

Importance of Parent Engagement

Students learn most effectively when their parents are engaged in their education. Engagement is different than simple involvement. Whereas involving parents, such as in traditional PTOs, can allow schools to feel accomplished and that they are doing the right thing, it falls short of engagement as parent involvement can a) marginalize the parents b) reinforce traditional upper middle-class definitions of parent involvement, effectively alienating a portion of the parents and c) allow the school's own interests (rather than that of the students) to dictate the level and form of involvement (Quezda 2016). In particular, in her study of the Morningside Elementary School, Posey-Maddox found that an enlarged PTO presence could create negative side effects, "the professionalization of the MPTO intensified racial and class tensions and status positions at the school, and not all resources brought by the MPTO parents benefitted all students" (2014, p.114). PTOs offer parents a traditional opportunity to involve themselves in the school but can also be confusing and unwelcoming to parents unaccustomed to such establishments. As a result, it is necessary to find ways for all parents to be engaged in the school.

Beyond involvement, parent engagement is most necessary as it not only enables parents to play meaningful roles in their child's education, it also equips them to educate other parents on the most effective ways to engage as well. Patterson and Williams offer a picture of an engaged parent, "parents have an active voice in establishing goals for their students maintain ongoing relationships with the staff, and program offerings are created to be

culturally responsive and support the best interest of the individuals and the collective” (2015 p. 80). In her 2016 article, “Strengthening Relationships with Families in the School Community”, Maria Quezada builds on this, citing Ferlazzo’s (2009) definition of an engaged parent, “The parent is...a leader or a potential leader who is integral to identifying a vision and goals” (p.29). Importantly, these “vision and goals” should be a shared vision with the school. This creates the potential for “co-powerment” which Dr. Roberto Vargas defines as, “communication that seeks to lift the confidence, energy, and agency of another person, self and the relationship” (p. 24). By collectively identifying visions and goals, schools not only empower the parents to play a significant role in their child’s education but the school is also able to learn more about that student’s family and what is important to them. The co-powerment model recognizes that schools and parents are jointly vital to the success of the student. Below, I will outline a few approaches that this school system could implement to better engage *all* of our students’ families, especially those who are non-English speaking or fall into a lower-income bracket than the parents who are typically active in our PTO.

Step #1: Create a Parent Liaison position

Parents hold a unique power to help their fellow parents become engaged in the school. Parents tend to trust other parents, especially those of similar backgrounds or socio-economic means as themselves. As such, identifying and recruiting potentially powerful parents is important to engage the whole community, “parents are able to recruit families in the community and can effectively provide program information to friends and other families in a culturally appropriate manner” (Downs et. al, 2008, p.229). Lowe-Maddox demonstrates the

importance that parents place on surrounding their child, and themselves, with other families with whom they are comfortable, "...she ended up enrolling her child at Morningside because of the connections she developed with neighborhood families in the GPG and the comfort she had in knowing other parents who were enrolling their children" (51). Establishing a Parent Liaison enables a school to promote themselves to parents through a voice familiar or similar to themselves. For those parents who do not speak English or who are of lower socio-economic status, a Parent Liaison of a similar background can educate them on means of engagement within the school.

The role of Parent Liaison can be effective not only in educating fellow parents on the means of engagement, but in educating parents as to what they should expect out of their school. By raising parental expectations about their child's education, parent liaisons can empower parents to play a larger role in this process. As Griffith cites in his 2008 study, "Principal Leadership of Parent Involvement", "parents who had higher expectations for their children's educational attainment reported being more involved in all aspects of their children's education" (p.174). Heightened expectations for their child's education can correlate with an increase in parent expectations for their engagement as well. Additionally, Sanders 2008 study demonstrates that the "direct support" of parent liaisons provides, "parents with the information and support needed to negotiate the intricacies of the school system and minimize the knowledge gap that can corrupt home-school relations for poor and minority families" (p. 291). If we want to incorporate more lower income and non-English speaking families, a parent liaison would help introduce these parents into the school system.

Step #2: Establish a practice of home visits amongst teachers and administrators

Many parents, regardless of socioeconomic status or English-speaking ability, can be hesitant to enter a school setting because they feel intimidated by the teacher or lack confidence in their ability to contribute to the educational experience of their child. These feelings are only heightened when the parents' background are different from that of other parents or they lack confidence in their ability to communicate in English. Home visits are one way for the teacher to learn about the student and the family, as well as familiarize themselves with the parents and enable the parents to see the teacher as a caring, approachable resource for their child and themselves, effectively "restructuring the habits/habitus of parent-educator interactions and blurring the boundaries between classrooms and living rooms" which can "positively influence academic outcomes and highlight the valuable funds of knowledge that abound in student home environments" (Johnson 2012 p. 359). Home visits demonstrate to a family that their child's teacher identifies and cares about the value they can bring to the school system, not just for their own child, but for the entire community. Posey-Maddox's study of Morningside Elementary (2014, p. 108) demonstrates the danger of marginalizing groups of parents, but home visits can encourage parents to become more engaged in their child's education. By visiting the home, the teacher is able to take the first step in establishing an authentic partnership with the parents (Auerbach 2010 p. 729).

Step #3: Reflect on the role of the Principal and identify ways to educate parents for advocacy

An effective school leader is far more than simply a school manager. Although this can be the easiest role with which to identify, effective school leadership requires action and

genuine engagement with the parents of the students. As Irish Sanchez notes in Susan Auerbach's 2010 study of school leaders, "Leaders need to develop an inviting environment and assure that all stakeholders are involved in decision making....the more parents know what they *should* expect and demand out of the school, the more you can teach them to hold the schools accountable" (p.744). Accountability can be a scary idea for school leaders, some of whom may want to limit parent involvement to enable them more freedom or freedom from responsibility. This is exactly the wrong approach, however, as marginalizing the parents deprives the students of a vital resource and source of support during their education and life. By creating authentic partnerships with the parents, the school creates the opportunity for easier and more authentic partnerships between the student and parent as well.

Before a school leader can establish authentic partnerships, they must self-reflect to identify why they are pursuing these goals. This must be a genuine effort and desire from the school leader. Auerbach's 2009 article "Portraits in School Leadership" offers a six step framework toward promoting family engagement. Importantly, the first step is "Believing It Is Possible and It Is Their (school leader) Job To Make It Happen" (p.25). Without true belief in the potential of the parents and desire to be the active agent of empowerment, a school leader cannot implement lasting empowerment amongst their students' families.

Conclusion

By establishing a Parent Liaison position, implementing and encouraging home visits, and purposeful self-reflection, a school and school leader can increase parent engagement, particularly among those groups of parents (non-English speaking or low income) who can

struggle to engage in their school communities through traditional avenues, which favor middle class, English speaking families. Taking the steps I have outlined above will demonstrate to these, and all, families that the school genuinely cares about their input and experience and will begin to raise their expectations not only for their child's education but for their role in it. In the end, the goal is to empower the parents to engage in their child's school. As Auerbach describes, "Parent engagement is about bringing them in, acknowledging that they have something to offer, and then providing the support that they need to become more supportive parents and contributing members of the community" (2009 p. 746).

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