

Family and Community Partnerships

The role of Family and Community Partnerships in segregated, desegregated, and integrated schools.

Introduction and Background:

The manner in which schools engage families and community members or organizations as partners in their work can have a large influence on a school's *academic* outcomes, culture of *belongingness*, collective *commitment* to dismantling racism, and appreciation of *diversity* ([the ABCDs of RIDES](#)). This paper will give a theoretical and historical overview of the practice of family and community engagement in diverse schools, focusing on both challenges and opportunities. It will also offer a selection of promising practices that school leaders and teachers, families, and community members can utilize to strengthen their partnership and create more equitable outcomes in their efforts to move toward true integration.

Theoretical overview:

Strong family and community partnerships have played a critical role in the academic success of all students. Studies involving measures of parental involvement have generally found a positive relationship between family involvement and student academic achievement (Jimerson, Egeland, & Teo, 1999). As a result, strategies intended to increase parent involvement can be used as a tool to enhance students' academic experience ([A of the ABCDs](#)). Research shows that families with different demographic characteristics, such as race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or educational attainment tend to exhibit different types of involvement, and therefore any effort to strengthen the family-school partnership must be mindful of such differences (Lee and Bowen, 2006).

School leaders and teachers must approach such engagement through an asset-based framework that respects cultural differences and highlights the strengths that each family brings to the partnership. Faced with implicit biases, lack of awareness and/or training, or poor school and district leadership, schools and districts often fail to engage diverse families appropriately. Educators have often taken a deficit-based approach when engaging families of color, resulting in those families experiencing a reduced sense of belonging ([B of the ABCDs](#)) in the school community and creating an implicit devaluation of diversity and other cultures in the school community as a whole ([D of the ABCDs](#)) (Cooper, Riehl, and Hasan 2010). When it comes to engaging immigrant families, schools often expect a "standard" family and show little sensitivity to the nuances of the immigrant experience. Research indicates that any efforts that target immigrants must be culturally sensitive and rooted in appreciation and respect for the family values (Valdés, 1996).

Historical Review:

Efforts to engage diverse families and communities have evolved over the course of the desegregation movement following *Brown v. Board of Education* to the present day. Prior to school desegregation, parents of color did not have to be formally invited to participate in their children's education (Edwards, 1993). In fact, home-school relationships during times of segregated schooling tended to be "collaborative and trusting," with parents of color taking on a variety of roles within and outside of schools to advocate for educational opportunities and advancements for their children (Fields-Smith, 2004). The rise of the desegregation movement of the 1960's and 70's, however, often left families of color feeling excluded from school decision-making processes. This exclusion marked a clear discrepancy in the experiences of white families and families of color, which ultimately resulted in weakened relationships between the school and the diverse families that the school intended to serve, leading to

mistrust and dampening student achievement. For example, as black children entered integrated schools, they

were met generally by white administrators and teachers who were unprepared to deal with their cognitive styles, social values, beliefs, customs, and traditions. Because of the discontinuity that developed overnight between home and school cultures, these personnel began teaching black children with preconceived notions and stereotypical views about how they functioned (Trent and Artiles, 1993, pg 29).

Since the onset of the desegregation movement, the burden has been placed disproportionately on families of color to advocate for representation in school decision-making processes or for equitable treatment of their students. In what has come to be known as the "Black English case" (Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School v. Ann Arbor School District Board (1979)), black parents had to fight for the equal educational rights of their children who had been rejected by their white teachers due to a perceived inferiority of the oral speech of black families. In this case, the courts found it appropriate to "require the defendant Board to take steps to help its teachers to recognize the home language of the students and to use that knowledge in their attempts to teach reading skills on standard English" (Cobb-Scott, 1985).

The post-desegregation movement landscape is fraught with examples like that of the Black English case, which have contributed to many families of color at diverse schools feeling unwelcome within the school community, hindering efforts to promote true integration. Most recently, discrepancies in access to school decision-making structures across varying racial and socioeconomic lines have resulted in dominant parental groups with greater access to power promoting practices of within-school differentiation, such as talented and gifted programs and restrictive honors course tracks that have heightened segregation practices within schools (i.e. tracking) and further contributed to inequities in access to quality education along lines of race and class (Gordon and Nocon, 2008).

Approaches and Strategies:

The following list is by no means exhaustive, but contains a mix of approaches and strategies that have been used in a variety of contexts to improve the school-home partnership and involve diverse families and communities further in the education of their children.

- [**Reaching Out to Diverse Populations: What Can Schools Do to Foster Family-School Connections?**](#)
 - A guidebook for schools with examples, related research, and recommendations for how schools can better foster family-school connections in diverse populations.
- [**Culturally Responsive Parent Involvement, Sabrina Hope King, A. Lin Goodwin**](#)
 - Successful parental engagement can be critical to a child's success in the classroom. Unfortunately, too often schools have been most attuned to the needs of middle class, able bodied, English speaking families, and have neglected to develop differentiated means of engaging with diverse families. This resource includes key assumptions, common misconceptions, and strategies around the best practices for culturally responsive parental involvement in schools.
- [**Building Trust with Schools and Diverse Families, Cori Brewster and Jennifer Railsback \(2003\)**](#)
 - This article provides the context of the components of trust, culture, and family involvement, each of which are necessary to strengthen the family-school partnership

between schools and diverse families. This article discusses key obstacles to the development of the aforementioned components, as well as examples and next steps for schools to further push family and community partnerships forwards.

- [**MALDEF \(Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund\) Parent School Partnership \(PSP\) Program, MALDEF**](#)
 - This organization provides a free, 12-session program in which parent participants learn their rights and responsibilities in the context of their child's education in addition to strategies for overcoming language and cultural barriers in interacting with their children's schools. These advocacy tools help parents feel empowered to become more engaged in their students' schooling process.
- [**"Proyecto de Literatura Infantil" -- School-based parent organizing approach \(Patricia Baquedano-López Rebecca Anne Alexander Sera J. Hernandez, 2013\)**](#)
 - Targeting Spanish-speaking families, this program provides monthly opportunities for families to enter into dialogue with one another through the use of strategically picked children's books. As the authors of the article describe, "The premise behind the model is that parents have a wealth of knowledge, including family narratives, to share with their children and which can provide valuable resources for their emotional and social development. This project outlines possibilities for engaged participation of families in schools and does much to set the ground for types of commitments that can develop into more organized forms of parent action."
- [**Diversity School, Family, & Community Connections Annual Research Synthesis 2003**](#)
 - This guide includes concise synthesis on research about family and community engagement in diverse schools, accompanied by recommendations for how to best strengthen the school/family partnership.

Approaches at Exemplar Sites:

In addition to the above resources, school practitioners or family and community members may find it beneficial to learn from promising practices currently taking place at a variety of exemplar sites across the country.

DCIS at Fairmont

- One example site that has developed innovative means to engage families is DCIS at Fairmont, a magnet school in Denver Public Schools. DCIS uses the following five techniques to strengthen family-school partnerships:
 1. **Host regular community meetings and parent/principal coffees**
 2. **Resources/Meetings translated to meet needs of diverse families**
 3. **Other regular meetings to engage community on a variety of issues (community organizing, advocacy, fitness, literacy, etc.)**
 4. **School Accountability Committee (SAC):** Includes 3 parent members; parent volunteers also help interview incoming staff
 5. **School App:** Provides two-way means of communication for parents to 1) receive important updates from the school and teachers and 2) communicate directly with school leaders regarding their child's education

Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, Fairbanks, Alaska

- 60 languages are spoken and over 10% of the district students are Alaska Native within the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District. Fairbanks employs a parent mentor program to help strengthen the relationship between the district's schools and their families. This program provides new parents a parent mentor who speaks their language and helps to orient them to the

staff, leadership, and facilities at the school. Mentors provide phone contact and home visits, and are the first point of contact for new parents who might have difficulty navigating their child's educational landscape. The program has been extremely well received by members of the community.

Bellevue School District, East of Seattle, Washington

- Responding to a perceived lack of communication between the district and parents of color around issues affecting students of color in the diverse district, the Bellevue School District superintendent partnered with parents in the community to establish 'Parents for African American Students.' This group continues to have open dialogue with the superintendent and host networking events for families to learn more about how to engage with one another and their schools in order to further advance the educational interests of their students within the district.

La Familia Organizing Initiative, San Francisco Bay Area

- An example of an effective location based family organizing initiative, *La Familia* was a group of families in the Bay area who organized to "challenge the way that student math and science work were evaluated." These parents ultimately had success in being able to influence greater access to higher tracked advanced courses for traditionally underrepresented Latino students at diverse schools. (**Patricia Baquedano-López Rebecca Anne Alexander Sera J. Hernandez, 2013**)

Systemic Focus:

Stakeholder Groups	Family and Community Partnerships materials with a lens for diversity and equity	A* B* C* D *A-academics *B-belongingness *C-commitment to dismantling racism *D-diversity
Teachers	Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain	A; B; C; D
Students	An Equity Toolkit For Inclusive Schools: Centering on Youth Voice In School Change	A; B; C; D
Family and Community Partnerships	Reaching Out to Diverse Populations: What Can Schools Do to Foster Family-School Connections?	A; B; C; D
Leadership	Curriculum for leadership development (e.g. Racial Equity Tools)	A; B; C; D
Culture	Curriculum for creating school culture and climate (e.g. Anti-Bias Curriculum Engages Preschoolers in Discussions)	A; B; C; D

Systems & Structures	Curriculum for organizational development to support equitable policies and practices for diverse schools (e.g. Communities of Practice)	A; C
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Implications:

Effective family and community partnerships can play a critical role in cultivating an environment in which students feel best prepared to succeed. One unfortunate consequence of the desegregation movement of the 1960's and 1970's was the systematic disenfranchisement of families of color from school decision making processes. This disenfranchisement occurred alongside culturally insensitive engagement practices that disregarded the strengths that diverse families brought to their school communities. Efforts to shift from deficit-based approaches to culturally responsive approaches in engaging diverse families in the education of all children are promising steps in bringing more families and community members into the educational experience of their children.

Conclusion:

Building trust through targeted efforts to include a more diverse set of family and community voices at the decision-making table will enable school level policies and practices to more effectively produce equitable outcomes for students and families of diverse backgrounds. Specific strategies include culturally relevant family engagement, family empowerment, and school-based family organizing, as well as creative and innovative means to increase the communication between the school and home. Strengthening the family and community partnership at the school level in the manners described above will lead to increased academic achievement ([the A of the ABCDs](#)), a sense of belongingness ([B](#)), respect for diversity ([D](#)), and collective commitment to dismantling racism ([C](#)) for all involved.

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