

**Parental and Community Involvement in Schools:
Does Socio-economic Status Matter?**

Rhonda Jeter-Twilley, Ph.D.,
Bowie State University

Harry Legum., Ph.D.,
Coppin State University

Frank Norton, Ph.D.,
Bowie State University

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Literature Review

The academic success for all students is a paramount issue confronting the American educational system. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) states that federally funded programs be implemented to help improve student learning for all pupils (Hatch & Bowers, 2002). Similarly, The National Standards for School Counseling Programs stress academic development among all students (American School Counselor Association, 1997). Despite this goal, current data indicate that 9.4 percent of our country's high school students drop out of school (United States Department of Commerce, 2003). In addition, the unemployment rate among high school dropouts is 18 percent, and the unemployment rate among high school graduates is 12 percent (United States Department of Commerce). Thus, every effort must be made to support students' academic attainment and to recognize the relationship between academics to the world of work (American School Counselor Association).

There is some evidence linking parental involvement to student achievement (Thorikidsen & Stein, 1998). Parental involvement can exist in several forms. First, school involvement refers to parental participation in activities at school and at home (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Second, cognitive-intellectual involvement refers to parents coordinating and participating in educational activities with their child (Grolnick

& Slowiaczek). Third, personal involvement includes a parent's awareness of knowing what is going on with their child at school (Grolnick & Slowiaczek).

It is unclear if a parent's socioeconomic status plays a role in their level of involvement in their children's schooling. For example, some empirical studies indicate that high socioeconomic status parents are generally more involved in their children's education than low socioeconomic status parents (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Keith & Lichtman, 1994; Keith, Troutman, Trivette, Keith, Bickley, & Singh, 1993; Lareau, 1987). However, other investigations reveal little support for the notion that parents with low socioeconomic status are less involved in their children's education than are parents with higher socioeconomic status (Catsambis, 2001; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996).

The literature is not definitive if race is a major variable in a parent's involvement in their children's education. For example, results of some empirical investigations reveal that the relationships between parental involvement and educational outcomes exist regardless of students' race or ethnic background (Catsambis, 2001; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). However, other research studies support the idea that parents from ethnic-minority groups participate less than Caucasian parents (Coleman, 1987; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

Given the literature does not manifest evidence to determine if socioeconomic status and minority status make a difference in parental school involvement, this study

investigated the following research question. With regard to parental/community school involvement patterns, does socioeconomic status and race make a difference?

The purpose of the study was to examine if there was a relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and parental/community involvement in elementary schools, and if there is a statistically significant difference between low SES schools and high SES schools in regard to Parental/Community Involvement. Socio-economic status was measured by the percentage of students on Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS) in a school. Five low SES/high FARMS schools and five High SES/low FARMS schools were selected for use in the study. Parental/Community Involvement was measured by Parent/Teacher Association (PTA) attendance and membership.

Methodology

Population

The schools used in this study were selected from a large urban county in a Mid-Atlantic state. All elementary schools in the county were considered for the study. Ten schools were selected for use by considering the Free and Reduced Meals Statistics (FARMS) for each school. FARMS statistics are how this state determines the socioeconomic status (SES). Each school has a percentage number that is related to the number of student FARMS recipients in each school. For this study, the five schools

with the lowest FARMS (high SES) and the five schools with the highest FARMS (low SES) were chosen for comparison.

Parental/Community Data

Data about parental/community involvement was collected from the County Council of Parent Teacher Associations (PTA'S), Professional School Counselors at the schools, PTA Presidents, and School Administrators. The data used in this study was PTA attendance and membership. While this was not the only data available on parent/community involvement, other data was not consistently collected or aggregated. PTA attendance and membership data were available across all schools. PTA involvement gives some measure of Parental/Community Involvement. The larger the PTA, the more likely there are opportunities for parental/community involvement.

All elementary schools in the county have PTA meetings on the 1st Tuesday of the month. Attendance and membership levels give some indication of parental/community involvement.

Minority concentrated versus majority concentrated schools depends on your vantage point in this county. In five of the schools used in this study, white students were in the minority, while in the other five schools, black and Hispanic students were in the minority. For the purpose of this study, minority concentrated schools will be those who have students who are from traditional minority groups (e.g., Blacks, Hispanic, Asians) regardless of their prominence at the school.

Data Analysis

An independent t-test for mean differences between Low SES/High FARMS concentrated schools and High SES/ Low FARMS schools with regards to parental/community involvement as measured by PTA membership and attendance was done to see if there was a statistically significant difference. Correlations were also done to see if there was a statistically significant relationship between SES/FARMS status and parental/community involvement as measured by PTA membership and attendance.

Results

The independent t-test indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in the number of PTA paid memberships at schools with High SES/Low FARMS and those with Low SES/High FARMS at the $p < .01$. There was also a statistically significant difference in attendance at 1st PTA meetings at High SES/Low FARMS schools and those with Low SES/High FARMS at the $p < .01$.

With regards to the correlations, there was a statistically significant negative correlation between PTA membership and the percentage of students on Free and Reduced Meals (-.93) at the $p < .01$ level. There was also a statistically significant negative correlation between PTA attendance and the percentage of students on Free and Reduced Meals (-.83) at the $p < .01$ level.

Discussion

This study found that there was a statistically significant difference in parental/community involvement by socio-economic status. There may be many reasons

for the findings in this study. First, the study was done in one large urban county in a mid-Atlantic state. Perhaps with a broader sample that included counties less urban or

including other urban counties in the state or in other states would produce a different result. Secondly, parental/community involvement was defined by PTA membership and attendance. Perhaps defining this variable differently would yield a different result. In this county however, this was the most consistent measure of parental/community involvement data that was consistently collected. Planning to get data from other sources rather than what is currently available would support or challenge the results of this study. In many school systems, PTA is not the thriving support system it once was.

Perhaps, data from this study will assist schools in rethinking or re-tooling this structure to get parents and the community more involved. Since this study looks at SES as a variable, it bears noting that it cost \$4.00 to become a member of the PTA in this county. While this is not a large sum of money, in neighborhood where FARMS are high, the fee itself may be prohibitive in terms of PTA membership.

Conclusion

Non-traditional methods are needed to get more parental/community involvement. More research needs to be done to understand what causes the reduced parent/community involvement in Low SES/ High FARMS communities. Many schools that lack PTA attendance and membership are also schools with low standardized test scores. While the lack of PTA attendance and membership does not cause low test scores, it suggests that

there may be a connection between parental/community involvement and achievement. This study raises the issue of parental/and community involvement as a possible avenue worth further research and exploration to assist in the battle to educate all children well.

Table 1

School Data Table

Low FARMS/High SES Schools

<u>SCHOOLS</u>	<u>FARMS</u>	<u>PTA Attendance</u>	<u>PTA Membership</u>
School 1	7.9%	60	441
School 2	8.7%	75	491
School 3	12.9%	30	483
School 4	14.6%	15	271

High FARMS/Low SES Schools

<u>SCHOOLS</u>	<u>FARMS</u>	<u>PTA Attendance</u>	<u>PTA Membership</u>
School 1	87.0%	50	57
School 2	91.6%	60	0
School 3	12.9%	45	102

School 4	14.6%	45	56
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