

VUE

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ANNENBERG INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL REFORM • *Voices in Urban Education*

Bringing Transformative Family Engagement to Scale: Implementation Lessons from Federal i3 Grants

Ensuring That Family Engagement Initiatives Are Successful, Sustainable, and Scalable

Joanna D. Geller

Fostering Family Engagement through Shared Leadership in the District, Schools, and Community

*Patricia Martinez and
Joshua Wizer-Vecchi*

Making Space for Collaboration and Leadership: The Role of Program Staff in Successful Family Engagement Initiatives

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Strengthening Relationships with Families in the School Community: Do School Leaders Make a Difference?

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Liderazgo Familiar Intergeneracional: Intergenerational Family Leadership as a New Paradigm of Family Engagement

*Aurelio M. Montemayor and
Nancy Chavkin*

Strategies for Scaling Up: Promoting Parent Involvement through Family-School-Community Partnerships

*Momoko Hayakawa and
Arthur Reynolds*

"Buy-In" vs. "Allowed In": Lessons Learned in Family Engagement Program Recruitment and Retention

*Susan Smetzer-Anderson and
Jackie Roessler*



ABOUT THE FEDERAL INVESTING
IN INNOVATION (I3) PROGRAM

This issue of VUE grew out of AISR's role as a program evaluator for an i3 grant in Central Falls, Rhode Island. Since 2010, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) has been funding i3 grants to local educational agencies and their nonprofit partners, defining innovation as, "A process, product, strategy, or practice that improves (or is expected to improve) significantly upon the outcomes reached with status quo options and that can ultimately reach widespread effective usage." Several of these grants have identified family engagement as their absolute priority or include a substantial family engagement component. They are diverse in terms of geographic location and scope, program type, and intended outcomes. Some of the grantees are developing new innovations, and others are scaling up already proven practices. These highly competitive grants have focused on developing and validating innovative programs and practices to strengthen opportunities for marginalized families to be engaged in their children's education.

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VUE

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Ensuring That Family Engagement Initiatives Are Successful, Sustainable, and Scalable

JOANNA D. GELLER

Lessons learned from implementing i3 family engagement initiatives reveal the critical elements of successful, sustainable, and scalable family engagement programs.

In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education launched the highly competitive Investing in Innovation (i3) initiative.¹ Since its launch, the i3 program has invested \$1.3 billion in 157 projects (Klein & Sparks 2016). School districts and nonprofit partners nationwide have competed for coveted funds to *develop* a new program, *validate* an existing program with some evidence of success, or *scale up* a program backed by ample evidence.

When “parent and family engagement” became an absolute priority for the i3 competition in 2012, family engagement proponents rejoiced. School systems tend to view family engagement as peripheral, rather than integral, to instruction and curriculum. But, finally, here was an opportunity to demonstrate the impact of meaningful family engagement! I could not wait to take on this charge in my role as project lead for the external evaluation of an i3 grant in Central Falls, Rhode Island, to be conducted by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

Very quickly, however, it became clear to the community of family engagement grantees that i3 was not going to be the panacea for the field’s struggles to prove itself worthy. I had the honor of meeting i3 family engagement grantees throughout the country at annual convenings, where we lamented together how the short duration of implementation time (typically two to three years) and emphasis on evaluating student outcomes was a mismatch with the slow, patient, and intensely relational work of family engagement. As Soo Hong (2011) writes, family engagement is not a program, but rather a “process that seeks to change the institution one relationship at a time” (p. 50).

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¹ For more on the i3 program, see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/index.html?exp=0>.

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In the United States, more than 80 percent of public school teachers and principals are White, while half of public school students are of color (Goldring, Gray & Bitterman 2013; U.S. Department of Education 2013). Even when educators and families share the same racial background, differences in culture, class, and immigration history often exacerbate tensions and misunderstandings. In this context, family engagement is about so much more than parent-teacher conferences and homework support. Family engagement is about eroding racism, classism, sexism, and xenophobia and tinkering toward relationships that are rooted in trust and respect for human dignity.

Building such relationships across race, class, language, and culture is one of the hardest challenges for humankind. And changing relationships is a daunting enough challenge when the goal is to change the culture of a single school, but 13 grantees were tasked with changing whole districts, or in some cases, multiple districts across multiple states!

This issue of *VUE* provides an opportunity for 13 grantees to share the real story of what it takes to successfully implement and scale up a family engagement initiative across schools, districts, and states. We gave the authors a fairly general prompt: “What lessons can we learn from 13 grants about how to build the right conditions for family engagement initiatives to flourish?” Interestingly, each author or pair of authors focused on the people – and the relationships among those *people* – that made their work possible.

This outcome supports the widely used Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Mapp & Kuttner 2013), and it also challenges the field to recognize that family engagement requires building the capacities of *all* members of schools and communities – superintendents, principals, teachers, school staff, family engagement liaisons, families, students, and community partner staff – to collaborate across lines of difference.

Together, the articles in this issue have important implications for family engagement practitioners, funders, and policy-makers. Among many other critical lessons, they imply that successful, sustainable, and scalable family engagement initiatives require:

- *Sufficient time and human and financial resources for:*
 - *planning*, including developing trust and a shared definition and vision for family engagement. Technical assistance providers should frontload support during the planning phase.
 - *flexible implementation*, including the freedom to reflect and change course in response to evolving needs and priorities of families, communities, and schools. Changing course does not indicate dysfunction, but rather a tone of reflection and responsiveness.
 - *capacity building* of all stakeholders – families, young people, teachers, program staff, principals, superintendents – to build relationships rooted in trust and respect.
- *Cultural brokers* – the individuals who build bridges between families and educators on a daily basis – who have access to professional development, supportive supervision, and a professional learning community.
- *Physical spaces* for families to call their own, within or outside of schools.

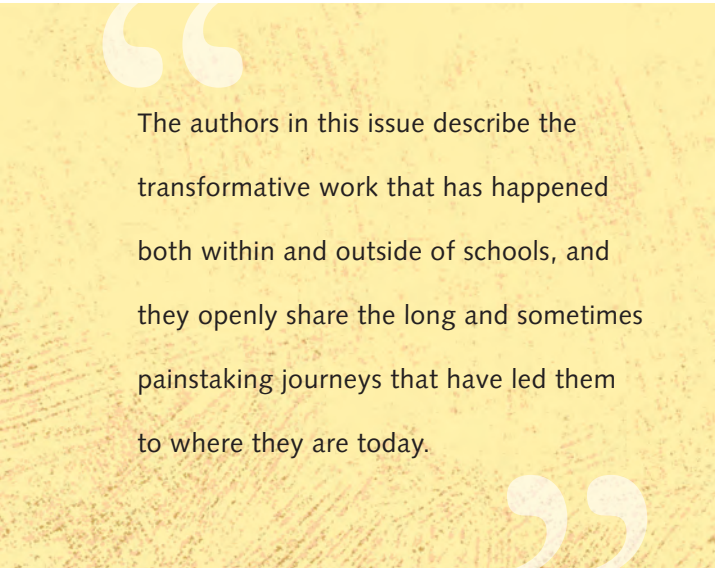
- *Multi-layered evaluations* that examine the degree to which initiatives have strengthened individuals, communities, and institutions, not just student outcomes.

The authors in this issue – program directors and coordinators, district administrators, evaluators, and youth leaders – represent a diverse array of experiences. They offer examples of implementing a family engagement initiative in both urban and rural areas from coast to coast and in between. They highlight the experiences of both immigrants and long-time neighborhood residents. They describe the transformative work that has happened both within and outside of schools, and they openly share the long and sometimes painstaking journeys that have led them to where they are today.

Patricia Martinez of the Central Falls School District and Joshua Wizer-Vecchi of Children’s Friend describe how the former and current superintendent of Central Falls set the tone for family engagement to flourish in the *We Are A Village* grant through their open door policies and visibility in the community. This tone created the conditions that allowed parent rooms, coffee hours, and parent leadership to flourish in Head Start centers and elementary schools.

Monique Fletcher, i3 project director of the Parents as Educators grant at the Children’s Aid Society in New York City, describes how deliberate team building and capacity building with her staff of school-based parent engagement coordinators had a powerful trickle-down effect on families and educators. She demonstrates how these staff have built trust, which she sees as the foundation for successful implementation.

Maria Quezada, i3 project director of the Project 2Inspire grant awarded to the California Association for Bilingual Education, discusses her multi-decade journey of refining a parent leadership program and the challenges of generating institutional support for parent leadership within schools. She writes about how the i3 grant has supported principal capacity building for family engagement in their work in Southern California schools.



The authors in this issue describe the transformative work that has happened both within and outside of schools, and they openly share the long and sometimes painstaking journeys that have led them to where they are today.

Aurelio Montemayor of the Intercultural Development Research Association and Nancy Chavkin, the i3 grant’s external evaluator, demonstrate how the sustainability of the *PTA Comunitario* initiative in rural communities of the Rio Grande Valley in Texas has depended on *liderazgo familiar intergeneracional* – intergenerational family leadership. They illustrate the powerful impact of youth involvement, critical dialogue, and collective action. Lupita Perez contributes a Perspective describing her experience as a youth leader and current staff member of ARISE, a partner organization supporting the PTA comunitario.

Momo Hayakawa and Arthur Reynolds of the University of Minnesota describe the Midwest expansion of the Child-Parent Center Pre-K to Third Grade program, a whole-school reform effort that provides comprehensive educational and family-support services to low-income families from preschool to third grade. The authors attribute their successes in scaling up their model to a flexible, menu-based system of supports and a dedicated collaborative leadership team.

Susan Smetzer-Anderson and Jackie Roessler of the University of Wisconsin openly share the challenges of implementing the internationally known and respected Families and Schools Together (FAST) program in the distressed Philadelphia school district. The authors share the critical importance – from the perspective of community outsiders – of hearing from parents and working with school staff to effectively implement the program. In a Q&A Perspective, Rob Lairmore, the lead FAST quality control manager at Turning Points for Children in Philadelphia, provides on-the-ground advice about what it takes to truly partner with schools and communities.

In contrast to the divisiveness that surrounds us, each of the articles in this issue illustrates how family engagement initiatives in poor communities of color are slowly shaping microcosms of what democracy should look like everywhere. These “micro-democracies” are evident when a White superintendent in Central Falls, Rhode Island, walks up to the door of an immigrant family from Colombia to welcome the family to the school district; when parents and young people gather together in a *comunitario* in South Texas to create a more equitable future for young people; when 150 families celebrate African culture at a public school event planned by African immigrant families in their new South Bronx community.

This work gives me hope for a world where people care about one another, understand the interconnectedness of their fate, and unite for a more just future. What could be a more important feat for our public education system?

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Fostering Family Engagement through Shared Leadership in the District, Schools, and Community

PATRICIA MARTINEZ AND JOSHUA WIZER-VECCHI

Successful implementation of family engagement programs requires buy-in, leadership, and collaboration at all levels – from the superintendent to parents.

At the core of our work in Central Falls, Rhode Island, is a belief that children’s achievement is not determined by the actions of individual principals, teachers, or programs, but depends on the collaboration of many stakeholders – district, school, community, and family.

In implementing family leadership and engagement initiatives, we must ask: How do district leaders and community partners facilitate the connections between school and home that provide all parents with the opportunity to

learn, provide input, and see themselves as active participants and leaders in their child’s schools? Our success depends on buy-in, leadership, and a commitment to collaboration at all levels – from the superintendent and other district leaders, to school principals, to program staff, to teachers and school staff, to parents.

All of the links in this interconnected chain must work together in order for parent leadership, collaboration, and engagement to truly take hold.

Patricia Martinez is the executive director for family and student support at the Central Falls School District and project director for the We Are A Village i3 grant. Joshua Wizer-Vecchi is the i3 coordinator at the local service agency Children’s Friend in Providence, Rhode Island.

CENTRAL FALLS AND THE WE ARE A VILLAGE I3 INITIATIVE

Collaboration is tough even in ideal circumstances. How do you begin to effect change when nearly half of the families in a district speak a language other than English in the home, but traditional education models rarely emphasize the strengths of cultural or linguistic diversity? Or when nearly all students live in low-income families and face social and economic challenges beyond the classroom?

Central Falls is small – just over one square mile – and densely populated. The city has struggled as jobs and opportunities have disappeared, and it now exhibits characteristics of a community whose problems are traditionally seen as intractable: 39 percent of students’ families headed by females, 93 percent receiving free or reduced-price lunch, 74 percent racial and ethnic minorities, 78 percent Hispanic, and 43 percent English language learners or living in homes with home languages other than English (Rhode Island Kids Count 2016). However, the city’s small size – along with a young, energetic group of community leaders in city hall and the district – provide a unique opportunity to investigate how collaboration can effect change within a community.

The *We Are A Village* initiative began in 2013 as a collaboration – funded by a U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation (i3) grant¹ – between the Central Falls School District (CFSD), Children’s Friend (providing Head Start and preschool), Bradley Early Childhood Clinical Research Center, and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. The project focuses on improving school readiness and academic achievement in five schools that serve young children, from pre-school to third grade, using strategies recommended in the Head Start Family and Community Engagement frame-

work² and embedding the evidence-based Incredible Years (IY) Teacher Classroom Management and Parenting programs.³ Each of the schools established a parent hub staffed by a full-time bilingual parent collaborator. Program staff provide a variety of services including social services and referrals to community resources, IY parenting groups, “coffee hours” to meet with the principal and school staff, and support for parent-teacher groups, while also encouraging engagement in leadership and advocacy activities.

Village draws on the knowledge that collaborative relationships between families and schools, and between schools and community agencies, can greatly benefit children (Bryk et al. 2010; Administration for Children and Families 2011). We know that children do better when families are engaged in their children’s learning, support them at home, and are connected to their school (Henderson et al. 2007; Mapp & Kuttner 2013), and parent social capital and connections enhance family members’ abilities to provide those supports to their children (Webster-Stratton 1997). However, trust, opportunity, and knowledge are necessary for relationships and leadership to develop, and working from inside a district to create the opportunity to engage and draw on parent’s passion and skills requires flexible leadership from the superintendent on down to parents (Bryk et al. 2010).

DISTRICT LEADERSHIP SETS THE STAGE

More than nine years ago, when Frances Gallo first arrived as CFSD superintendent, she set the foundation for valuing family and community engagement,

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- 1 For more on the i3 program, see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/index.html?exp=0>.
- 2 See <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/sr/approach/pfcef>.
- 3 See <http://incredibleyears.com/programs/>.

which continues as a priority under the current superintendent, Victor Capellan (who served as the deputy superintendent for transformation under Gallo). For over ten years, these superintendents have led the community to understand their vision of collaboration and interconnectedness: when organizations, families, business leaders, schools, and others share a commitment to improving the educational achievement of its students, a powerful synergy is created that ensures that children are ready to learn. The status quo is altered and a sense of urgency becomes the norm.

A typical day for former superintendent Gallo began as early as 5:00 a.m. Regardless of whether it was rainy, snowing, hot, or humid, she walked the square mile of our city several times a day. In her travels, she would be seen talking to a child, a parent who stopped to ask her a question, or a staff person from a community agency who offered to give her a ride (which she always turned down). Sometimes, she would be joined on these walks through the city by other district administrators. Superintendent Gallo had a visible presence in the city and the schools. Every time she entered a building, children would come running to greet her. Today, this practice continues with Superintendent Capellan.

These district leaders have brought two important qualities – community building and emotional intelligence – to their approach to family engagement. As community builders, they have created a culture of collaboration, which has inspired other stakeholders to join them in their school reform efforts, leveraging historic partnerships with local charter schools and public universities, as well as the community partners in the Village 13 grant. These leaders prioritize empathy and taking time to listen

and understand people – particularly families. They have an open door policy, despite their busy schedules, understanding that working families might not have flexible schedules. It is not unusual to see a visitor, a family, a former student, or a faculty member come by their office without an appointment to talk about any issue.

This culture of collaboration sets the standard for the entire district, valuing the resources, energy, time, and expertise of school personnel, families, and the community. In the last decade, district leadership has sparked a sense of urgency for collaboration, coordination, and deep understanding that schools cannot do it alone; reaffirming that successful partnerships are built from a strength-based perspective and require reciprocal relationships. Families and students are given a voice and asked to take an active and meaningful role in key district and school decisions, such as being part of hiring committees or building a culture of collaboration as in the Village program. District and building administrators open their doors to partnerships with families and host monthly Principal Coffee Hours to mirror the district-level Superintendent’s Forum – a topic-driven time to report and converse with families about attendance, budget, discipline, assessments, and other issues facing schools and families. As a result of this collaborative culture, schools have now become community hubs, almost replacing Central Falls’ only community center, which closed when the city declared bankruptcy.

CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Studies indicate that the quality of supports a student receives both in

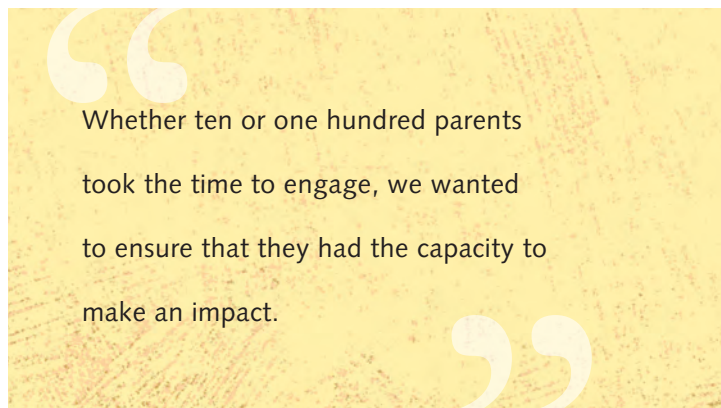
school and at home can determine their academic success (Henderson et al. 2007; Mapp & Kuttner 2013; Henderson & Mapp 2002). Unfortunately, in Central Falls and across the country there tends to be a lack of collaboration between parents and teachers. Teachers have not received formal training on how to engage families, while many families – particularly immigrants new to the U.S. – are unfamiliar with the American educational system’s expectation of parent engagement and do not feel comfortable approaching teachers or administrators.

Within the Village initiative, the lack of connections or clear understanding between two key stakeholders – teachers and parents – often got in the way of faculty buy-in. For many teachers, it was difficult to envision how parent leaders and volunteers were going to make a difference in the teaching and learning the teachers were responsible for, particularly when the parents had limited English skills. So we provided opportunities for conversations about the grant and family engagement in collaborative working groups that included classroom teachers, support staff, principals and other building leaders, district and program administrators, i3 staff, and consultants.

But deeper family-staff engagement was more difficult, largely because of scheduling issues. We very quickly realized that finding flexibility for faculty during the school day, when many parents could be available, was impossible. Teachers seemed to be available for meetings right after school, which was not realistic for many families; parents were able to come back later in the evening, which was, of course, unrealistic for teachers, most of whom live outside the city and have their own families.

We asked ourselves, “How do we get these two very important stakeholders

in the life of the child to value each other and recognize the benefits of having involved parents?” We wanted teachers to move from a focus on quantity (“How many parents will show up?”) to understanding the impact that even a handful of parents can have on the culture and climate of the school. Initially, Village placed a premium on building strength through small interactions. Whether ten or one hundred parents took the time to engage, we wanted to ensure that they



Whether ten or one hundred parents took the time to engage, we wanted to ensure that they had the capacity to make an impact.

had the capacity to make an impact.

The personal connections between parent volunteers who worked with school staff to support individual students or classroom activities acted as a starting point to build family-teacher coalitions that could support improved outcomes for children across the district. Through these initial connections, further activities were planned, like cultural nights, beautification projects, or a large literacy event, which could engage larger groups of families.

FAMILIES SHOW THEIR VALUE WHEN GIVEN THE CHANCE

Prior to the grant, there were numerous opportunities for families to engage with district leadership. A

districtwide Parent Governing Body and the Superintendent’s Forum established by former superintendent Gallo showed families that she cared deeply about families and their perspectives. To an outside observer, it was clear that there was a strong group of parents with a voice and skills to advocate effectively.

For example, in 2011 a group of parents concerned about the dress code brought the issue to the superintendent, who encouraged them to present a petition for school uniforms to the board of trustees. Parents were delighted to receive a mandate from the board to survey all families in the district and present their results. They met with state legislators to advocate for legislation regarding school uniforms and continued with an outreach campaign to increase community awareness of their uniform policy petition. Five years later, there is a districtwide, enforceable uniform policy, and families engaged at all levels to support those who might not be able to afford uniforms.

However, outside of the group of parents that had organized around the uniform policy, uncertainty persisted. Parents, particularly those with children in lower grades, were often unsure about how to engage meaningfully with the schools. Perhaps because these parents are typically younger and have less experience in the workings of the schools, they were also less comfortable with their role as advocates. We see two activities as integral to building leadership among families in Village schools: first, providing family members with space and opportunity to connect with and engage one another; and second, offering leadership and advocacy training and ongoing opportunities for family members to think through their goals and ideas as a group.

Providing Space and Facilitating Connection

Though it may seem simple, the first step to building parent engagement in the lower grades was giving parents a space to be comfortable in the schools. We designated “family hubs” in each school where parents could get coffee, use a computer, or meet with each other or school staff. This small step jumpstarted the parent engagement process by showing parents that the school cared enough about their presence to make dedicated space available to them to congregate, connect with each other to discover and discuss common concerns, and volunteer. Being located in the schools supported families’ abilities to develop ongoing relationships with staff and helped to maintain focus on education and supporting children.

Beyond those basic elements, however, different schools used these spaces in very different ways, illustrating the variety of opportunities for family engagement. At the pre-K, which was already a relatively warm and welcoming place for families, the hub saw wide use by parent volunteers and leaders, visitors, and teachers and staff as a space to meet with parents. Here, though classic parent leadership was slow to evolve – for example, a PTO wasn’t formed until midway through the second year of the grant – the constant presence of parents in the school played a supportive role by enhancing the inviting climate. We strongly believe that the environment and openness parents experience as they enter and interact with others sets a foundation for confident engagement as their children move through the schools.

At the elementary school, in contrast, the hub was used almost exclusively by parent volunteers. A small and close-knit group would work together on projects that supported the school; plan activities and upcoming meetings;

discuss concerns, interests, and desired outcomes for their families; and learn from each other or program staff. Because the parent collaborator also supported parents in identifying and pursuing their own goals, parents placed a premium on building their skills and abilities and expanding the existing work of the parent-teacher group as advocates for the school. The result is a highly engaged and powerful group of parent leaders who have grown more deeply connected to each other and the inner workings of the school.

These two examples show that parents can be engaged – and need to be engaged – in different ways depending on their strengths and interests, their children’s needs, and likely, many other factors. Simply setting up the family hubs was not a panacea that immediately increased parent engagement; it was important to build in flexibility to allow the hubs to be used in the ways that best served specific school communities.

Building Skills and Confidence of Parent Leaders

Living in a city like Central Falls can be isolating. Limited public transportation and high rates of mobility may compound individual barriers to getting out of the house, meeting others, or developing relationships – barriers such as high stress levels, health and mental health conditions, or working multiple jobs or unusual hours (Cutrona, Wallace & Wesner 2006). Limited social connections also cut families off from networks that might help them build connections to traditional institutions like schools (de Souza Briggs 1998).

We often hear from parents who had frequent negative school experiences and now have limited contact with staff except when something bad happens at school. Getting parents interested and comfortable enough to enter the family hubs and engage with

the schools took work from the Village staff and volunteer Parent Peer Navigators (PPNs) – parents who expressed interest in leadership and advocacy and committed time to volunteer.

The core of our support for PPNs is the Family Leadership Institute (FLI), a twelve-hour workshop that engages with parents as advocates and leaders in the schools and community. The program focuses on building parents’ connections with one another, teaching about the structure and process of interacting with the schools, training in advocacy and leadership in school and community, and building parent beliefs in their ability to change the schools. Participants are drawn from across the district and are supported to continue meeting after the FLI to work on goals outlined during the initial workshops.

When this process works effectively, we saw parents build strong networks of support and volunteers become advocates. Over the course of the FLI and subsequent meetings, relationships develop between families across the schools. Parents arrange to help each other with childcare or other duties so they can participate in meetings or workshops in the schools. Families also help one another to navigate social service resources and the school system, and they give each other advice on approaching faculty about issues affecting their children.

This year, families are advocating for improved communication with the city and increased family engagement opportunities across schools. They are in ongoing discussions with city officials on how to increase community awareness of events, concerns, and meetings. At the district level, they have taken steps to reestablish the cross-district parent leadership group and are working to build systems to engage families across all schools, instead of only their own children’s school.

Developing these ongoing groups after

the FLI ends has been a challenging process. Of the four trainings we held over the course of the grant, only two parent groups continued to meet regularly, and only the most recent have continued for more than a couple of months. The key to successful groups seems to depend on our ability to step back after providing the FLI training, giving parents the lead. We model creating agendas, identifying stakeholders, and creating to-do lists and next steps. As meetings continue and leaders emerge, we step into a “consultant” role. We provide support and feedback on group processes, or help to make connections when asked, but leave parent leaders to develop the content and action steps with little to no input from us. We try to step into the follow-up meetings with no agenda, open to supporting families to pursue whichever goals they choose, and in any way they need from us. This process can be challenging, since we have our own ideas of what is best, but as a result, we see parents who are more committed to their work and seem more highly engaged overall.

In a community like Central Falls, where English is not the primary language for nearly half of families, and over 70 percent are cultural, ethnic, or racial minorities, a network of parents with a strong connection and commitment to the schools has a huge impact – not just through the great work parent leaders do as individuals, but also as the foundation of a stronger, more cohesive community. The presence of these parent leaders helps to build trust among other parents, and coupled with the work of family engagement staff, increases the schools’ understanding and sensitivity to the needs of the community while providing a platform for PPNs and others to advocate for the interests of families.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Helping parents feel comfortable and welcomed in their children’s school is a job for everyone. We all benefit from conditions that enable parents to easily engage with district and school leaders, and the expectation set by leaders that families are paramount. However, simply saying these things doesn’t make them so. Based on our experience in Central Falls, we offer the following recommendations for creating an environment that welcomes commitment by families:

- Capitalize on the leadership and buy-in of the superintendent and school principals to set the foundation for teacher-parent partnerships and leadership.
- Recognize that a small number of highly engaged families can have an outsized impact; focus on quality of engagement rather than quantity.
- Use staff or family concerns, such as the school uniform policy, as opportunities to review and strengthen policies and protocols around family engagement (including workshops, trainings, background checks, and orientations for parent volunteers).
- Create a dedicated space in every school for families to meet, network, and establish a regular presence at the school.
- Take the pulse of the schools and their relationships with families. Ask, “What are the barriers preventing families from engaging, and what can we do to help?” In Central Falls, the most obvious challenge was a language barrier, and our solution was to ensure that Village staff members were bilingual.
- Provide leadership training for parents. When families are prepared and able to engage, their confidence

builds, and they will (perhaps little by little) gain the respect of teachers and clerical staff who see their commitment and dedication day in and day out.

- Support teachers and school staff to develop positive relationships with parents by providing activities or professional development opportunities designed to promote trust and respect.

Daily in the Village schools, teachers, secretaries, staff, and other parents saw a cadre of parent volunteers, some with very limited English skills, proudly walking through the school doors early in the morning, ready to help the children learn. The impact of these personal moments and interactions cannot be understated. In the three years since the Village initiative's inception, the commitment and dedication of families has gained the respect of the school faculty and administrators. They notice if the PPN is not in school. Instead of suspiciously asking, "Why is that parent here?" the question today is, "Where are the parents? What am I going to do without their support?"

In Central Falls, we have discovered that the work of true family engagement can be slow, hard, and painful at times, but very rewarding. Perhaps there are not hundreds of parents in the school, but the number of engaged parents has certainly grown. Several of those parents who started as volunteers have secured permanent positions in the district as teacher assistants, lunch aides, or childcare providers during school functions. The rewards have been realized only as a result of the collaboration, leadership, and buy-in from the entire Village.

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Making Space for Collaboration and Leadership: The Role of Program Staff in Successful Family Engagement Initiatives

MONIQUE FLETCHER

Parent engagement coordinators provide the foundation for family engagement by modeling shared leadership, facilitating trust, and creating space to build partnerships with parents and schools.

Since 1992, The Children's Aid Society (CAS) has partnered with the New York City Department of Education, schools, and the community to provide resources and supports to students and their families using our community school model.¹ The Washington Heights community schools have engaged in groundbreaking work with parents and the community in developing parent

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¹ For more on CAS's Community Schools work, see <http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/community-schools>.

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leaders for more than twenty years. Four key elements serve as the foundation of the Children’s Aid approach to parent engagement and the development of parent leaders: parent resource centers, parent engagement coordinators, adult education classes, and leadership development.

In 2014, Children’s Aid was awarded a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant² to expand the parent engagement work we had developed in Washington Heights into four schools – from pre-K to grade 12 – in the South Bronx. In our work, we have found that the success of parent engagement initiatives, particularly with a short-term grant such as the i3, depends heavily on the skills of parent engagement coordinators and the engagement levels of the school staff. Offering training, preparation, and support for parent engagement coordinators allows them to model collaborative leadership, value the voices of parents, and create space for building partnerships with parents within school communities.

Implementation of the South Bronx expansion began with the 2014-2015 school year. Our Family Success Network – a team consisting of four parent engagement coordinators and me, the i3 project director – spent the summer of 2014 preparing to begin our work with a full schedule of professional development, classes, and readings. In hiring our parent engagement coordinators, we required candidates to have experience providing services and supports in the South Bronx, and we gave preference to those who lived and/or were raised in the community, allowing them to connect immediately with the community and understand the perspective of parents and residents of the South Bronx. Three of the four coordinators are bilingual

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2 For more on the i3 program, see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/index.html?exp=0>.

– a critical skill because of the large Spanish-speaking populations on our four campuses. We also spent a significant amount of time reading about community schools and how they function, which included both the positive and sometime negative experiences of partnering with a school as an external provider. These conversations made the coordinators very aware of their surroundings, much more attuned to the interactions they have with our partners, and able to identify potential pitfalls and plan around them.

On our first day of school, we started engaging parents while simultaneously building understanding of our role with partners, teachers, and administrators. We would spend time during school drop-off and pick-up sharing fliers about upcoming events for the school year. We developed “community builders,” typically a fun event that allows parents and school staff an opportunity to come together: movie nights, Halloween costume making, family game night, and a holiday dinner. Community builders welcome parents into the school environment and give the school staff an opportunity to develop relationships with families. During that first school year, we were able to engage a total of 878 out of 3,381 parents in a workshop, class, or volunteer experience. Parent participation across the four campuses ranges widely, from 27 to 83 percent. Although the campuses are in different places in their ability as a community to engage parents, the foundation of quality parent engagement is present at all of them.

Replicating the Washington Heights model required more than just providing the key elements on each campus. During our summer of learning, the Family Success Network spent time in Washington Heights learning more about implementation and developing our vision for the South Bronx. As the

project director, my role is not only to develop systems and supports to promote intentional parent engagement but also to create an environment where the parent engagement coordinators understand the importance of reflection in the practice of engaging a community. We operate with the understanding that good engagement begins with ourselves and how we model partnership.

As we engage these new communities, our path to partnership requires much more precision and flexibility than just the implementation of the four elements. It requires spending quality time engaging parents in a meaningful way while being willing to learn how to improve practice. We must also understand what parents are interested in learning and what skill sets they would like to expand. We found that many parents were interested in adult education such as GED and English classes, and that parents also enjoy learning more about preparing healthier versions of their menus. These adult education pursuits allow parents to learn and grow, gaining the confidence and voice to actively engage in their children's school. Valuing parent-focused supports while supporting student academic progress is the balance we like to strike.

The Family Success Network identified a platform for successful parent engagement based on the principles of shared leadership, space, cultural competence, advocacy, and trust. This platform creates the environment and shared understanding for parents to feel valued by the school community while working with school staff to support the academic goals of both their students and the community. This goes well beyond offering events to engage parents in what their child is learning. It extends to empowering and partnering with parents as critical stakeholders in school-wide gains.

MODELING SHARED LEADERSHIP

Establishing parent leaders is central to the work of parent engagement, and as newcomers to this work on our campuses we were very thoughtful about our introduction. The priorities during summer training were to prepare the team of parent engagement coordinators to enter a new community and to identify and train parent leaders. As a team, it is our responsibility to ensure that our team motto – “teamwork makes the dream work” – becomes a reality.

Developing a culture of shared decision-making was the first step to preparing the parent engagement coordinators to lead on their campus. The best way to establish a culture is not only by being specific about expectations and values but, most importantly, modeling shared leadership. Parent engagement coordinators may enter communities with stakeholders who are nervous about parent engagement or skeptical about parents' roles as critical partners to academic improvement. It is critical that the parent engagement team operate with unwavering commitment to and belief in parents.

Since parent engagement coordinators are leaders in the promotion of family engagement for the campus, involving them in decisions about the program direction has become a way to model responsive leadership. Their ability to value constructive criticism and differing opinions takes practice; in our early trainings we talked at length about the various ways we may receive constructive criticism. We see these moments as opportunities to improve our practice and strengthen our understanding of parent needs and interests.

As members of the Bronx community and parents themselves, the coordinators' insight is key to keeping the

program relevant and receptive to all the skills and talents that parents bring to their leadership roles. This shared leadership practice has allowed the parent engagement coordinators to lead in various ways on behalf of the program and offers them a model of how to field parent input and feel empowered by parent voice. As their confidence blossoms and as they grow into the role, the coordinators' comfort and confidence with shared decision-making is a team strength. As a team, they look to identify their differing skills to allow one another to lead in their area of strength. For example, one coordinator has a talent in developing workshop presentations. Because of her phenomenal ability to take critical information and turn it into an engaging visual experience, she has played a key role in our conversations as we develop and expand our workshops for parents and share information about our program to our community of stakeholders.

Committing to these operating principles has provided a model for collaborative leadership and decision-making. It also increases the parent engagement coordinators' abilities to hear parent feedback and see it as the fuel that will allow parents to lead. Often those tough conversations uncover the changes we need for academic improvements. When parents are offering constructive criticism about school or our practices, we are comfortable about asking the important follow-up question: "What do you think would make it better?"

SOUTH BRONX PARENT VOICES: THE ROLE OF A PARENT RESOURCE CENTER

What do you like most about the space?

"It's really nice having a space that's available to the parents. It's also nice meeting new parents from other schools. I enjoy having a place to have workshops and our PTA meetings."
—Rondell

"It's nice having so much space for us parents and a place where we have a kitchen and can use computers. It's always nice to be thought of and be given a new updated room." —Melissa

What would you say to other parents at other schools that don't have a parent resource center?

"All parents need a space in our schools. A space where we can learn and have our own classes and where we can have a voice." —Rondell

"It's needed! Try to fight for a place. Parent engagement can't happen in a place that you don't own. It's nice having a space that's safe." —Melissa

CREATING SPACE FOR PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

Having a safe space for parents to learn, share, and create a parent community is vital to developing parent leaders. Identifying a parent-owned space on the campus also helps to build strong school and community ties, and creating a parent resource center sends a strong message of dedication and commitment to parents. Yet because space in schools is always at a premium, it is a struggle to balance the needs of students and adults, and dedicating a space for parents is a tough ask for most schools.

“ It took removing the old lockers, painting, and adding lighting, tables, chairs, a couch, and a smartboard to turn the abandoned locker room into a flagship parent resource center – a welcoming space for parent learning and engagement. ”

The new parent resource center on the Whitney Young Jr. campus, which includes three schools ranging from pre-K to eighth grade, is a great model for repurposing unused facilities to develop a welcoming space that promotes parent learning and engagement. Utilizing 13 grant funds, we were able to turn the school’s unused locker room into the parent resource center. It took removing the old lockers, painting, and adding lighting, tables, chairs, a couch, and a smartboard to turn the abandoned locker room into a flagship parent resource center that offers classes, workshops, and leadership training to parents in a safe space. The center’s computers also give parents access to technology that improves that learning experience. Along with the common space, the parent resource center also includes the office of the parent engagement coordinator, who serves as a supportive resource to parents in need and ensures that a variety of parent initiatives are offered.³

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³ For “before” and “after” photos of the parent resource center, see our online edition of this issue: <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/44/making-space-collaboration-and-leadership-role-program-staff-successful-family-engagement>.

The space also offers a starting place for parent engagement for school staff, where coordinators partner with individual teachers, life coaches, guidance counselors, grade-level teams, and principals to plan and support activities that promote parent engagement. For example, a team of second grade teachers was interested in developing strategies to increase their contacts with parents. After the team reached out to the parent engagement coordinator by visiting the parent resource center, the coordinator attended the next grade-level team meeting and worked with the team to develop their interests and ideas. The team began with a Halloween costume-making event that allowed families a creative and less expensive alternative to store-bought costumes. This hands-on community-building event provided an opportunity for parents, teachers, and staff to support their students’ creations and gave teachers a platform to meet their families while enjoying a fun evening of laughs and creativity. It is this consistent, collaborative, and team-oriented approach that sets the tone and displays the program culture of the Family Success Network.

FOSTERING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

We understand the hard work necessary to ensure that all parents feel welcome and have access to ways of strengthening the home and school connection. It is essential that all students, regardless of their differences, are successful academically, and the same understanding is shared in our work with parents. This requires the team to be very thoughtful about four components of cultural competence: awareness of one’s own culture, attitude towards cultural differences, knowledge of different cultural practice and worldviews, and cross-cultural skills (Martin & Vaughn 2010).

The South Bronx has a growing population, especially with respect to residents new to this country. Currently, the four campuses are 72 percent Hispanic and 26 percent Black, but these statistics do not reflect the vast diversity within those two groups. There is also a large Spanish-speaking community that is more prominent on some campuses than others. We operate with the understanding that the most culturally competent team member is the one who is always in a place of learning. This allows us to let parents take the lead in making decisions around the timing, music, food, and agenda for parent engagement events.

For example, one partner school has seen a rapid increase in the African student population. After several incidents of bullying of the African students in regards to Ebola, the school became aware that their connection with the African parent community was limited, so the school's life-coach team partnered with the Family Success Network to increase the engagement and address the needs of African families. The staff was faced with the challenge of engaging and supporting a community that did not seem to respond to the school's traditional mechanisms of parent engagement, which included flyers posted around the school campus, flyers sent home in book bags, and the parent engagement coordinator's direct outreach to parents. The first step in attempting alternative forms of engagement was creating a welcoming space – both symbolically, in the broader school environment, and physically, in the form of the parent resource center itself – for families and staff to build community.

The team decided to hold an event celebrating the various African cultures represented in the school community. The life coaches and the parent engagement coordinator held several focus groups in the parent resource

center to ask parents about their interests, needs, perspectives on the school, and what was needed for school improvement. The team utilized the life coach's contacts to do individual outreach to parents who had already had contact with the school, and they encouraged those parents to reach out to other African parents they knew. This parent-to-parent outreach proved to be the most effective strategy, as the connection and trust that already existed between members of that community helped the other parents feel more comfortable to attend.

Not only did the focus groups offer an opportunity for parents to provide leadership, but they served as great community builders. The school team learned that the parents were very pleased with their children's school experiences and would like to see some additional tutoring to support academic achievement. The parents were also able to talk more about their cultures and what they would like to see at the first "Celebrate Africa" event.

Once engaged, the parents from the focus groups took on leadership roles to make the event happen. They made decisions about food, recruited other parents by phone, and participated in and led other campus-wide recruitment efforts. The priority of this event was to celebrate the different African countries represented on the campus. The parent resource center was decorated with African flags, and one of the first activities involved the children identifying their home country on the map of Africa, with assistance from their parents.

As a result of the first annual Celebrate Africa event, the community began to unite. There were more than 150 attendees, including members of thirty-three families. The parent resource center buzzed with excitement. The aroma of African food was in the air, and the families wore their

traditional African clothing. We learned that the majority of families are from West Africa, with many from Guinea and Mali. Parents, teachers, and students ate and mingled as they laughed and enjoyed the festive environment. Two fathers played the drums while mothers danced. They were proud to show their school appreciation and cultural traditions as they cheered each other on. The families connected with one another and met other families from their home country. It was a transformational experience for all as we were able to watch a new community grow.⁴

By bringing parents into the planning process and executing their suggestions, both through Celebrate Africa and in response to their identified needs, we have seen measurable results in the community's engagement. There has been a marked increase in the participation from the African community in parent classes, workshops, and volunteer opportunities. Being willing to acknowledge parents as experts in their culture promotes culturally responsive practice and allows parents to take the lead in teaching the team.

PREPARING PARENTS FOR ADVOCACY

Once a culture of shared leadership has been established, parent leaders themselves serve as important models to show the entire community how powerful parents can be. Developing parent leaders to be active members of

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- 4 For a video of the Celebrate Africa event, see the online edition of this issue: <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/44/making-space-collaboration-and-leadership-role-program-staff-successful-family-engagement>.
- 5 For a video of Nancy Maxwell's interview on NY1's "The Call," see the online edition of this issue: <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/44/making-space-collaboration-and-leadership-role-program-staff-successful-family-engagement>.

the community through volunteering and advocacy requires not only a commitment to parents expanding their knowledge but also opportunities for parents to exercise their advocacy skills. The Children's Aid Ambassadors Program trains youth and parents in advocacy strategies. The advocacy training – provided by Children's Aid marketing, communications, and public policy staff – consists of topics such as how local, state, and federal policies are set; effective messaging; social media; and "telling your story." After the training, the ambassadors agree to be available to speak to the press and/or elected officials to share their stories and identify issues that need to be addressed in the community. Having structures and supports to provide parents an avenue through which to advocate and let their voices be heard is vital.

During spring 2015, the Ambassador Program – in partnership with the Family Success Network – trained over thirty parents. One of the parents in attendance at the training was Nancy Maxwell, an active parent from the Whitney Young Jr. campus. Several weeks after the training, Children's Aid reached out to Nancy in response to a budget released by New York City mayor Bill de Blasio that reneged on a promise to fund summer programming for middle school students. Children's Aid faced losing summer camp slots for more than 400 young people, and across the city as many as 35,000 students would spend their summer without summer camps and activities. Along with other parents and staff from a coalition of youth-serving organizations, Nancy participated in a rally on the steps of City Hall. Nancy stepped to the podium to push the mayor to fix this mistake immediately.⁵ Later that evening, the mayor restored the 35,000 summer camp slots across the city.

This powerful experience for our parents is the key to keeping parents excited and passionate about their potential for changing their community. Not only did one of our parents play a key role in advocating for change, but all the parents were able to see how important and effective their voices can be in provoking change.

HELPING TO BUILD TRUST BETWEEN PARENTS AND SCHOOLS

With the pillars of space, cultural competency, leadership, and advocacy, the foundation for successful implementation of parent engagement is trust. It requires trust from all stakeholders to facilitate the home-to-school connection. Trust involves the willingness to be vulnerable based on the belief that the other party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy 2000). Working to earn the trust of parents, teachers, students, and administrators is an ongoing priority, requiring us to partner in a way that is transparent and has a clear focus on promoting academic improvement. Our ability to connect and honor parent voice feeds the efficiency in relationship and community building. Partnering with parents about their interests, thoughts, celebrations, and struggles allows us to develop a relationship of mutual respect, honor, and trust.

Getting to a place of trust is not an easy process and is often the most difficult part of bringing a parent engagement initiative to scale. School culture plays an important role in how quickly stakeholders can move to a place of trust. Some schools – even those with very strong parent leadership – struggle to bridge the gap of trust with parents, while parent engagement coordinators find more success (see sidebar).

SOUTH BRONX PARENT VOICES: SCHOOLS WITH A LACK OF TRUST

“Parents feel unsafe when it comes to their children. School staff feel social services needs to be called against parents. It’s not all staff, it’s some staff. Teachers put the blame on the parent. The first question that shouldn’t come out is, What’s going on in the home? That automatically gives a parent a blockage of trust. It makes them feel like teachers are trying to pin issues and concerns within the home.” —Arelis

“Parents need to feel safe with whoever they are talking to about their kids. There is always going to be that fear of saying the wrong thing and they will try to do whatever to take away your children. A lot of parents don’t feel safe going to school to get the help that they need. But the parent and parent engagement coordinator have already built a relationship. There is trust there. I can let loose. I don’t have to watch what I say.” —Reggie

Partnering with parents may come easily to us, but some of the most challenging work for our team can be helping to bring the teachers and parents to a place of partnership. Developing a partnership with school administration can provide an opportunity for systemic influence. For example, before the first parent-teacher conference of the school year, one principal requested parent engagement training for the entire school staff. This afforded us an opportunity to help them understand how hard it is to make sense of words such as “literacy” and phrases such as “deep dive” for people whose first language is not English. This simulation training asked teaching teams to unpack a series of loaded words and phrases so they are easy for parents to understand. Teachers found the training to be eye opening, and several reported changing parts of their presentation so they are easier for everyone to comprehend.

Providing this kind of professional development to school staff helped them expand their understanding of the nuances of responsive parent engagement, see success in increasing parent engagement, and identify potential pitfalls.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

We continue to learn more about our community of parents and how that engagement will influence academic outcomes. Implementing shared decision-making and leadership requires trust in the group's ability to focus and make informed decisions. Providing a safe space to learn and build community allows parents to feel welcome and valued in the school and is a first step to building partnerships with parents.

If our definition of trust involves a willingness to be vulnerable, then actively working to partner with new parents puts us in a place of constant discomfort in our practice and gives us the motivation to keep fine-tuning our work and reaching new stakeholders. Our challenge is to strike a balance. We need to embrace vulnerability and discomfort enough to push the practice and see real results, but without discouraging our partners. In fact, we need to encourage our partners to embrace the discomfort required for trust to be established.

On several campuses, working to bridge the trust between parents and teachers has become our priority. We have a lot of work to do to meet the goal set by the team: engaging 80 percent of the parents across four campuses. This ambitious goal is a reflection of the team's willingness to stretch into success and their dedication to excellence in engagement.

Building a successful family engagement initiative must involve setting the

groundwork for the parent engagement coordinators to build their practice and develop the skills to foster partnerships and a culture of shared leadership in the school. This will prepare parent engagement coordinators and parents to understand the often-difficult process of moving a school community to trust and partnership on behalf of student well-being and success.

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Strengthening Relationships with Families in the School Community: Do School Leaders Make a Difference?

MARIA S. QUEZADA

School principals can play a key role in family engagement by believing in the leadership capacity of parents and viewing families as partners in their school community.

Many family engagement programs logically focus on providing training and support for parent leaders, giving them the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively partner with schools. Yet in implementing family engagement programs, I have found again and again that the key to

successful partnerships between families and schools is the school principal. Even with comprehensive parent leadership training, sustainable family engagement initiatives cannot truly take hold without buy-in, shared understanding, and a structure for parent engagement at the school level.

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A FOCUS ON CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PARENT ENGAGEMENT

For over twenty years, I have worked in programs providing parent leadership training to bilingual families in Southern California, first as the director of the Multifunctional Resource Center (MRC) at the Center for Language Minority Education and Research (CLMER) at California State University, Long Beach, and since 2000, at the California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE). Because we work with parents who are culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse, the sessions are grounded in a “community learning theory” (CLT) approach, developed by Roberto Vargas (2008) and J. David Ramirez (2010), a cultural strategy that uses diversity-responsive processes and activities essential for developing the critical relationships that provide the foundation for individual and community empowerment, action, and change.

The CLT approach includes acknowledging and building on existing cultural “funds of knowledge,” or what Yosso (2005) and others call “community cultural wealth.” It also introduces Vargas’s (1987) concepts of the Unity Principle, which seeks to build a sense of *conocimiento* (“Who am I?” “Who is s/he?” and “Who are we?”) and unity through shared power and trust. Using this process, we learn about each person and the lived experiences that have given them cultural capital and wisdom that is now shared with others. Knowing individuals at a deeper level brings *confianza* (confidence and trust) to work together in unity and power. In his work in communities, Vargas (2013) has also introduced us to the concept of “co-powerment,” a practice that he believes is:

more collaborative than the hierarchical relationships often implied by

the idea of empowerment. . . . Co-powerment is communication that seeks to lift the confidence, energy, and agency of another person, self, and the relationship. It is lifting the power of self and others. The better we become at co-powering, the more we grow deeper relationships that develop our power to create positive personal, family, and community change.

When we used this culturally responsive process, we were inspired by the transformation experienced by the parents attending our institutes – especially after they had attended several sessions. Parents who never shared or participated in the early discussions would freely and confidently do so during the final sessions; parents shared that they were more active in ensuring their child was getting on track for college. We were creating and fostering a sense of community, belonging, and personal power among the parents attending the sessions. Project staff developed a greater understanding of the families and became more adept at addressing the cultural, linguistic, social, economic, and political barriers they faced. They created activities that engaged parents through the use of art and metaphors, creating a safe place to share their lives and aspirations for their children. The parents recognized that we were reaching out to them in a very different way than schools usually did.

SCHOOL-LEVEL BARRIERS TO PARENT ENGAGEMENT

When I became the chief executive officer of CABE in 2000, we continued to offer the parent institutes, as well as a parent center, at our annual conference. As the CEO, I often ran into “transformed” parents who had previously attended our institutes. Many of them were frustrated and in some cases “militant” because they

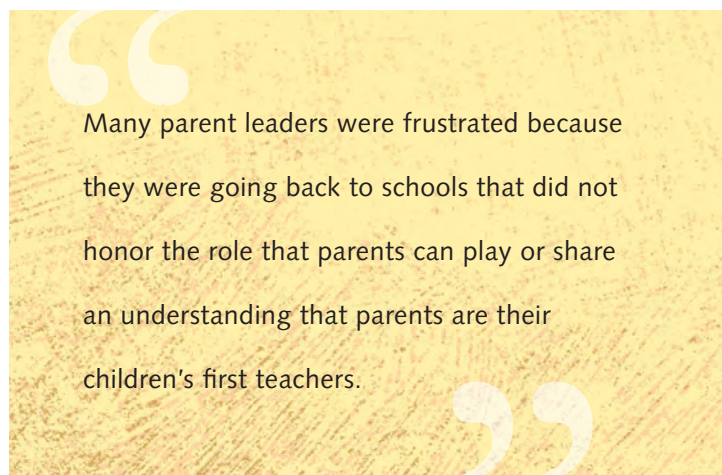
were going back to schools that were not transformed. Schools did not honor the role that parents can play in schools and share an understanding that parents are their children’s first teachers. Some parents had learned that the school budget required approval of the school site council, but their school only asked them to sign the budget without the opportunity to review or comment on it. The knowledge and skills they learned in our earlier institutes were not deep enough to work through the barriers created in some schools that were not prepared to “engage” parents in a meaningful and partnering way.

As an organization that advocates for equitable programs for English learners and their families, CAFE firmly believes that families are a child’s first teacher, and that they have the capacity to be strong partners with schools (Dantas & Manyak 2011). Being in a leadership role and with a deep commitment to engaging families and parents, I was searching for a way to, at minimum, lessen the frustration felt by parents who could not make inroads into their children’s schools.

In 2003, my colleagues and I submitted a proposal for a Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC) grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Innovation and Improvement. We were successful in obtaining the grant funds, and we were on our way to search for the best way to serve our parent communities. In 2006, CAFE secured a second PIRC grant – this one with a statewide focus – to further develop our parent engagement program. Since this federal grant included funding to conduct research on family engagement, we had the opportunity to not only design a culturally responsive program for communities of color, but to also really look into the impact the program was having on parents and their children’s academic achievement. Eighteen

treatment schools and eighteen control schools were randomly selected to participate in this study.

During the first year, we developed a three-level curriculum. The control schools did not receive any of the sessions that were provided in the treatment schools. Parents at the eighteen treatment schools received twelve three-hour modules at the Mastery level and eighteen three-hour modules for the trainer-of-trainers Expert level, both rooted in the CLT approach. Because of our experience with previous programs, we wanted to create a program where, at the end of the study, the schools would be left with “parent experts” who had the capacity to maintain the program at the conclusion of the grant. We had also learned that when families from the same school work together, they form supportive social relationships



Many parent leaders were frustrated because they were going back to schools that did not honor the role that parents can play or share an understanding that parents are their children's first teachers.

that can provide a protective function for families who face many challenges (Ramirez 2010; Yosso 2005; Henderson et al. 2007). This is especially true for immigrant families, who often lack the support of extended families and feel they are isolated in their communities.

The basic research question was, “Did the students whose parents

attended the Mastery and Expert level sessions have an increase in achievement?” Our study showed that they did have significant growth over other students at the treatment and control schools. Another surprising result was that English learners whose parents attended the parent leadership development sessions also learned more English than students at the treatment schools whose parents hadn’t attended the program sessions, as measured by the gains on the California English Language Development Test.

Despite these gains, we once again found a key ingredient to be missing from the program: the school leader. While the principals were pleased with the outcomes for parents, they did not fully understand – nor did we make provisions for working specifically on – the knowledge and skills of the school leader that are necessary to engage the families at the school and to forge those important relationships. There were “bright spots” in about half of the eighteen schools, where the principals saw the power of having parents “join the team.” The principals at these schools’ shared, during individual interviews, the changes they saw in the parents at their school. They spoke of how the parents were “changing the dynamics” of teacher-to-parent interactions, and that parents had learned how to communicate effectively with them, so they were able to express their views about what changes were needed at the school. However, the research project was not designed to collect survey information to document these changes.

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- 1 Part of the criteria used in the selection of the schools in the 2006–2011 study were what we called “readiness factors” for parental engagement. We felt it was important to have schools that were not dealing with many other challenges and could participate fully in the program.
- 2 For more on the i3 program, see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/index.html?exp=0>.

PREPARING SCHOOL LEADERS AND STAFF FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

When we secured a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) Development grant² in 2012 to study parental engagement, we were able to put all of our previous learning to the task. We have laid a strong foundation for the program by making sure that our previous shortcomings in designing a program for engaging parents were carefully considered. The i3 Project 2INSPIRE Family, School & Community Engagement Program now includes professional learning for everyone at the school; a strong emphasis on fostering relationships among the principal, teachers, and other parents; and the development of a yearly plan for parental engagement where parents help plan, monitor, and evaluate the plan, and where parent leadership development is only one of the components – not the total program.

The new program, which involves ten schools at three districts in southern California, offers professional development for school leaders, teachers, office support staff, and parents. The school leader and district representatives have attended a two-day session on parent engagement research, strategies, and practices and a two-day session on cultural proficiency in schools by noted experts (Michelle Brooks, Karen Mapp, and Randall Lindsay). They also have attended a two-day session on the Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) model led by Joyce Epstein and have written their action plan for parental engagement for their school (Epstein et al. 2002). In our previous attempts at designing programs for parents, we learned that unless there is a structure and shared understandings as to how to engage parents at the school level, the likelihood of sustaining the program is minimized.

We also felt it was important to provide teachers with sessions on building relationships with families, so every year we have Roberto Vargas facilitate a seminar introducing CLT to teachers participating in our program. During our spring 2015 meeting with district and school leaders, teachers suggested that office staff, and even our parent leaders, could benefit from attending alongside the teachers in learning how to build relationships. Therefore, school teams attended our October 2015 CLT session, which proved to be very effective, giving teachers, office staff, and parents the opportunity to learn about each other and form vital relationships. Project staff reported that after this session, they felt the climate at the school was much more inviting. A principal at one of the 13 schools also reported that an amazing thing had happened: an especially irate parent, who had a two-year battle with a teacher, had apologized to the teacher and pledged to work on their relationship.

Teachers are also improving their perceptions of parents. In the first 13 survey of teachers, 55 percent of classroom teachers said they felt that their students' parents helped their children learn. In Year 2, 78 percent of school staff indicated that parents at their school who are actively engaged have a positive impact on student learning, and by Year 3, that number had increased to 88 percent of school staff. The 13 research project is documenting all of these activities and changes in the schools.

LESSONS LEARNED

The 13 Project 2INSPIRE schools are working with families to forge those important relationships and partnerships needed for school and student success. The concepts and outcomes presented in the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family School

Partnerships (Mapp & Kuttner 2013) are becoming evident in actual practices of the program.

Because of the strength-based, collaborative leadership development program that provides families the necessary tools to participate more fully in the education of their children, school leaders are recognizing that parent leadership is important. On a yearly survey given at the beginning of each school year, principal responses have steadily increased on a survey item that asks them whether this description applies to their school: "Families and staff have opportunities to learn together how to collaborate to improve student achievement." Out of the ten principals participating in our program, in Year 1, three indicated that this statement was "a great deal or a lot like our school"; in Year 2, it was five principals; and in Year 3, it was eight principals.

School leaders are recognizing the positive benefits of having a critical mass of parent leaders who work as a team and have reached out to them to form a stronger relationship, which has really added value to their schools. For example, one principal reported that the parents came to her to tell of their concern that the library was closed and not available for the children. The principal explained that she did not have the funds to pay for someone to reorganize the books into the new reading levels. The parents stepped up and worked as a team, and the library was available two months later.

Events like these are happening even in schools with a large number of families with racially, ethnically, and economically diverse backgrounds. In at least seven of the ten schools, the parents have developed the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to negotiate the multiple roles – supporters, encouragers, monitors, decision-makers, advocates, collaborators – of effective

family engagement (Mapp & Kuttner 2013). District staff, school leaders, teachers, and other school staff are learning that given relevant information about schools, families can participate fully in school activities and functions. Schools are learning to respect and honor families' existing knowledge and their potential contributions to the work of schools. As one principal participating in our i3 initiative said:

At their LCAP³ parent meetings, parents and community members had a chance to receive an update on the school's goals and performance and to voice their ideas about how they could further support students in their academic growth and overall well-being at the school. Parents attending had the chance to collaborate in small groups and chart their ideas under each of the three LCAP goals: Teaching and Learning, Enrichment and School Climate, and Safety. Each small group of parents had a facilitator that supported them in sharing their ideas. Many of the facilitators were other parents who participated in the Project 2INSPIRE parent leadership development classes.

These parents are now leaders on the campus, creating positive change and supporting our students in many roles, including being members of our School Site Council and English Learner Advisory Committee. The conversations consisted of high-quality, informed ideas and empowered all involved to make Martin Elemen-

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3 Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) are part of California's new local control funding formula, which dictates that districts obtain input from parents and the community on their school plans. See <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/lcffoverview.asp>.

tary the best it can be. The school doesn't belong to any one person or any one group – Martin Elementary belongs to all of us whose children study here and all who work at the school to teach the children.

Measuring Principal Support for Parent Leadership

One thing all of our schools have learned is that engaging families is a process, and the first step is to demonstrate a commitment to family engagement as a core strategy to improve teaching and learning, as Jeynes (2011) states: “A school can run a parental engagement program with great efficiency, but parents can easily discern whether their participation is welcome and whether their input is warmly received.”

One of the measures we use to document progress in working with the schools is feedback about the program from the parent specialists who provide the parent leadership sessions at the schools every week. In these parent leaders' responses to the question of rating the principal's support for the program (1= strong, 2= supportive, 3= developing and 4= weak), they reported that five of the ten principals in the i3 project are “strong” supporters and are effectively engaging their families, two of the school leaders are “supportive,” and three others are “developing” their skills.

The principals identified as strong supporters are realizing that, as school leaders, they also have the skills, knowledge, and confidence to create welcoming and inviting learning communities for their families and parents. For example, as part of an assignment in the Expert level training, parents are asked to make presentations to the teachers at a staff meeting. At two schools with principals who are “strong” supporters, principals not only encouraged their parent leaders to

present what they were learning to the teachers, but they worked alongside the parent specialist to prepare a parent team from each of the four i3 schools in the district to make a presentation to the school board about the i3 Project 2INSPIRE program. These two principals attended the district meeting along with the parents and spoke of how proud they were of the parents at their school. When one of the principals was transferred to a new school, some of the parent leaders from her previous school “transferred” with her.

On the other hand, the three school leaders who are “developing” seem to see many barriers to the engagement of parents at their school. In an individual interview, one of these principals told us that the parents at their school “just won’t do those types of activities,” referring to the presentations for teachers at staff meetings. In discussing the fact that our program’s “expert and advanced” parent leaders facilitate the parent leadership development sessions for other parents, one of the “developing” principals stated, “I am not sure if the parents at my school can ever manage being a facilitator and present the technical information we cover in the modules after they graduate from our Expert level.” It was interesting for me to hear this comment, because three of the four parent specialists who work with the i3 project schools are actually parent leaders from our former PIRC project, serving as proof that parents can rise to high levels when given the chance. In fact, parents at this principals’ school have demonstrated their leadership abilities in other ways, creating an Earth Day event for the kindergarten classes and making project t-shirts.

At another school with a “developing” principal, parents report that they continue to feel like they are on the “outside” of the school; the principal has parents at her school busy with tasks, but when it comes to deciding what happens at that school, the parents do not have a voice. This principal completed the school’s ATP plan on her own, without bringing in the parent leaders who attended the ATP session with Joyce Epstein. The parents do not feel that they can have a relationship that is based on mutual respect at this school. In her study of school leadership and family engagement, Auerbach (2009) reports that many principals “named ‘relationship building’ as part of their vision of parent involvement, but few could be observed actually engaging in it with parents.”

Parent Involvement vs. Parent Engagement

Mapp (2010) talks about a paradigm shift that is needed to redefine what it means to engage parents, and Ferlazzo (2009) outlines important distinctions in the way families become partners in the school, describing the differences between *involvement and engagement*:

When we’re *engaging* parents, the parent is considered a leader or a potential leader who is integral to identifying a vision and goals. He/she encourages others to contribute their own vision to that big picture and helps perform the tasks that need to be achieved in order to reach those goals.

The following matrix is an adaptation of his main points. It gives us a way to see the differences more clearly and then compare the engagement features found in our schools between “strong” principals and those who are “developing” their skills to fully engage the parents at their school.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

When schools *involve* parents they are leading with their institutional self-interest and desires.

When we're *involving* parents, school staff can fall into the role of a social worker who does things for parents, or who tends to tell them what they should be doing with their child.

When we're *involving* parents, schools tend to focus on supporting students by strengthening and assisting school programs and priorities.

When we're *involving* parents, the parent is generally directed towards completing tasks selected by the school staff – or the parent may be a *client* who receives services and information.

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

When schools *engage* parents they are leading with the parents' self-interests (their wants and dreams) in an effort to develop a genuine partnership.

When we're *engaging* parents, school staff act more as community organizers who help parents do things for themselves, and who elicit from parents ideas about what parents and school staff could be doing to better help their child and their community.

When we're *engaging* parents, schools support students by developing parent relationships and often working with parents to improve their local communities.

When we're *engaging* parents, they are challenged to do something about what *they* feel is important to them. Staff learn what parents believe is important through developing a relationship.

“Principals who see parents as leaders and give them the space to use their newly developed skills tell us that their parents are transformed.”

In looking at the dynamics of the i3 schools, it seems that those five principals considered “strong” supporters have begun to make that paradigm shift from involvement to engagement as Ferlazzo describes. They see parents as leaders and have given them the space to use their newly developed skills as parent leaders. These principals tell us that their parents are transformed and have seen

that their support and the relationship they developed with them over the last two years is making a difference.

The “developing” principals, while they are reporting that they have a relationship with parents, seem to be operating in the old paradigm of “involving” parents. These principals are providing more services to parents and offering them opportunities, such as “coffee with the principal,” to dialog with them or introduce topics they want to share with parents. Although they have the best intentions for the parents at their school, they have not shifted their perspective about what parents are capable of doing. This diminishes the role parents have in their school community.

Confidence in Relationship Building and Belief in Parent Capacity

For school leaders, building relationships with parents is not an easy task. It takes nurturing and persistence in order to develop and gain trust with the families in the school community, yet these relationships are of the utmost importance (Cunningham, Kreider & Ocón 2012). Strong family, school, and community engagement programs reach out to families and engage them in true partnerships, challenging parents to learn and apply the necessary supports for their children's learning at home or school. It is a shared-responsibility, integrated, sustained, and family-strengthening approach that truly engages parents and fosters the relationships between schools and the home. We see this in schools when the school leader is confident in developing relationships with the families in the school.

What is becoming evident in our work is that families who have participated in the i3 Parent Leadership Development Program have the tools they need to feel connected to the school, understand how the school functions, and participate in the school more readily. The missing link in some schools is for school leaders to truly believe that parents – especially those who have taken on the challenge of becoming parent leaders – are an asset to the school.

In the i3 project we have seen shifts in principals' perceptions of parents. It usually comes about when there is an event at the school where parents have taken the lead and carry out the event in a very professional manner and with great results. This then triggers a change in the perception and they begin to trust that parents have the ability and knowledge. This success also leads to a measureable change in the principals' own confidence to let this happen. Those school leaders who recognize that parents are assets and resources for their school will see their schools change and become better, and as a result, will see a positive impact on student learning and well-being.

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Liderazgo Familiar Intergeneracional: Intergenerational Family Leadership as a New Paradigm of Family Engagement

AURELIO M. MONTEMAYOR AND NANCY CHAVKIN

Comunitario projects in Texas's Rio Grande Valley offer a community-based alternative to the traditional PTA model, fostering the participation and collective leadership of youth.

Title I schools that serve a large population of low-income students often view families through the lens of an outdated paradigm of family engagement in education, assuming parents are mostly uneducated, ill informed, and much in need of training and support to be good parents. Comments like the following by school personnel are

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not uncommon: “I’ve got to get food and door prizes, otherwise they won’t come!” “We sent bilingual notices with the children, and only ten showed up.” “If I get the kids to perform, the parents show up, but if we have a meeting afterwards . . . the children running up to the families are a great distraction.” “I feel I really succeed in parent involvement if I get thirty warm bodies in the room for the meeting.”

The old paradigm sees families as free volunteer labor for an understaffed, underfunded, and overextended school. The focus is on having families be participants in courses or hobbies. This old paradigm has little room for perceiving the poor, English-learner, rural, or recent immigrant parent as co-constructor of an excellent education for all children.

Comunitario projects in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas model a new kind of family engagement in education: intergenerational family leadership, or *liderazgo familiar intergeneracional*, which values the participation and collaboration of parents, community members, and youth. The locus is the family and, therefore, requires personal outreach, home visits, multiple settings for meetings, and seeking creative ways to inform families who, because of work and other circumstances, are not able to attend an evening meeting on campus.

In this article, we focus on the ways that intergenerational family leadership recognizes the contributions of youth in family engagement, offering opportunities for them to serve as mentors to their peers as well as to adults in the community. We explore the ways that investing in true family leadership in this way has allowed us to scale up the *comunitario* approach as we have implemented our federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant.¹

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 1 For more on the i3 program, see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/index.html?exp=0>.

UNDERSTANDING INTERGENERATIONAL FAMILY LEADERSHIP

Each word in intergenerational family leadership has a special meaning in the *comunitario* programs:

- “Intergenerational” means not just adults telling youth what to think and do, but adults and youth working together. Every opinion counts.
- “Family” means that parents are just one set of key caretakers. There are grandparents, other adult kin, foster families, and non-family members who live with the family. The individuals in this circle are those who are legally, morally, and practically responsible for the children and who would most likely advocate for the best possible education for them.
- “Leadership” means that volunteerism within *comunitario* programs focuses on families advocating, bringing together, collaborating, and joining other families and schools to create excellent and equitable public schools. This leadership focuses on families taking action to improve schools. Unlike traditional PTAs, *comunitario* programs have no interest in fundraising and providing free labor for the schools.

The facilitators of our leadership process see it as collective and familial rather than a process of honing individual skills and searching for charismatic, vocal, and gregarious individuals. In our model, leadership is marked by genuine service to the community, listening, and critical dialogue.² Decisions are collective and responsibilities are shared. Elected positions rotate and everyone has tasks to perform. Small-group conversations are reported to the large group.

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 2 Critical dialogue means conversations that are based on issues of interest to the community about education and that use open-ended questions, allow for open dialogue with equal air time for participation, encourage authentic conversation, and have no right or wrong answer.

THE COMUNITARIO MODEL

Comunitarios, which first developed within rural *colonias* (unincorporated communities) of south Texas, are innovative community and family partnerships with the sole purpose of collaborating with schools to improve the success of students in the community.³ PTA comunitarios are affiliated with the national PTA organization but are based in a community organization rather than in a single school. Central components of the PTA comunitario model include community-based, distributive leadership that engages in school-community partnerships, spearheading educational projects using actionable data to improve schools. The PTA comunitario i3 project focuses on refining and expanding this model, establishing new PTA comunitarios within each of five South Texas public school districts.

Critical elements of the comunitario approach include:

- Valuing all families and assuming intelligence, high expectations for their children, and the will to take action in support of the education of their children.
- Intra- and inter-family collaboration, cooperation, and relationships.
- Intergenerational family leadership, where families gather as families, children are part of most events, and youth gather to have critical conversations about school and education.
- Building positive image: when we see a child from the barrio, we see a child with potential – intelligent, creative, having dreams and desires – not as hopeless.

The comunitario approach aligns with the U.S. Department of Education’s new Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Mapp & Kuttner 2013), which takes a strengths-based approach to building

skills and relationships with educators and families. A formal comunitario begins in the community where families live to focus on the “capabilities, connections, cognition, and confidence” described in this framework. The comunitario model has also been enriched by the work of Henderson & Mapp (2002), Epstein (2011), Hong (2012), and Weiss and colleagues (2014).

COMMUNITY ROOTS: IDRA AND ARISE

Comunitarios, by definition, must be based in an existing community organization both for sustainability and for the trust and connection to their communities. The comunitario model itself is the product of a collaboration between two community organizations in south Texas: the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) and ARISE (A Resource in Serving Equality).⁴

IDRA is an independent nonprofit organization whose mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA’s family leadership in education approach evolved through work with families since the early 1980s, focusing on aspects of parent engagement that followed a different path than such traditional approaches as developing parenting skills or securing volunteers for schools. IDRA’s role as the comunitario innovator and backbone organization involved several key elements:

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3 See http://www.idra.org/IDRA_Newsletter/June_July_2014_Actionable_Knowledge/Armed_with_Data/.

4 See <http://www.idra.org> and <http://www.arisesotex.org/>.

- conducting training-of-trainers;
- co-planning with grassroots organizations;
- responding to community requests for information on education issues;
- providing family-friendly materials in English and Spanish on policy, research, and practice;
- mentoring emerging leaders;
- offering training and technical assistance to groups and networks that focus on education;
- assuring that meetings, trainings, and workshops are asset-based and value the ideas and experiences of all participants; and
- shifting perceptions of participants as passive receivers of information to assertive actors who can fully engage in critical conversations.

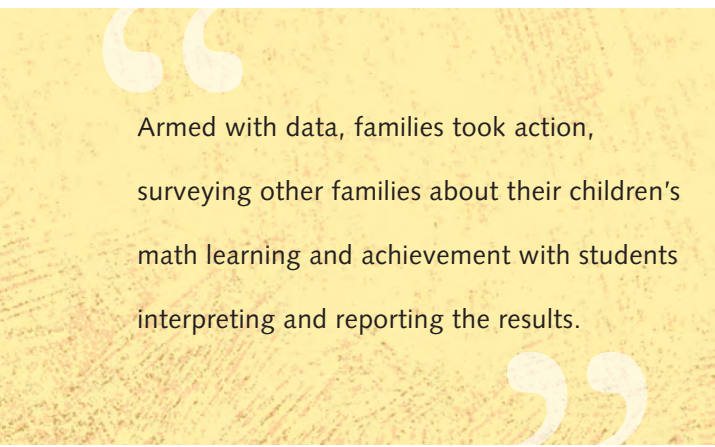
ARISE is a woman-centered organization that works with families in four colonias in South Texas, offering educational programs and workshops for youth and adults that focus on personal development and leadership in order to strengthen their communities. Many characteristics of the community-based organization ARISE made it perfectly aligned to launch the comunitario model:

- location in the community;
- strong community connections;
- clear commitment to education;
- inclusion of families and youth working together;
- emphasis on family strengths;
- valuing the assets of all participants;
- focus on family and youth as active participants;
- nurturing leadership of women; and
- goal of sustainability.

The collaboration between ARISE and IDRA provided a solid platform for building the sustainability of intergenerational family leadership in education. Because ARISE is a community organization rooted in strong family connections, it was the ideal context for comunitario work. As entire families gathered to discuss educational issues in the comunitario meetings at ARISE, the intergenerational family leadership model was strengthened. IDRA developed tools, such as the Our School portal in English and Spanish, to provide families with actionable data.⁵ Armed with that data, families took action, surveying other families about their children’s math learning and achievement. Students led in interpreting and reporting the results. Such actions and others became the inspiration for further youth-adult collaborations on educational issues.

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⁵ See <http://www.idra.org/ourschool/>.



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BUILDING YOUTH CAPACITY FOR MENTORSHIP, LEADERSHIP, AND COMMUNITY ACTION

Intergenerational family leadership values and supports the participation of the entire community. While many traditional family engagement programs view children as the passive recipients of the benefits of parent involvement, our model sees youth as assets who can inform, lend expertise, and lead community efforts to improve their schools.

Youth “Tekies”: Supporting Positive Youth Image

“No, sir. I’m dumb and very poor in math!”

This statement is at the heart of why intergenerational family leadership is critical. The story begins more than a decade ago, when the ARISE Community Center’s youth group became a support team for adults who had little or no experience with technology. Some old computers had been donated to the center, and the youth “tekies” became the technology bridge for the families. This youth project had evolved from the IDRA family leadership sessions set up to introduce families to online education resources.⁶ These young people from those same economically disadvantaged neighborhoods of the colonias had already become the English language bridge for their families. Now, they also were their technology bridge. One high school junior was especially adept at guiding the ARISE ladies who were hesitant to hit the keys, imagining they would break something in the process. When one lady was ecstatic as she saw

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⁶ See http://www.idra.org/IDRA_Newsletter/March_2006_Student_Engagement/Eruption!_Bridging_Language_and_Technology_-_Educational_Leadership_Across_Generations/.

her name appear on the screen, we told the young tekie, “You’re a brilliant technology teacher.” She replied, “No, sir. I’m dumb and very poor in math!” When adults repeated the praise, she responded that they were prejudiced because they liked her, which must have been a good feeling.

The support given to youths in these centers is sometimes in stark contrast to the harsh environment they experience in school. IDRA has seen over and over that all children can learn and master high school course requirements with appropriate and effective support. Likewise, with appropriate support, they can take on leadership and carry out community projects for the betterment of their community and their education. Some of those early Youth Tekies are now teachers and in other professional fields. One is a staff member at ARISE.

Pedro: The Development of a Youth Leader

Our intergenerational family leadership model helps to foster the development of youth leaders who continue to give back to their communities. For example, Pedro Nepomuceno began volunteering at ARISE when he was 12. He was part of the youth cadre that mentored little ones as part of ARISE’s summer program, which provides activities for young children who wouldn’t otherwise have any summer activities because of the isolation and poverty of their communities. The intergenerational leadership begins with these opportunities for cross-age mentoring. When he was 17, the summer before his freshman year of college, he participated in the IDRA-sponsored meeting, ¡Ya! Es Tiempo, as a youth tekie, guiding adults in how to use the OurSchool portal to get information about their schools. Based on what they learned, the families would later lead projects

focusing on curriculum, instruction, and college preparation in their local schools.

After receiving his bachelors' degree from Texas A&M University, Pedro spent some time working for ARISE.⁷ While there, he accompanied a team to San Antonio to present on the ARISE comunitarios at the IDRA's annual *La Semana del Niño* Parent Institute, with an audience of parents and educators from across the state. Pedro was the translator for the presenters who made their entire presentation in Spanish. The session was live-streamed, making it possible for several groups in south Texas to participate. Part of the power of intergenerational family leadership comes from allowing youth to participate and lead in efforts to inform the community about their experiences in school.

MOBILIZING THE COMMUNITY: INTERGENERATIONAL FAMILY LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Our efforts to cultivate youth leadership and mentorship can have a deep impact on community engagement and activism. In the spring of 2015, the comunitario members and their network were very concerned about recent changes in the graduation requirements in Texas. The legislature removed the 4x4 requirements (four years of math, English, science, and social studies) that had previously resulted in over 80 percent of high school graduates having the necessary courses to be ready for college. Certain courses, such as Algebra II and English IV, are no longer required for high school students. While proponents of the weaker requirements claimed they were giving students more “choices,” the data show students had higher achievement under the old 4x4 plan. “College is not for everyone” became the mantra of those who praised these changes. Families, especially families

in rural colonias, feared that their children would be tracked into paths that, rather than preparing them for college, would return to the old days of vocational education.

In response, the education working group of the Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network⁸ – a formal network of eleven community organizations, including ARISE and IDRA – decided to conduct a survey on the graduation requirement and college track issues, canvassing ten school districts and resulting in over 1,600 responses. The community members designed the questionnaire, collected the data, and interpreted the results with assistance from IDRA. In August of 2015, community members held a *Mesa Comunitaria*, a valley-wide meeting to report the results to more than 150 community members and school administrators.⁹ The major findings were that most families were not informed and most did not know if their children were on a college track. Each participating comunitario and community group pledged plans of action as a follow-up.

Locally, the two comunitarios sponsored by ARISE planned a mini-Mesa Comunitaria in collaboration with IDRA and the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district (PSJA), which has recently undergone a transformation from a district with low achievement and expectations to one that prioritizes college readiness and completion for all students (Boroquez 2014). But rather than simply informing the community about graduation requirements as had

7 For an interview with Pedro about his experience in college, see http://www.idra.org/IDRA_Newsletter/November_December_2015_Student_Voices/College_Students_Describe_What_a_School%E2%80%99s_/.

8 See <https://www.facebook.com/rgvequalvoice/>.

9 See http://www.idra.org/IDRA_Newsletter/November_December_2015_Student_Voices/Our_children_could_get_lost/

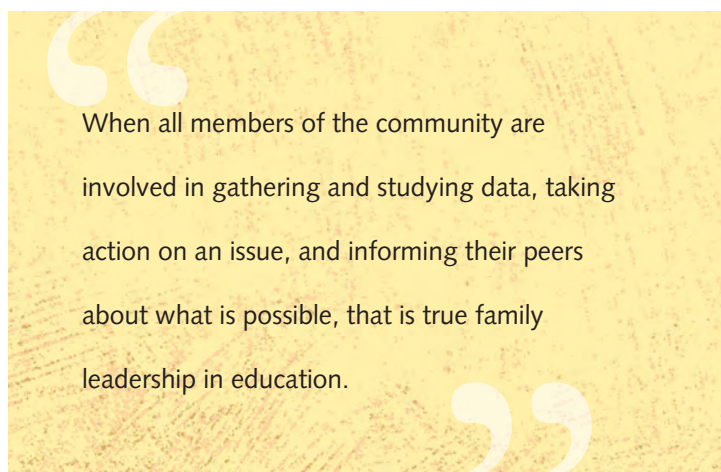
been done in the valley-wide meeting, local comunitarios chose to have presentations made by students who were participating in particular programs that spoke to the issues of graduation requirements and college preparation. Students who were on college tracks related what the benefits are, their experiences as students in these classes, and what challenges they face. A student who had dropped out talked about her college experience as a result of the drop-out recovery efforts of the school district.

More than 180 adults and 30 students participated in the mini-Mesa Comunitaria, and these stories had a great impact. The middle school students – who served as ambassadors guiding the participants to the sessions – were in awe as they heard the high school students’ presentations. The adults, some of whom had not heard about dual-credit courses and advanced classes, were moved to have their own children follow the lead of the students presenting. Some who came from neighboring districts wanted to have a comunitario in their area. This mini-Mesa Comunitaria shows the impact of intergenerational collaboration and leadership, where all members of the community are involved in gathering and studying data, taking action on an issue, and informing their peers about what is possible: true family leadership in education.

SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES THUS FAR

Regardless of economic situation, language ability, educational background, or neighborhood, families have the motivation, intelligence, and power to influence their local public schools and act on policy and practice to have an excellent education for all the children. We’ve seen the successful implementation of the comunitario approach manifested in many ways:

- Youth and adults spread word about the early comunitarios. Sister organizations appreciated what they heard and adopted the model. Since then, the RGV Equal Voice Network has been actively transmitting and promoting the comunitario model.
- All comunitarios, intergenerational and bilingual, learn about issues of critical interest to families in family-friendly language.
- A key part of the comunitario process is for members to take on an education project to effect change in their local school(s). Currently, all of the comunitarios have adopted education projects focusing on graduation requirements and college preparation tracks.
- Meetings, sessions, and workshops are participatory and include small-group conversations about critical education policies, programs, and practices.
- Intergenerational projects emerge from experiences and conversations and become opportunities for action.
- Adults and youth share information online for conducting meetings and making live-streamed presentations.
- Both youth and adults emerge as leaders.



When all members of the community are involved in gathering and studying data, taking action on an issue, and informing their peers about what is possible, that is true family leadership in education.

There are also many challenges. Work in the community is not a linear, step-by-step process. For the early comunitarios, one lesson learned quickly was not to elect officers too soon. Leadership needs to emerge after the group gets to know each other and has started to work on their educational project. Otherwise, elections are often based on personality or friendship rather than on commitment to the actionable data project. We do not want to repeat the mistakes of traditional parent organizations where the “super mom” or “super teen” become gatekeepers and elitist about their positions.

Typical school campuses have prejudices about families. There may be resistance, at first, to having families in advocacy roles. It takes time to work with school leadership to build trust. Young people can bridge the connection to families and help the school be more aware of the strengths of families. When students are allowed to be in leadership positions or be the presenters, it puts educators in the role of listeners, which nurtures mutual respect and understanding.

Time constraints are a constant challenge. Some families and schools want to see immediate change, but the comunitario process takes time. It is not a one-day event with a deliverable. Results are not quick; a more realistic span of time to see very concrete results in schools and communities would be five to ten years. You have to be committed for the long haul. We are collecting formative information and are involving families and youth in the debriefing and evaluation. Projects that result in families having a voice in improving schools motivate the community for continued action.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES

Important recommendations for replicating IDRA’s south Texas comunitario approach include:

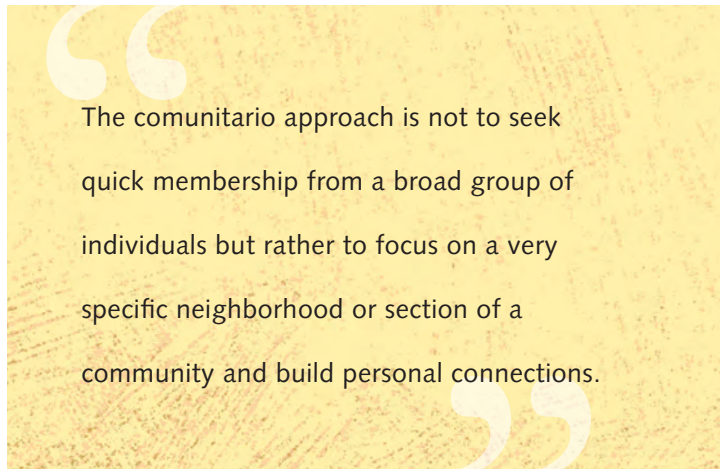
- Identify a community organization, civic group, or church that is willing to sponsor and organize an intergenerational group of adults and youth from a specific community who want to have excellent public neighborhood schools.
- Partner with a grassroots organization that has real, ongoing, and personal contact with both adults and youth.
- Have a core group of both adults and youth who are in touch with their neighbors interested in belonging to such an organization.
- Build community and relationships through personal home-visits and one-on-one communication in the language of the community, conducted by comunitario members, the sponsoring organization staff, and – if there is access and a good relationship – the schools’ Title I family liaisons.
- Do not suggest electing officers or becoming a formal organization until the group has solidified and its members view themselves as a group.
- Bring together about twenty adults and youth who commit themselves to the organization and to the goal of excellent schools for all children.
- Facilitate a conversation to have the initial group identify their common vision and goals.
- Identify data sources on schools, preferably from a state education site. Ideally, an intermediary organization accesses data about schools and presents it or makes it accessible to community groups. IDRA helps to make information family-friendly

and translate it into Spanish. It is also important to have facilitating and training approaches to review and analyze data that allows for critical analysis and dialogue by the families.

There are, of course, caveats to these steps:

Do not start by trying to sell a parent-teacher organization to the initial group. Many of those we are approaching aren't interested in the traditional mode of a campus-based organization and in the traditional functions of such a group. You may mention that the ultimate goal is to form a community education organization, but the group must emerge with its own vision, mission, and goals around the focus on having all children having excellent neighborhood public schools.

Do not shoot for large numbers, speed, or scope of organization. Some excellent organizations have been formed that are regional or statewide, and those have their own place and function. The comunitario approach is not to seek quick membership from a broad group of individuals but rather to focus on a very specific neighborhood or section of a community and build personal connections. Mass media, printed fliers, or online communications cannot replace ongoing, authentic outreach and personal contact. The comunitario approach is given life and continuity through labor-intensive outreach, but it rewards the community with continuity and emerging leadership from parents who were previously marginalized.



The comunitario approach is not to seek quick membership from a broad group of individuals but rather to focus on a very specific neighborhood or section of a community and build personal connections.

POSSIBILITIES AND QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

If small community centers in colonias, with limited resources, can be the hosts of successful family-student-school education projects, there are great possibilities for many schools. When the starting point is the family, drawing on the assets and funds of knowledge in the community, the results can change the future of education for vulnerable students. Key questions for the future include:

- How do we identify community organizations that could sponsor comunitarios, and are there a significant number in the country?
- How do we maintain the strength-based, asset-valuing approach toward poor and disenfranchised families when the deficit or condescending attitudes permeate our institutions?

For more youth-centered stories of intergenerational family leadership, see IDRA's May 2016 newsletter: http://www.idra.org/images/stories/Newsltr_May2016.pdf.

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YOUTH VOICES AND ACTIVISM IN THE PTA COMUNITARIO

Lupita Perez

Lupita Perez is an animator at ARISE (A Resource in Serving Equality) in Alamo, Texas

I got involved in ARISE because of my mother. My mother would participate in the meetings for ARISE, and she would come to the community PTA, and she would bring me. And then I started being a volunteer in ARISE, and that's how I got involved – about six years ago, when I was sixteen. When I started volunteering, I started participating in the summer program, and from there I started being a volunteer animator with kids from first and second grade at this program called *Lectura de Verano* – “Summer Reading.” And then from there I just started getting involved in ARISE, and now I'm on the staff at ARISE. My role is called an “animator,” and it involves being around the community, coordinating meetings, and going to the community door-to-door to show the kinds of programs we have. We animate women, children, and youth from the community to participate in our program and to be leaders of their own community.

When there's a PTA meeting, we go door-to-door and explain what a comunitario PTA meeting is, and we go and animate the community to come to our PTA. When parents hear “PTA,” they think it will be in English, because when the school's PTA invites them, the community basically doesn't go because it's just in English. Our community PTA is based in the language of the community, which is Spanish. If we bring in speakers who speak English, there is someone who will translate for the community. And when we tell them that the point of the meeting is to hear from our community, they get interested. And what I've seen is that the community actually comes to the community PTA meetings, and they advocate, and they learn.

When I was in high school, my mother didn't speak very much English. She wouldn't attend any of the PTA meetings at school, and she wouldn't even go and ask how I was doing at school, because she didn't know any English. And now, going to PTA comunitario meetings with my mom is motivating me to do what she couldn't do with me, with my brother and sister. Now my mother has learned a little bit more, and we actually go to the schools and we go and check up on my sister, now that she's in high school, how she's doing on her credits. Even though I work at ARISE, I still like coming to the PTA meetings. It has shown me how not to be nervous, how to ask questions, and learn a little bit more about my sister and her school.

When I was in high school, I didn't take the college prep classes because I didn't know that it was for my own good. I always thought it was really hard taking those classes. And one of the things I remember in one of the PTA meetings: they said that as Latinos, we don't take those classes because we don't want to struggle or we worried it's too much for us. From there, I learned that it was fine for my sister to take those college classes. My mom and I talked to her about it, and at first my sister didn't want to take the college classes because she was scared that it would be too much, and we pushed her and animated her to get those classes. And now she's actually in college classes and she's doing really well.

The youth are involved in the community PTA too. They are actually members of the PTA, and when we have meetings with families, the youth come with their parents, and they hear about the school credits, things that they know, and the youth try to explain to the community, too. I guess in one way, our youth tell their parents what goes on in school and the problems that they have in school. When I go to the community PTA meetings, I sometimes hear the parents bringing up problems that their kids are having in school, and I'm, like, “Oh, I had that problem, too.” And maybe this way, we can help each other.

And it's not just the meetings. We have trainings for the youth every month. And we have a week of retreat for them in the summer. That's when they plan a project that they want to do during the year to help the community. We ask them, what are the problems that you see in your community? What are the things you want to change? They're the ones who actually plan what project they want to do. At ARISE, we might help them, but it's all based on them.

This year, it was the wastewater treatment plant that they wanted to change. They have educated the community on how to advocate on rights. They actually made this community meeting, and they educated the community on the problem that we've been having here in the community, which is a really bad odor – they wanted to stop the smell. Some people in the community say that they have complained, but there hasn't been any change. A group of youth leaders started passing out flyers door-to-door to the community, and started giving a little bit of information about what's causing the smell, and as a community member what they could do. And one man from the community said it was a really good thing that the youth were taking action on a community problem, and that he was going to assist at any of the community meetings that the youth could make. We've been working in collaboration with the city, trying to find grant money to buy a mechanical wastewater treatment plant. We've been working with the EPA and a lot of other different organizations, and the youth have actually gone and presented the project at the courthouse, and they have shown it to the city, to the commissioner.

There are younger kids from our community that see our youth volunteers, and those kids have said that they want to be a volunteer when they grow up. They want to be volunteers and they want to help other kids. And some of our youth go to college, some start working, but they still come, any chance that they have, they still come. And they come over and they still help with our kids from the community. That's what they love – they love seeing the kids from the community happy.

Strategies for Scaling Up: Promoting Parent Involvement through Family-School-Community Partnerships

MOMOKO HAYAKAWA AND ARTHUR REYNOLDS

Flexibility, creativity, and collaboration are required to successfully meet the needs of each school when scaling up family engagement programs across a diverse range of communities.

Are you interested in participating in a healthy cooking workshop?

Are you interested in participating in a “Real Men Read” event with your child at the school?

Are you interested in reading to your child’s class?

Parents are often asked at the beginning of the school year whether they would be willing to volunteer their time or participate in various events offered at the school. Parents may express interest in participating in these events, but to the teacher’s chagrin, low parent turnout is unfortunately a frequent reality. It is all too common to hear from teachers that demanding and busy life schedules prevent parents from following through in their commitment to participating at school events.

In our work implementing the Child-Parent Center Preschool to Third Grade (CPC P-3) program, we have encountered a variety of barriers, but also have developed strategies to overcome these challenges. As intervention researchers and implementers of the Midwest expansion of CPC P-3, we have worked with schools across diverse demographics and have identified some major barriers frequently experienced by schools. Through close collaboration with teachers, social workers, administrative support, and school staff, we have surveyed numerous public schools on feedback they have received from parents on the challenges of participating in school events.

Scaling up our program across diverse communities in the Midwest has required flexibility and collaboration

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to build strong family-school-community partnerships, allowing schools to adapt components of our program to fit their needs, engaging with school-based collaborative leadership teams, and creating dedicated physical space for parents to feel welcome.

Scaling up our program has required flexibility and collaboration, allowing schools to adapt components of our program to fit their needs, engaging with school-based collaborative leadership teams, and creating dedicated physical space for parents to feel welcome.

THE CPC P-3 PROGRAM

Established in 1967 and initially implemented in Chicago, the Child-Parent Center (CPC) is a center-based early intervention that provides comprehensive educational and family-support services to economically disadvantaged families from preschool through third grade. Each CPC is located within or near an elementary school building. Receiving a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant in 2012¹ allowed us to further expand the CPC P-3 model across thirty-seven schools in four urban and suburban communities of various sizes in Illinois and Minnesota.

The CPC P-3 program is a targeted school reform effort with an overall goal to promote children's academic

1. For more on the i3 program, see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/index.html?exp=0>.

success and facilitate parent involvement in children's education. The program reaches these goals through implementing six key elements:

- **Effective learning experiences from Pre-K to third grade:** Ensure mastery in language and literacy, math, science, and social-emotional development throughout early childhood.
- **Aligned curriculum:** Organize a sequence of evidence-based curricula and instructional practices that address multiple domains of child development within a balanced, activity-based approach.
- **Parent involvement and engagement:** Comprehensive services are led by the parent resource teachers and school-community representatives, including multifaceted activities and opportunities to engage families.
- **Collaborative leadership team:** A leadership team (parent resource teacher, school-community representative, curriculum alignment liaison, and parent liaison) is run by a head teacher in collaboration with the principal and assistant principal.
- **Continuity and stability:** Preschool to school-age continuity, through co-located or close-by centers, incorporates comprehensive service delivery and stability for children and families.
- **Professional development system:** Online professional development and on-site follow-up support is integrated for classroom and program applications.

The integration of these elements across the entire early childhood period distinguishes the CPC P-3 program from other approaches, which may include specific initiatives such as professional development or instructional enhancements but do not usually lead to strong and sustained gains in

student learning. Because of the comprehensive scope of the elements, the CPC program seeks to enhance the culture of learning in the school, which makes it a school reform model, and our research has found large and sustained gains in student achievement and parent involvement (Reynolds, Ou & Topitzes 2004; Reynolds et al. 2011; Reynolds et al. 2002).

While all six elements work in tandem and are essential to the model, a unique and critical aspect of the CPC P-3 program is the parent involvement and engagement component, which has been successfully implemented across diverse communities.

A MENU-BASED SYSTEM OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

The CPC model of parent involvement and engagement emphasizes a tailored approach through a “menu-based” system. All CPC parent involvement programs offer events and workshops from the following categories:

- Volunteering in the classroom
- Child development and parenting
- Language, math, and science
- Health, safety, nutrition
- Career, education, personal development
- Field trips and community events
- Home involvement

This menu-based system is made possible through our parent involvement system, which requires the following steps to implement a successfully tailored parent program.

1. Family Needs Assessment, which inquires about family needs and interests as well as times available for in-school activities, and provides an opportunity for families to describe

needs for social services. School staff work collaboratively to administer the family needs assessment at the beginning of each year and use this information to determine what types of activities to include and how best to deliver them.

2. Asset Mapping, a process of gathering formal and informal information about resources available in the school and neighborhood community, which can be used to further develop partnerships and the sharing of resources between the school and community partners.

3. Parent Involvement Plan is developed by the parent involvement and engagement staff, based on the results of the needs assessment and asset mapping.

4. Monthly Parent Involvement Calendar, which lists the time and day when an event or activity is occurring for a particular month. At the end of each month, based on the parent involvement plan, school staff meet with families to brainstorm and develop events and activities of interest to families for the upcoming month. The activities provided by the school vary each month based on the families’ interests and themes covered in the curriculum. The parent involvement calendar is approved by the principal and distributed to all families on the last day of each month.

5. Parent Involvement Log, maintained by each site to document the frequency of attendance of events, including the event type, time, duration, and who participated. This allows parent involvement and engagement staff to understand and tailor parent programming in subsequent months to ensure an effective and successful program.

Parent involvement and engagement staff work collaboratively with parents to develop events and workshops for families from a list of broad categories. The program maintains high fidelity

while simultaneously featuring tailoring by ensuring customized events and workshops based on individual school's needs assessments, but offering at least one event or workshop from every parent involvement category. Thus, the frequency of events from each category differs by each school – some schools may have weekly nutrition classes while others have weekly GED workshops – but all families are presented with a menu of options. In this way, we have been able to implement our parent involvement and engagement program across a diverse range of communities.

The tailored, menu-based approach is integral to a successful CPC parent program with high levels of school-based parent involvement and engagement. Physical participation in events, activities, and workshops held at the school is emphasized based on previous CPC research that has shown that frequency of attendance is associated with children's achievement (Miedel & Reynolds 1999). Recent research has shown that school-parent involvement, within the context of the CPC program, increases student motivation, which then increases achievement and later student motivation, as well as subsequent school-parent involvement (Hayakawa et al. 2013). As a result, the CPC program emphasizes parent involvement and engagement as a critical element that must be implemented successfully and tailored appropriately to reflect the needs of each school-family-community.

The flexibility and individualized approach to the parent involvement program has allowed schools to creatively adapt their program to their families' needs and interests. One inner-city school with a predominantly Latino population found through their needs assessment that families were most interested in health events; families were attending healthy

cooking classes, Zumba classes, and walking groups, but there was consistently low attendance in workshops on child development and literacy. Since parent participation data is meticulously collected as part of the CPC program, parent involvement staff recognized the popularity of Zumba classes and decided to attach a literacy component to them: parents would come to participate in the popular Zumba class and stay for a literacy workshop. In this case, the key to parents' attendance was identifying an event that matched parents' interests and motivated families to come to school. Furthermore, once families felt welcome and comfortable in the schools, they continued to participate in other events that they had not attended at the beginning of the school year.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP TEAM

Another reason we have been successful in developing, maintaining, and growing a P-3 parent involvement and engagement culture in all of our schools is through our strong collaborative leadership teams. Each team consists of a parent resource teacher (PRT), school-community representative (SCR), head teacher, curriculum alignment liaison, parent liaison, and principal. The entire team must work together to ensure a welcoming environment for families. The PRT and SCR are critical roles in implementing and maintaining a successful parent program, as one PRT noted:

If parents feel comfortable coming into the school, talking with their teachers and their principals, they're going to feel connected to their child's education. Therefore, they'll stay involved all the way through elementary and high school.

The Parent Resource Teacher

The PRT is a certified teacher who directs the parent program and staffs the Parent Resource Room in the Center as a full-time job. Because the PRT has experience as a classroom teacher, he or she is able to serve as a liaison between families and the school system. Working collaboratively with the SCR, the PRT administers a family needs assessment, develops a parent involvement plan, and creates a parent program that includes monthly input from families on events and workshops they are interested in attending. The PRT plays a critical role in not only assessing the needs of the families of that particular school, but also providing opportunities that meet these needs during days and times that are convenient for families with varying schedules. An equally important responsibility of the PRT is to welcome families and develop strategies to bring in marginalized families, as a PRT said:

Our parents often feel they have nothing to contribute. We want parents to understand that they are the first teachers in their child's life. Everything we do is geared to equip them for that role.

The PRT is also responsible for being the key liaison between families and teachers. In this capacity, the PRT not only develops parent events and take-home activities that tie themes covered in the children's classrooms into home involvement, but also collaborates with teachers on strategies to include parent participation in the classroom. One parent reflected:

So, being able to see what he was doing in the classroom, I could relate to it more and so we could bring that home also to be, like, "Oh, remember when this happened in the classroom?" or "I know you do this stuff in the classroom." Because they would write a newsletter saying, like, we're doing this stuff in the

classroom, but actually being there and seeing – I felt like that was a tool for me at home as a parent to make it more seamless of a transition.

Creativity is an important feature to the success of the PRT's role. With limited dollars and resources, a PRT must develop events and workshops for families with different interests and needs. The success of the parent program hinges upon the PRT's ability to address the needs, interests, and availability of the families. We have learned that these strategies can look very different, based on the particular school-community.

In one of our schools with a high Hmong population, in a mid-size city, we found that providing a diverse set of events (e.g., personal development, health and safety, arts and crafts) on a daily basis was not addressing the interests of the families. As the PRT greeted families at the school gate and made phone calls to families to welcome them to the parent room and personally invite them to upcoming events, families stated that there were too many options and they were too busy. This resulted in no to low turnout at these events. The PRT worked with the SCR to understand what types of activities families were interested in and what times of the day would work best for them. By reviewing the data collected through the parent involvement log, the PRT was able to provide events that met the needs, interests, and schedules of families. For this particular site, the most effective approach was to provide one or two different events per week – focusing on child development, language, literacy, and math – in addition to one recurring monthly event. Furthermore, the PRT realized that afterschool literacy events in the evening and morning events with the principal had higher parent participation than events held during student pick-up time in the afternoon.

However, in another urban school with a strong school-community culture, the success of the parent program hinged upon the variety and high frequency of events offered. In this school, two to three events were offered each day. Balancing a high demand for diverse events and workshops with a limited budget required the PRT to work with the SCR and reach out to community organizations and businesses that would provide workshops and resources for free. For example, they were able to form a connection with a local bakery that donated baked goods for parent involvement and engagement events. As the school was perceived as central to the community, local businesses were willing to donate materials and time; we received donated art supplies for parent craft events, and local business owners presented workshops to parents on how to write a resume, how to interview for a job, what to wear to a job interview, and how to start their own business. This community-building process takes time, as it is tied to the strength of the relationship between the school and the community, but it is made possible through the role of the SCR.

The School-Community Representative

The SCR is a paraprofessional who works with the PRT to implement the parent program and is hired because of his or her extensive knowledge of the local community and service agencies. Typical activities include recruiting and enrolling families in person and over the phone, providing resource referrals to parents, conducting home visits, and developing and strengthening relationships among the family, school, and communities.

In our initial implementation of this role, we hired half-time SCRs. However, we quickly realized that this process requires a full-time position, as developing relationships with

families and the community takes time. Furthermore, in nine schools within one urban district, we found that children's school attendance increased when we increased the hours of SCRs from half-time to full-time. SCRs are expected to recruit families to not only enroll and continue attendance in the program, but also participate as active members of the school community. This requires the SCR to physically work in the community – not just within the school building. As one SCR said:

It's all about the relationship. Without it, families will not open up about their real needs. Families need someone they can go to when in crisis, and I am happy that I can be available to point them in the right direction to find the assistance they need.

Creativity and flexibility are key to an SCR's ability to create a sense of welcome and trust within a school community. At one of our schools located in a suburb that draws students bussed in from rural regions, the SCR noticed that parents were simply not coming to school and attending any events. As the SCR was driving around in the school's neighborhood, she soon realized that many parents worked at or spent time socializing at the neighborhood gasoline station. Seeing this as an opportunity, the SCR made frequent visits throughout the week to the gasoline station to meet families and establish her role as someone in both the school and neighborhood community. This provided her with an opportunity to get to know the families and gain the trust of the families. Once this relationship was established, she was able to provide home visits and welcome families to participate in school events and workshops.

THE PARENT RESOURCE ROOM

Another integral component to our successful parent program has been the availability of a physical space dedicated to welcoming parents: the Parent Resource Room. Located within each CPC and managed by the PRT, the Parent Resource Room provides a warm and friendly environment within the school, where parents can come in, learn, and become an active member of the school community.

In many of our schools, we have found that the initial barrier to parent involvement and engagement is having the parents physically enter the school building. Having a physical space dedicated to parents that is organized by the PRT and SCR, both of whom are school-family-community liaisons, is important in welcoming families. We have realized that this is the first step to developing a successful parent involvement program in the school building. The Parent Resource Room allows families who may not feel comfortable in a school building to have a safe space to meet other families, and also express their concerns or ask questions to a teacher (the PRT) who can assist them with concerns they may have at home or with their child at school. One SCR described its importance for her school community:

Any questions they have, anything we can help with, our doors are always open and we're always available. We never turn anyone down when they come to us for help of any kind. . . . The workshops we offer are customized to their needs. If they need a job, we can help them with resumes and applications. If they need a place to wash their baby's clothes, we invite them to use our washer and dryer. We encourage them to stop by the Parent Resource Room or come see me in my office any time to talk.

SCHOOL-FAMILY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

At the heart of the CPC model lies a strong school-family-community partnership. The PRT, SCR, and Parent Resource Room are all critical components of the model that facilitate this partnership through encouraging families to perceive themselves as an integral part of the school community. Moreover, the activities, events, and workshops held in the Parent Resource Room require outreach and partnership with community organizations and local businesses. As the community contributes their time, knowledge, and resources in the Parent Resource Room to strengthen the skills and address the needs of the families, this partnership is developed and strengthened. Families feel supported in the school and are better equipped to support their children's education, as some of our parents reported:

I come to the workshops [at the center], and, you know, movie day, or game night. Stuff like that has helped me be more involved in [my son's education], and learn how to create different activities for him to do. Whether they are here, there, or at home . . . coming to the events has showed me that I can still be a mother and have fun at the same time as interacting with him on a learning aspect.

“If they need a job, we can help them with resumes and applications. If they need a place to wash their baby's clothes, we invite them to use our washer and dryer.”

– School-community representative
in the CPC program.

We are currently in our fourth year of implementing the CPC model across diverse populations in the Midwest. Our work underscores the importance for schools to collaborate with families and provide a variety of opportunities that reflect the needs of families from diverse backgrounds. This challenging but effective work is impossible to do well without dedicated staff. Our work highlights the importance of a full-time PPT dedicated to developing and maintaining strong parent involvement and a full-time SCR dedicated to connecting with families.

As we have come across new barriers in scaling up our model, we have explored new strategies to overcome them. For example, in order to reach out to parents of children who are bussed to school, we have provided meet-and-greet teacher events in families' home-communities and used text messaging to send parents reflection topics to work on at home with their children. We are continuing to learn each day and hope that as we expand our program, we continue to gain strategies that will help all schools in increasing their parent involvement and engagement for their families.

For more on the Midwest expansion of the Child-Parent Center program, see <http://humancapitalrc.org/midwestcpc>.

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ALLOWED IN



BUY-IN



“Buy-In” vs. “Allowed In”: Lessons Learned in Family Engagement Program Recruitment and Retention

SUSAN SMETZER-ANDERSON AND JACKIE ROESSLER

Parent focus groups reveal insights about the communication, collaboration, and community buy-in needed for successful family engagement in an under-resourced urban district.

All the lessons we’ve learned introducing a family engagement program in thirty “low-performing” Philadelphia elementary schools would easily fill this issue. You might expect us to detail the challenges of recruiting 3,000 low-income families to participate in

an after-school program. You might expect us to lament “hard-to-reach” parents. You might expect us to warn against working in a school district facing serious, ongoing financial crises. That’s not what you will find here. We have too many positive and valuable takeaways to share that we have

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learned in this rigorous work from our district partners and astute parents.

Here is what you *will* find: an honest discussion of our project’s family recruitment challenges, successes, and recommendations; the wise insights parents expressed during focus groups and implications for increasing families’ sense of welcome in schools; and an exhortation not to avoid but rather to *advance* into a district in crisis. What better place to invest time, resources, and energy than in under-funded schools? Where better to learn the lessons of collaboration than around a table littered with thrice-revised plans?

With support from a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant,¹ our project team has been implementing the FAST (Families and Schools Together) program in thirty Philadelphia schools to improve family engagement and, by extension, advance school turnaround. Our team includes the nonprofit Families and Schools Together, Inc.; the Early Childhood Education Department within the School District of Philadelphia (SDP); and our local agency partner in Philadelphia, Turning Points for Children. The American Institutes for Research (AIR) is the independent evaluator.

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1 For more on the i3 program, see <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/index.html?exp=o>.

CHALLENGES AND PROGRESS WITHIN THE FAST I3 PROJECT IN PHILADELPHIA

2012-2013 We receive a five-year, \$15 million i3 grant to validate a targeted approach to reform that reduces critical barriers to school success, including lack of family engagement and family stress, in sixty low-performing elementary schools. The planning timeframe is reduced due to required funding timelines.

2013-2014 A severe budget crisis in Philadelphia leads to lay-offs of 3,783 SDP employees. Principals handle enrollment tasks and substitute as lunch monitors and classroom teachers – just as we launch FAST in thirty schools. Severe winter weather alters school schedules and changes FAST timelines. A school principal is indicted in a cheating scandal. We serve 545 families.

2014-2015 FAST continues in all thirty schools. Of thirty principals, nine are new and need to be brought up to speed. Our target audience is expanded to include kindergarten *and* first-grade families. The team copes with tragedy as its leader in Philadelphia is shot and killed while waiting at a bus stop. (A co-worker unrelated to the project is arrested.)

The project moves forward. We serve 531 new families.

2015-2016 The next stage of FAST (FASTWORKS) is launched in all thirty schools for first- and second-grade families. To advance the district’s “Read by 4th” goals,* the project team collaboratively creates a “Success in 2nd Grade” program and pilots it at twenty-nine schools. Teacher buy-in increases.

2016-2017 FASTWORKS continues, and the team plans to launch FAST in the thirty control schools. Eighteen principals will require introduction to the program that their predecessors agreed to implement. (Success in 2nd Grade program needs a new funding stream to continue.)

2012–2016 AIR conducts a randomized control trial that includes sixty elementary schools (thirty treatment, thirty control) and a quasi-experiment involving eight matched school pairs. The combined evaluation is assessing FAST impacts at the individual and school levels.

* See <http://libwww.freelibrary.org/readby4th/>.

At the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER), we play an oversight and assistance role. One co-author of this article (Susan Smetzer-Anderson) has been supporting on-the-ground colleagues in strategizing recruitment, researching parent communication preferences, collaborating with AIR on focus groups, and compiling the project's stories for dissemination. As the program manager, the other coauthor (Jackie Roessler) has also managed two other research projects that involved implementing FAST in fifty-six schools. Weekly conference calls, site visits, and ongoing communication with our Philadelphia partners guide our work and, together, we bridge the project to education stakeholders and our funders at the U.S. Department of Education.

As of this writing, our 13 journey is eighteen months from the finish line.

INCREASING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH FAST

FAST is an evidence-based family engagement and prevention program created in 1988 by Dr. Lynn McDonald and developed through years of research at WCER. In the more than twenty-five years since it was first introduced, FAST has been implemented in forty-eight U.S. states and twenty countries, and the program has been recognized by the United Nations, the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.² The eight-session program, designed for both students and their parents, is held in school classrooms and facilitated by trained teams that include at least one parent leader, a school partner (either a teacher or school counselor), and an agency partner. The two-hour sessions

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2 See <http://www.familiesandschools.org/why-fast-works/evidence-based-lists/>.

focus on strengthening parent-child communication, building social capital, increasing families' comfort levels in schools, and improving children's behavioral skills.

FAST sessions are designed to be fun, conceptually rich, developmentally appropriate, and engaging for both adults and children. The program is also culturally adaptable. A "special play" time gives parents one-on-one time with their children. Parents also have time to meet other families and discuss topics they choose, building a broader support network in the process. A shared, free meal brings families together around the same table – a rare experience for many of them. Something that surprises parents is that children serve their parents dinner; this not only reinforces the children's sense of responsibility, but parents are gratified by the show of respect and see how their children can be helpful. In subtle ways, FAST draws adults and children closer together and at the same time reinforces parental authority.

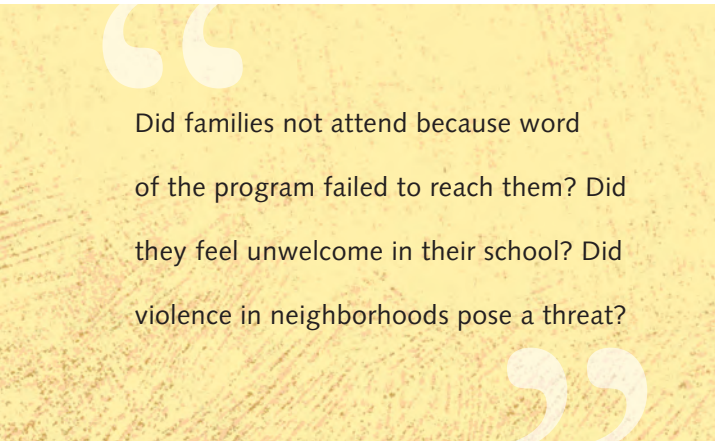
In the thirty Philadelphia schools we first worked with in 2013, we invited only kindergarten students' families to attend, viewing the transition to elementary school as an opportune time for families to build fresh, strong connections in the relational dimensions addressed by FAST. We also aimed to recruit at least 60 percent of kindergarten families to participate. Once in the schools, however, we found out that we had set ourselves a very challenging task.

CHALLENGES TO RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION: LESSONS LEARNED FROM PARENT FOCUS GROUPS

Getting families in the door – and keeping them involved until the end of the program – proved much harder than we expected. We never made our

60 percent participation goal; we averaged 22 percent, and that number was achieved through intense and sustained effort.

Did families not attend because word of the program failed to reach them? Did they feel unwelcome in their school? Did violence in neighborhoods pose a threat? What about the families who came only once or twice and never returned?



Did families not attend because word of the program failed to reach them? Did they feel unwelcome in their school? Did violence in neighborhoods pose a threat?

Yet many families that did participate *loved* the FAST program. They came to every session they could manage. What made them attend session after session, even after they graduated from the program? Why did the program thrive and gain momentum at some schools but limited traction at others? As a team we came to understand that there are at least two outreach strands to consider. One is recruitment – reaching out to people to extend that first invitation to “come and try” FAST. The other is retention – encouraging and maintaining ongoing attendance. What were we doing right? What were we missing?

Going straight to the parents and guardians was the best way to answer these questions, so we invited parents to focus groups facilitated by AIR in 2015. These focus groups included caregivers from nineteen schools and were among

the most illuminating exercises we have done. The forty-three participants fell along the entire spectrum of FAST attendance. They gave us amazing, strategic insights into their situations, decision-making, and perceptions of their schools. Moms, dads, grandmothers, and an uncle clearly identified barriers to participating in their schools – and serving as volunteers – of which we were unaware. They also clarified implementation issues relevant to organization and buy-in. We came away from these groups with a much more nuanced understanding of – and appreciation for – the varied situations faced by the families and schools we are serving.

Building Awareness, Achieving Attendance

Had families heard about the program? Attendees answered with a resounding “Yes.” Parents described FAST program features in remarkable detail, even if they had never attended a FAST session. They knew that the entire family could attend; they would meet other parents; they would have special one-on-one time with their child. In short, awareness of the program was high – far higher than attendance.

Kudos go to Turning Points staff, our SDP partners, FAST teams, and school staff for successfully building awareness. At every school, recruitment is locally driven, so parents recalled different after-school promotional events, variously hosted by teams with school parents, principals, and teachers. Pizza parties with balloons, Rita’s Water Ice treats, school supply giveaways, and more were held over several weeks at all schools. Such events added to a sense of welcome, as one grandmother warmly reflected: “They had a welcome day with water ice and pretzels by the principal, . . . a good experience for my grandson.” In fact, during the second year, we started

recruitment during summer, to build awareness and momentum going into the school year. All of these efforts *were* quite successful in raising awareness. But still, we didn't achieve the participation we wanted.

Influence of Children and Teachers

What or *who* seemed to elevate attendance? Kids and teachers inviting parents personally and repeatedly. The children, one mother said, "get you the most response." She remembered her son coming home from school and saying, "If we go to FAST, we'll get a pretzel the next day. He really wanted to go. And because I didn't want him to be left out, we went." Across our project, we observed this happening. Where teachers talked up FAST repeatedly, kids paid attention. Where activities and rewards excited children, parents responded. Children who fell in love with FAST also nagged parents to return week after week. One mother admitted, "My son made me go back. I did it to keep him happy."

But FAST was rewarding for parents, too. One participant said she was surprised about its impact on her:

I loved FAST. . . . It helped me to open up, and people gravitated to me. We still hang out together and socialize. I didn't expect it to do anything for me. I did it for my grandson. But it helped me even more.

Barriers – Logistical and Perceptual

Despite this impact, our attendance goals went unmet. Parents shared how program times conflicted with work schedules, transportation was complicated, and multiple family responsibilities – such as taking care of sick family members – jostled for priority. One mother shared, "I was tired and pregnant and didn't want to take two busses to go back to school to do the program."

We tried to adapt program schedules to provide more options for working parents. Instead of meeting right after school pick-up, we scheduled some meetings after 5:30 pm. A few programs were held on Saturdays. These changes required our district partners to reschedule rooms, compromise with custodial staff, and arrange and pay for after-hours security. In addition, such changes required teachers to remain very late or to come to work on Saturday mornings. The results? The alternative times netted no gains.

Many parents said they send their children to schools outside their neighborhoods for a variety of reasons, and transportation to distant schools adds complexity to their lives and also affects how they engage in school activities. Insurance liability restrictions kept agency partners from offering rides, and the project did not have money to help with transportation.

Multiple responsibilities? Working two jobs, homeless, taking care of parents, helping children with homework – where does an after-school family engagement program fit into crowded priority lists?

And then there are parents' perceptions and sense of welcome at the school. Impressions of staff strengths and competence, sincerity, willingness to reach out, and attentiveness emerged as parents discussed their schools' various climates. Positive insights balanced concerns. Management styles, the tone of conversations in front of children, and levels of organization came to the fore. A principal at one school, for example, was praised as "assertive" and competent at conflict management. Parents noted principals' efforts to connect and know children by name. Many also had high praise for their children's teachers, the way they made them feel welcome, and their efforts to communicate and problem-solve. As one noted, "My son's teacher would make comments about his day when I

picked him up,” and that it made the school “feel welcoming.”

It makes sense that positive experiences fed a sense of welcome; however, even one bad experience, or a personal sense of ambivalence, fed unease. A principal being late for meetings left a mother feeling disrespected. All parents brought up the negative impacts of budget-driven staff cuts on workloads, especially during the budget crisis in 2013 (when our project launched). They noted staff being stretched too thin and resources being too scarce. Teachers being moved to different classrooms after the school year started – and no communications being sent home about the staff turnover – frustrated parents, too. Implicitly, lack of communication was linked to a lack of welcome and a sense of dissonance.

For parents who feel alienated, introducing a family engagement program alongside other school climate improvements that meet families’ *expressed* needs and desires makes a great deal of sense. Parents might otherwise view the program as irrelevant.

Why Some Families Came but Didn’t Return: Importance of Communication and Trust

What else did our focus groups tell us? First and second impressions are vitally important, but so are third, fourth, and fifth. Consistent, high-quality program delivery – and clear communication – earn parents’ respect and trust, with attendant results. Unfortunately, faltering even once can lead to losing parents’ trust.

The focus groups helped us see where we need to strengthen communication. For example, young children (in particular) benefit from routine, so FAST has built-in repetition for some activities. While activity supplies are refreshed and varied weekly, an

activity might come to feel rote to parents over time. One mother who returned week after week because her son loved the program reflected, “It would have been more engaging if it could have different activities week to week. Changing it up would keep parents more interested.” Comments like this showed that not all parents had been exposed to the reasons for repetition – or the value of the developmentally appropriate activities. They would have appreciated this information.

In addition, some FAST teams came across as “harried” or “disorganized” if they felt pressed for time – a problem at some schools where custodians insisted on a strict schedule since overtime was unavailable. One parent noted:

At first they ran it by the clock and were very professional, . . . treated us like royalty. By the end it wasn’t run as tightly. There were some staff changes. . . . We left early a few times because it was a bit disorganized.

If a program doesn’t come across as organized, parents will likely feel they are wasting their time, even disrespected: “This is two hours of my time and I have a lot to do at home.” At our January 2016 project planning meeting, two of our 13 project consultants (Rutgers University’s Nancy Boyd-Franklin and AIR’s David Osher) also discussed how disorganization communicates disrespect – the last thing we want to convey to parents.

The issues we’ve identified here are, in part, scale-up issues. We’ve learned it is very important to revisit the basics. Communicating rationales for activities and logistics is an easy-to-miss element of retention. Parents reminded us why we must continually ask for their input, even as we stretch to serve more families at more schools. We also were reminded that our good inten-

tions are irrelevant: good intentions don't earn trust. We earn trust at every meeting by showing respect for families and staff. We earn trust by always being on time, asking for regular feedback about how the program is working for the school, and following through on received suggestions. While we try to do this, there's always room for improvement.

Why Some Families Returned Again and Again: Sense of Community and Student Impact

"My kid begged me to take him to FAST." Another parent said, "Starting FAST made [school] feel more like a family. It helped relationships between parents, like an ice-breaker." One dad commented, "As a single dad with four kids, . . . FAST helped me so much – to stop being by myself."

Parents appreciated meeting other families, sharing recipes, networking for jobs, learning about community resources, and spending one-on-one time with their child. Parents also celebrated the behavior changes they observed in their children. One parent discussed how her child's speech problems improved, another how her child, a picky eater, learned to try new foods. This experience was a huge victory for her child, and she credited a FAST team member for helping. These and other anecdotal stories came out as parents talked, revealing poignant, difficult-to-statistically-describe program impacts.

Building bridges between parents – extending the network – is one of the goals of FAST. How rewarding it was to hear parents reflect on this! Parents also commented on the connections between community building and problem solving.

We all need to get engaged with other parents. If we knew people before problems happen, we can

work problems out as parents. But [mostly] we all get to know each other when there's a problem.

Building Parent Leaders and Refining Recruitment

When parents graduate from FAST, they might decide to become FAST team members for future implementations. Undoubtedly, they are the program's most credible spokespeople. But it usually takes one or two FAST cycles to graduate prospective parent leaders, which means the first year is developmental within a school. The first year is also key to refining messages and communication channels for recruitment.

FAST recruitment normally depends on face-to-face conversations and home visits, but in Philadelphia, district safety concerns led us to rely mostly on school-based interactions, emails, robo-calls, and the like. We discovered that for some people, though, face-to-face communication makes all the difference in feeling invited. When asked in an informal parent survey about how they preferred to learn about new activities, Latina respondents specifically highlighted face-to-face invitations. Their answers were related through an interpreter who was a FAST team member. We wondered, without this team member who could serve as an interpreter, would these parents still have attended and shared this information with us?

Qualified interpreters, strategically selected message channels, and culturally relevant content and images in messages, events, meals, and literacy are key considerations in recruitment and retention. Clearly, diverse parents and ELL staff (or volunteer interpreters) are critical to involve on teams and in designing outreach. With Philadelphia's high immigrant population, it's not surprising that some of

our 13 schools are mini-United Nations, which meant that we translated materials (through the district) into Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, French, Khmer, Nepali, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Since some parents also have lower levels of literacy in their home languages, we also evaluated our materials to assure messages were readable at or below a seventh-grade level.

School parents working on teams also help refine the FAST program for the school culture, as well as help create the messages that resonate with other parents in the community. They are invaluable allies when navigating barriers to program implementation. That said, planners can further strengthen outreach by gathering insights from representatives of as many social groups in the school community as possible. Program advocates might advance this effort by systematically conferring with school staff and community residents with long-term knowledge of the neighborhood. Which families in the school regularly attend meetings or volunteer? Which are on the fringe? Invitations to groups who may sometimes seem relegated to the sidelines need to be specially considered. Who are their de facto opinion leaders? Are there particular people in the school community they really identify with? Because of the importance of this task, it's worth considering allocating time and money to set up school-based parent advisory panels to specifically inventory and reflect on the nature of school communications, cultures, and family involvement.

The Crux of Recruitment: “Buy-In” versus “Allowed In”

One of our key lessons is that buy-in is not the same as being “allowed in.” In our 13 project, principals agreed to implement FAST several months before the fall 2013 launch. In the interim – amid contract disputes, staff lay-offs, and reallocations – family engagement was a priority, but so were a lot of other things. As a result, in some schools we were mostly allowed in; the buy-in had to be re-initiated.

Buy-in is, at least partially, related to shared vision. Among the principals involved in the 13 project, some have been very invested in FAST. These principals participated actively in outreach and helped us to problem-solve, even sharing with other principals why they are sold on the program as part of their family engagement efforts. We also came to recognize that some school leaders were more passive in interacting with us and occasionally less than forthcoming in collaborating with us about how to best communicate with parents. This leads us to wonder if the principal's priorities and vision may not have aligned with those of FAST in ways appropriate for the school. The value and goals of FAST may not have come across clearly, although our district partners tirelessly advocated for us. Or the financial crises impacting the school may have simply raised the height of obstacles on the implementation road.

Developing alignment – a shared understanding of goals on both sides – requires sufficient time for orientation and planning pre-launch. Just as school leaders desire clarity about how a program will serve their goals, program implementers and teams need to know how they can align the program with school goals. Gains made through a program also need to be communicated clearly so that leaders can share in the reward, their vision affirmed and

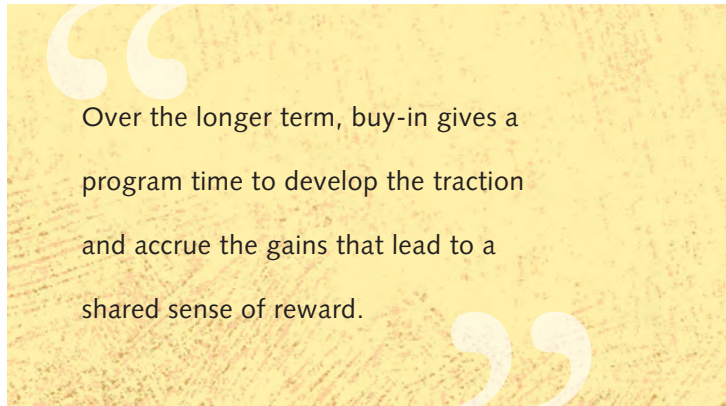
enlarged. Over the longer term, buy-in gives a program time to develop the traction and accrue the gains that lead to that sense of reward. Fortunately, we've seen it happen in some schools, offering encouragement about what is possible.

The Impact of District Financial Stress on School-Family Engagement

The schools where we introduced FAST were described in legalese as “low-performing” (based on Annual Yearly Progress results), but we believe a more accurate descriptor is “under-resourced.” These schools are bearing the brunt of several years of budget cuts borne by the district as a result of federal- and state-level funding fluctuations. The district has made national headline news because of budget battles between the city and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, who share financial responsibility for the district as well as lopsided policy-making authority. Just before we launched FAST in 2013, the district was forced to lay off 3,783 employees and close twenty-four schools due to a politically disputed budget shortfall (Lyman & Walsh 2013). Principals were filling in as substitute teachers and lunch room monitors and had little time to discuss the program with us. We can't help but wonder at the impacts of this crisis on school-level buy-in to our program.

Given this context, it might come as no surprise that we use the word “heroic” to describe the work of some of our teacher, principal, family, and district partners. Developing long-term relationships with these folks has elevated our appreciation for the daily demands they face to meet students' needs, even as they add a new family engagement program to their workload. We have stood in kindergarten classrooms crowded with more than thirty desks, where students work under the smiling gaze of Clifford-the-Big-Red-Dog and colorful banners

with good behavior slogans and math facts. Displayed artwork shows each student's vibrant, imaginative side. Teachers in classrooms we have visited are creating rich learning environments, despite scarce resources.



Many of our focus group members praised their children's teachers for spending their own money to purchase materials for classrooms. It was sobering to note that several low-income families were likewise contributing to classroom supplies out of their own pocket – to support their teachers and children. With the vast majority of our families living at or far below the poverty line, the school district's fiscal straits are deeply felt; many families try to fill needs when they can. They worry about their children and their schools, and they are not alone: According to a recent poll, public education tops the list of concerns for the citizens of Philadelphia, above issues such as crime and jobs (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2015). At every focus group, parents expressed how much more they wanted for the city's children and schools.

“Nuanced, incremental relationship building; cross-cultural mingling; even bracing moments of mutual encouragement among adults who met through FAST – these encourage and motivate us.”

FINAL REFLECTIONS

So what does this mean for those of us trying to implement family engagement programs in “low-performing,” under-resourced schools in financially stressed districts? What inroads might family engagement programs make, when civic decks seem circumstantially stacked?

The stories our focus group parents told speak to the reasons we do this work. They also gave us insights into successes we had not heard about before, or counted. As a result, we’ve come to realize that authentic success has a different look than we predicted in our grant proposal to the U.S. Department of Education. Consider this evidence of parents’ growth in agency and sense of connection to their school communities: FAST families collaborated, using their groups’ resources, to purchase Thanksgiving turkeys for food boxes they collected for other low-income families at their schools. Their generosity deeply affected us. How did it affect the recipients and schools?

Nuanced, incremental relationship building; cross-cultural mingling; even bracing moments of mutual encouragement among adults who met through FAST – these encourage and motivate us. If it weren’t for these less obvious forms of success, we might ask, how

many teachers would persist in overcrowded classrooms? How many principals would labor the same hours – for 16 percent less pay than they earned the previous year? Seemingly small successes mean a great deal in deeply challenged places.

Through family engagement programs like FAST, we build school-based relationships critical to an agenda of transformation. As much as we want transformation to be dramatic, it is proving to be incremental, with every target school shedding light on what is required to engage families more successfully.

For more on the FAST program, see <https://www.familiesandschools.org/>.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Kim Jones, i3 project leader at Turning Points for Children, whose life was tragically taken on January 13, 2015. Kim was dedicated to bettering the lives of children and families in Philadelphia. Her work mirrored the respect and hope embedded in FAST.

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Q&A WITH ROB LAIRMORE

Rob Lairmore is the lead FAST quality control manager at Turning Points for Children in Philadelphia.

What does your job involve?

I meet with principals and teachers in several schools and work with them to get the word out about FAST. I also recruit team members (parents, school partners, agency partners, and other volunteers) and support them as they recruit families to attend the program. Before and during FAST implementation, I provide training and help maintain program fidelity at each of my (five to six) schools.

What are your takeaway lessons in working with these schools?

“One-Size-Fits-All” does not work in these schools because each school is unique. It is very important to listen to the people we are trying to partner with, to ask them to identify the barriers they see to family involvement and program implementation, and to ask their advice for the best ways to reach parents at their school. It’s great to have a big plan for a large-scale implementation, but we absolutely need to listen to locals’ insights about how to implement in their school. Along the same lines, we need time up front to research the neighborhood and school audience. If I had had access to the school sooner, been able to canvas the neighborhood and talk to more local folks earlier, I might have had a better idea of what each neighborhood school was dealing with and been more successful in identifying partners.

What would you suggest to people trying to launch family engagement programs like FAST in urban schools?

Planning time is really important. For example, to build teams, get familiar with each school, meet principals, etc., program folks ideally need a good year, to be better prepared to launch in the fall. Of course, you’ll have to deal with principal and teacher turnover, but at least you have a good chunk of groundwork done.

“Soft launches” make a lot of sense. Instead of starting in a lot of schools at once, choose five or ten. Then make time to study the neighborhoods, figure out the barriers, and roll out more incrementally, building up to the larger launch.

Also, consider doing a softer launch *within* schools. Instead of aiming for a 60 to 75 percent participation target right from the start (as we did), aim for the people who are ready now, and gain traction in the school.

I also think it’s a good idea to set initial attendance goals with the principal and school staff. We came in with lofty attendance goals. I can’t tell you the number of times principals told us that parents “never” come to afterschool events, or that they never get more than a handful in the door. Our goals were far higher than anything they had ever seen. As a result, our attendance numbers always looked bad – even when principals said they were moving in a positive direction based on previous history. Being realistic and celebrating step-by-step advances keeps everyone’s morale up, even the school leaders.

Final words?

When you see parents growing and changing and becoming the advocates their children need and deserve, you realize all the work is worth it.



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