructions for parents accompanying homework. Parents noted that schoolwide communications came home in Spanish and English but that classroom-specific communications sometimes were only in English. One parent suggested building community by having a thematic focus on communications to tie in community resources and class activities.

Following the series of focus groups, we again met with available parents at a community dinner. As part of the CBPR process, we shared the findings with them and received their input as to the accuracy as well as the interpretation of the findings. They confirmed the findings as well as clarified and reaffirmed that parents want to be involved and want opportunities to meet with other parents. We then discussed next steps.

MOVING FORWARD

We encouraged parents to assume leadership in moving forward, noting the importance of including community voices in planning next steps (Ishimaru et al., 2016). We then shared findings with school staff, district administrators, and community partners. The district implemented some changes at the school, including hiring a bilingual staff member to work half-time at this school and to be available in the office. In addition, the telephone system was changed so that callers could select Spanish as an option. Consistent with CBPR is the commitment to giving the findings back to the community and supporting the community in making decisions and taking action based on the results by using the findings for social change (Minkler, 2004). This was our intent.

Because parents were most interested in increasing their opportunities for community with other parents, we started there. They were interested in having a social event first, followed by information meetings for parents on such topics as bullying, school safety, and parenting. We met with parents for planning sessions, but they did the planning. They coordinated a social gathering, publicized it, and had upward of 80 people in attendance, including children, older siblings, parents, and grandparents. We supported parents in creating a structure and implementing interventions, placing us in the dual role of researchers and change agents (Cole et al., 2013). The FEC has maintained regular contact, primarily through texting, with these parent leaders to support them in their efforts at creating community among school families, even as the COVID-19 pandemic limited options for in-person meetings. The bilingual administrative assistant still works at the school part-time and directly connects with families regarding attendance as well as helps them connect with information technology resources and complete online enrollments, which is now entirely online. The FEC and other district staff have continued to work through communication barriers presented by this online transition, and the FEC will likely be forming a group of families to explore how to improve the communication systems.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There were some limitations to this research. Even though we collaborated well with school district personnel and other community partners, it was challenging to recruit adequate numbers of parent participants. As noted, all parents were invited to participate, but those parents who did participate may have been those who were already more likely to be engaged. Although CBPR aims to reduce power imbalances in the research process, this power differential is difficult to eliminate completely. There will always be one group or individual who makes decisions about the process without the community's full consent. This can be seen in the formulation of the research question as well as the set of focus group questions in Appendix A, because it was not families in the community who formulated these questions but school district personnel and the research team. It may be ideal to eliminate this power differential, but that is not easily done in practice.

We observed that Latinx parents, in particular, seemed to welcome the opportunity to share their ideas with someone who spoke and understood Spanish as well as to have the chance to communicate with other parents. They tended to discuss for a longer period and likely would have continued if the facilitator had not brought the focus group sessions to a close. It may be that these parents do not have as many opportunities to share with other Spanish-speaking parents and school staff as they would like, so this is an area that can be further addressed. Toso and Grinder (2016) noted that providing training and offering leadership roles can be a strategy to engage parents who traditionally feel excluded and can also enhance parent–teacher relationships and provide teachers insight into parent knowledge and strengths. Those parents who stepped up to facilitate the next steps certainly have demonstrated leadership and organizational potential that may not have been otherwise used in the school setting. It may be beneficial to include parents in the school–community partner monthly meetings, too.

This school has a high population of immigrant, nondominant culture, low-income families. School personnel noted that individuals are required to undergo a state patrol background check to be cleared to volunteer in the schools. Even though this documentation is internal to the school, parents may not understand or trust this process, particularly if they are undocumented or come from mixed-status families, a concern that is heightened in an era of anti-immigrant sentiments expressed by some elected officials at the federal level. This is an issue that might be more challenging to address, and it is important to broaden the understanding of what parental involvement can look like and to provide ways to communicate this to parents as well as teachers. Communication must be bidirectional.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

For school social workers, this study demonstrates how they can facilitate discussion and action to better serve their students and families, while they also work to dismantle inequitable power structures that are inherent in their position as school staff. This research model is a positive step toward, affirming the role of parents and families as experts on their children and their education and toward, affording them the power to make decisions that are in their best interest.

School social workers can serve as liaisons among families, schools, and community partners by developing and sustaining trusting relationships among stakeholders. They also can provide education to staff and schools about strengths-based practices to better support families, building on their unique experiences. School social workers can create opportunities for learning between school staff and families in regard to equity and culturally responsive services and collaboration. School social workers can empower families to advocate for the needs of their children by creating clear pathways of communication between school leadership and families. School social workers can facilitate family- and community-led events that help promote parent participation and student engagement by building family-led events into regular school events.

It is important to continue to ask parents what they want and need—and to check back to see if changes are making a difference. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) recommended revisiting these questions frequently, because new cohorts of parents and students have different needs. Henderson and Mapp (2002) noted that schools that are successful in engaging diverse groups of families emphasize trust and collaboration among teachers, families, and community; they recognize family needs and cultural and class differences; and they assume a philosophical stance in which responsibility and power are shared. In schools with significant turnover each year, such as the school in this study, it is especially important to revisit these questions and to encourage involvement by all families.

Moving forward, it is important to continue to ask parents what they want and need from schools in support of their children. It is essential that school personnel recognize the strengths parents bring and allow them the opportunity to demonstrate these strengths in ways that are culturally relevant. The school social worker can facilitate this process. CS

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APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS (AND FOLLOW-UPS, AS NEEDED)

How important do you think it is for parents to be involved in their children's education?

- What benefits are there for children?
- What benefits are there for parents?
- What benefits are there for the school community?

When you think about parental involvement in their children's education, what comes to mind?

- What are the different ways parents can support their children in school?
- What ways have school personnel (teachers, principal, counselor, social worker, paraeducators, office staff, others) encouraged your participation/involvement?

What barriers do you think there are to parent participation in this school community?

- Have you ever felt reluctant to participate in school events?
- If yes, what keeps you from becoming more involved?
- Have events/activities been at convenient times?
- How well do you think the school communicates with parents?

What could your school do to more fully involve parents?

- In what ways have you seen school personnel reach out to families?
- What ideas do you have for involving more families or involving them more actively?

Some people have spoken about the lack of community identity in the school vicinity. In other words, there doesn't seem to be a clear sense of what makes up the neighborhood/community.

- How do you define this community (for example, geographic area? Demographics? Other?)?
- Would you like to see a stronger feeling of community?
- If yes, how do you think this could be achieved?

Are there any final comments you have or any ideas that you would like to see emphasized?