PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN URBAN CHARTER SCHOOLS: A NEW PARADIGM OR THE STATUS QUO?

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Abstract
Decades of research point to the benefits of parent involvement in education. Research has also shown that white, middle-class parents are disproportionately involved. Charter schools, as schools of choice, have been assumed to have fewer involvement barriers for minority and low-income parents, but a 2007 survey of charter leaders found that parent involvement remains a significant challenge. Our exploratory research investigates specific strategies employed by charter schools with strong family engagement – distinct from parent involvement, as we will discuss – in order to examine whether traditional models of involvement fit the charter context or whether a new paradigm has emerged.

Past Studies of Parent Involvement
Decades of research point to the numerous benefits of parent involvement in education for not only students but also for the parents involved, the school and the wider community (Barnard, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Epstein, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; Lee and Bowen, 2006). Despite the challenges in establishing a causal link between parent involvement and student achievement, studies utilizing large databases have shown positive and significant effects of parent involvement on both academic and behavioral outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2007). Research has found that parent involvement is related to a host of student achievement indicators, including grades, attendance, attitudes, expectations, homework completion, and state test results (Astone & McLanahan, 1991, Cancio, West & Younf, 2004; Dearing et al., 2004; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow & Fendrich, 1999; Gutman & Midgley, 2000;Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Sheldon, 2003). Parent involvement also accounted for other academic outcomes such as lower dropout rates (Rumberger, 1995), fewer retentions and fewer special education placements (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999).

In addition to improving grades and test scores, parent involvement also appears to have positive effects on students' behavior. Brody, Flor & Gibson (1999) found that parenting practices contributed to students' increased ability to self-regulate behavior. Higher levels of social skills and improved overall behavior were also documented. In a study of American Indian students, researchers found that a parent intervention approach reduced students' disruptive behavior in the classroom; students were less aggressive and withdrawn after parent participation in the program (Kratochwill, McDonald, Levin, Bear-Tibbetts & Demaray, 2004). Other studies have documented the ways in which parent involvement supports children's social competencies in school (Hill et al., 2004; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen & Sekino, 2004). Some researchers have found that only specific types of parent involvement appear to correlate with student achievement. These studies conclude that involvement at home, especially parents discussing school activities and helping children plan their programs, appeared to have the strongest impact on academic achievement (Ingram, Wolfe & Lieberman, 2007; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Van Voorhis, 2003). Other researchers found involvement at the school site made the key difference (K. V. Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Lee & Bowen, 2006).

A dominant theme in the parent involvement literature is the lack of common understanding between school staff and parents about parent involvement. Parents consistently report higher levels of involvement compared to teachers' reports, presumably due to different conceptions of what constitutes involvement (Barnard, 2004). In one study, parents describe involvement as keeping their children safe and getting them to school punctually while teachers expect parents' presence at the school. While both teachers and parents felt that involvement was important, the lack of consensus around what constitutes parent involvement has caused teachers to blame families and parents to feel unappreciated (Lawson, 2003). On the other hand, DePlanty, Coulter-Kern & Duchane (2007) found in their survey that parents do know the activities

expected of them, such as attending school events, but they may not know the benefits of such involvement.

Urban Parent Involvement

Research has shown that family demographics are a significant factor in the level and type of involvement in their child's education. White middle-class parents are traditionally the most active in public schools (Lee & Bown, 2006; Manz, Fantuzzo & Power, 2004; Waanders, Mendez & Downer, 2007). Mathews (2009) goes so far as to suggest that "the importance of parental involvement, at least in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, has been exaggerated, probably because middle-class commentators have been imposing their suburban experiences on very different situations." Federal policy through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 has long-mandated parent involvement in disadvantaged communities through parent advisory councils, but barriers continue to exist, particularly for urban, low-income, immigrant, minority and working-class parents. Language barriers, work schedules, and a sense of disenfranchisement have generally resulted in lower levels of parent involvement by working-class parents in urban schools; in particular, those from ethnic and racial minorities. While a growing body of research continues to advocate for parent involvement in urban schools as a key to increasing student performance, parent involvement remains elusive (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Desimone, 1999).

Some have called for research that takes into account the particular experiences of urban minority parents when evaluating their involvement in public schools**.** Auerbach (2007)**,** for instance, asserts that parent involvement is socially constructed and politically contested through the lenses of race, class, culture and gender. She presents a parent involvement continuum for minority parents that range from "Moral Supporters" to "Ambivalent Companions" to "Struggling Advocates." Moral supporters encourage their children without making appearances at the school. On the other end of the continuum, struggling advocates work hard to fulfill their role according to traditional expectations but often face barriers when they try to be present at the school. In the middle are ambivalent companions, parents who want their children to do well but do not make efforts to advocate on their behalf. To this point, David Levin, co-founder of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), concludes that initially, low-income parents may often be consumed just trying to make a living, but if their children become successful at school, gratified families will support the schools in any way they can: good schooling comes before parental support, not the other way around (Mathews, 2009).

This strand of research, bringing a critical lens to the study of parent involvement, points out that educators may be unaware or unappreciative of the invisible strategies that minority or low-income parents use to support their children's education, such as making sacrifices so children can attend better schools or limiting children's chores to allow for study time (Mehan, Hubbard, Villanueva & Lintz, 1996). Lopez (2001) suggests that parental transmission of socio-cultural values – such as "translating the lessons of working hard in the field into lessons for working hard in school" – to their high-achieving children be recognized as legitimate parent involvement (p. 433). Similarly, Delgado-Gaitian (1994) shows that cultural narratives are a form of involvement not recognized by traditional models. These authors argue for an expanded conception of parent involvement that gives value to the actions of minority parents. Overall, these studies expand the dimensions of parent involvement, but they lack a coherent framework for analyzing the quality and quantity of involvement among urban parents. Questions arise from these studies as to how schools can increase the participation of traditionally underrepresented parents in activities valued by the school while at the same time valuing the less overt efforts made by parents to foster positive educational outcomes for their children.

This study aims provides exploratory research into parent involvement practices in place in urban charter schools, a context in which families not typically prominent in participation may have increased avenues for participation beyond the traditional classifications.

Charter Schools: Opportunities for Innovations in Parent Involvement?

The rise of the charter school movement has been seen as an opportunity for urban parents to play a more central role in the education of their children. The majority of charter schools have been established in urban areas and disproportionately serve minority and low SES students (e.g. students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch). As such, urban charter schools have been touted as a setting in which the traditional barriers to involvement can be alleviated, since charter schools are typically small "community schools" that are schools of choice with missions tailored to their student populations. In 15 states, the opportunity for parent participation is one purpose written into the charter school law; many charter schools are established by a founding group that includes parents (Center on Educational Governance, 2008). Tennessee's law states, "The purpose of this chapter is to …afford parents substantial meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children" (Section 49-13-102(a)(6)) and Utah's law says, "The purposes of charter schools are to…provide opportunities for greater parental involvement in management decisions at the school level" (Section 53A-1a-503). In addition, parent contracts have been a common approach for charter schools to encourage parent involvement once the school is operational (Cowrin & Becker, 1995).

Not surprisingly, there is an underlying assumption that charter schools involve more parents both quantitatively and qualitatively. Theory posits that charter school parents, because they actively choose to send their child to a charter school, will be more involved than parents whose children are automatically assigned to a district-run school (Goldring & Shapira, 1993). Due to the greater autonomy enjoyed by charter schools, researchers have found that these schools tend to adopt stronger and more specific parent involvement policies than traditional public schools (Bulkley & Wohlstetter, 2004; Finn, Manno & Vanourek, 2000). An early study of charter schools – one of the few that compared charter school parent involvement to that of traditional public schools in the same neighborhood – reported greater parent involvement in charter schools. Using nine measures, including volunteering and attendance at school events, the authors found that across the board, parents spent more time at the charter schools filling a variety of roles (Becker, Nakagawa & Corwin, 1997). Other researchers also have found that parents are more involved in charter schools and most importantly, they are involved in more significant ways: for example, serving on charter-school governing boards (Finn et al., 2000). While charter school laws vary a great deal across the nation, many states emphasize the role of parents in the creation as well as the governance of a charter school, as noted above. The involvement of parents in the governance of charter school is particularly significant for minority parents. A study found that when minority parents are represented in the governance of a school, the overall parent involvement increases and better cultural understandings exist between school staff and parents (Marshall, 2006).

Cooper (1991), on the other hand, argues that the parents who choose schools may feel like their decision alone is sufficient to ensure their child's success and they have no need to get further involved. Murphy and Shiffman (2002) note that parent involvement is the "cornerstone of many charter school visions" (p. 97). Despite lofty goals and good intentions, charter schools vary greatly in how they involve parents. A 2007 survey of charter leaders in three states found that parent involvement is one area in which charter school leaders, lacking confidence in how to increase participation, struggle to translate intent into practice: 29 percent of leaders reported "major challenges" with engaging parents and an additional 43 percent indicated it to be a "minor challenge" (Gross & Pochop, 2007). Becker et al. (1997) discovered that despite a

greater level of involvement, charter schools do not necessarily take a more active role in trying to involve parents; parent contracts were the only notable outreach method. The researchers also voiced concerns that parent contracts exclude minority and working-class parents from enrolling their children in the school, afraid they will be unable to fulfill the requirements of such contracts. Fuller's (2002) case studies suggest that charter schools do not necessarily escape the issues that plague parent involvement in traditional public schools. Issues like social class differences, language and culture barriers and the intimidating role teachers present to some parents who did not experience success in school themselves create obstacles for meaningful involvement and communication in charter schools as they do in traditional schools. The literature on charter school parent involvement points to a need to uncover strategies that help encourage and support minority and working-class parents.

New Research on Parent Involvement

The purpose of this research is to examine parent involvement strategies in urban charter schools and assess whether traditional models of involvement fit the urban charter context or whether a new paradigm has emerged. We begin with a description of Epstein's typology of parent involvement in schools, used as the framework for our study. Next, we discuss the findings of our national qualitative study of parent involvement in urban charter schools. Then, we examine whether Epstein's typology applies to urban charter schools or if a new paradigm has emerged.

Defining what Constitutes Parent Involvement

Parent involvement has been defined as including behaviors at home as well as at school. Some researchers define parent involvement by the locations where involvement activities take place, differentiating among home-based involvement, school-based involvement and home-school communication (Barnard, 2004; Kuzin & Park, 2008; Manz, Fantuzzo & Power, 2004). Lee and Bowen (2006) employ a typology that takes into account both the activities and the locations of parent involvement. The measures in their research include: 1) parent involvement at school, 2) parent-child educational discussion, 3) homework help, 4) time management, 5) parent educational expectations. In all, there is a lack of cohesion on the terminology and definition of parent involvement (Christenson & Hurley, 1997; McCarthey, 2000). For instance, the terms "parent involvement," "family involvement," "parent engagement," "parent empowerment" and "school-family partnerships" are used often interchangeably in the literature. We use the term parent involvement to encompass the gamut of activities parents engage in to help their children succeed at school.

Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement

Epstein's theory of school, family, and community partnerships is commonly used to analyze parent involvement in school settings. Epstein (2001) offers a model of family-school-community partnerships based on the theory of overlapping spheres of home, school and community influences that shape children's learning and development. Although Epstein's typology has been criticized for being school-based and Euro-centric, she recognizes that parents participate in their children's education along numerous dimensions – including at school and at home – and proposes a six-part typology of parent involvement (see Table 1): 1) basic obligations of families, 2) basic obligations of schools, 3) involvement at school, 4) involvement at home, 5) involvement in decision-making, and 6) collaborating with community organizations. Type 1 focuses on parents preparing their children to learn by keeping them healthy and safe; by supervising, disciplining and guiding them; by helping develop their confidence; and by reinforcing a positive attitude toward learning and school. Type 2 activities include the information schools provide to parents about students' progress and school programs, as well as schools' lines of communications, such as parent-teacher conferences, open houses and

report cards. Type 3 in Epstein's framework involves parents volunteering at the school: helping in the classroom as well as attending student performances, athletic events, and parent workshops. Type 4 activities entail parents facilitating learning activities at home: playing games with their children, reading, taking trips, visiting museums, telling stories, singing and working on homework. Type 5 includes opportunities for parents to be involved in governance and advocacy at the school. In parent groups, leadership teams and other local school organizations, parents help make decisions for the school. Type 6 focuses on parent involvement in community collaborations. As citizens in community agencies, businesses, service organizations, cultural groups, and faith communities, parents partner with schools to advance their children's learning.

Table 1: Epstein's Model of School, Family, and Community Partnerships (2001)

Type	Description of Type	Examples
Type 1	Basic obligations of families	Providing children with basic needs such as health and safety.
Type 2	Basic obligations of the schools	Communication between school and family such as memos, phone calls, report cards and parent-teacher conferences.
Type 3	Involvement at school	Volunteering at the school to assist teachers in the classroom or attending school events.
Type 4	Involvement in learning activities at home	Helping children with homework.
Type 5	Involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy	Serving in a parent-teacher association (PTA), on committees or in other leadership positions.
Type 6	Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations	Making connections with organizations that share responsibility for children's education, such as after-school programs, health services and other resources.

Epstein's model has influenced the ways policymakers and school administrators design and implement parent involvement programs. In some states, schools are asked to complete the parent involvement portion of their Title I reports using Epstein's framework. In our study, Epstein's model served as the framework through which to examine parent involvement in urban charter schools, as well as a comparison to gauge whether charter schools have gone beyond traditional conceptualizations of parent involvement.

Research Methods

The research reported here used a qualitative approach to assess parent involvement strategies utilized by urban charter schools. We first reviewed the charter legislation in each state and the District of Columbia with charter school laws (n=41) to better understand the legislative context for parent involvement. In our review of the charter school legislation, we uncovered a range of provisions that encourage, require, or hinder parent involvement: For example, 14 states explicitly require a parent involvement plan as part of the charter school application. We selected states for the study sample to cover a range of provisions related to parent involvement, including:

- Support required for conversion from a district-run school to a charter school;
- Support required during the application to form a charter school;
- Parent involvement plans required in application;
- Parent involvement one purpose of the law;
- Regular communication required from the school to parents;
- Enrollment preference given to children whose parents were active in the application process;

- Assessment of parent satisfaction required;
- Parents have power to close school with vote; and,
- School site decision-making team or governing board must include at least one parent.

Study Participants

In order to arrive at a national sample, we identified participants for our study through a multi-step process:

1) Once we had selected states for geographic diversity as well as differences in state laws around parent involvement, we selected cities within each state that were a) urban and b) had between 5 and 35 charter schools with the assumption that this would increase the likelihood of at least one school with strong parent involvement while increasing the likelihood that authorizers would know about the specific practices of the schools they oversee.
2) We then conducted interviews with charter school authorizers[1] in each selected city to gather nominations of urban charter schools with strong parent involvement.
3) We used a semi-structured interview protocol to conduct interviews with leaders from nominated charter schools to find out more about the specific parent involvement strategies employed, the resources needed to sustain them, and the various impacts of those strategies (see below).

The final study sample included 12 urban charter schools in 6 states. Table 2 provides demographic data on each of the study schools. Each leader agreed to have their school named in the study, so pseudonyms are not used.

1 Authorizers are entities identified by state charter school law to approve new charter school petitions, oversee ongoing performance, and evaluate charter school's performance to make renewal decisions. Authorizing entities vary by state and include local school boards, universities, state boards of education, municipal bodies or nonprofit organizations. For more on the role of authorizers, see www.qualitycharters.org.

Table 2 : Characteristics of Participating Schools

School	Location	Year Opened	Grades Served	# of Students Served	% Free or Reduced Price Lunch	% English Language Learners	Student Ethnicity
Community of Peace Academy	St. Paul, MN	1995	K-12	684	83%	60%	60% Hmong 30% African American 10% Latino /Caucasian
Dolores Huerta Learning Academy	Oakland, CA	1999	K-8	215	90%	92%	97% Latino 2% African American
EC Reams	Oakland, CA	1999	K-8	344	45%	12%	81% African American 18% Latino
Erie Charter School	Chicago, IL	2005	K-3	160	88%	3%	69% Latino 17% African American
International Community School	Decatur, GA	2002	K-6	383	63%	22%	56% African American 10% Asian American
Lighthouse Community Charter School	Oakland, CA	2001	K-12	359	79%	63%	81% Latino 13% African American
IVY Preparatory Academy	Norcross, GA	2008	6	120	Data not available	Data not available	All girls school; Ethnicity data not available
Manzanita Charter School	Richmond, CA	2000	6-8	149	48%	33%	70% Latino 9% African American
Neighborhood House	Boston, MA	1995	PreK-8	399	72%	66%	55% African American 14% Latino 4% Asian American
Partnership Academy	Richfield, MN	2002	K-6	192	97%	76%	87% Latino 12% African American
Rise Academy	Miami, FL	2008	K-8	200	Data not available	Data not available	Data not available
University of Chicago Charter School – Donoghue Campus	Chicago, IL	2005	K-5	320	73%	Data not recorded	97.4% African American

Data Collection

We conducted pilot tests of the interview protocol with three schools and refined the instrument slightly to ensure that the questions elicited the information of interest without bias. The final interview protocol consisted of 11 semi-structured questions (see Appendix A). Questions gathered information about current parent involvement activities (e.g. volunteering, homework help, parenting classes), the goals of parent involvement at the school, the techniques employed to obtain high levels of involvement (e.g., parent liaisons, parent contracts, home visits), the ways in which parent involvement is monitored or enforced, and challenges to parent involvement faced by the school. During each 45- to 60-minute interview, we probed administrators to provide specific and detailed information. All interviews were taped with interviewee permission, transcribed, then coded and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software HyperResearch. Coding and analysis were accomplished in a series of three iterations. Three members of the research team worked collaboratively to increase the reliability of the coding process. We started with a code list derived from Epstein's typology as well as with topics generated by the interviews. The first iteration of coding was intended to capture all of the specific ideas that were discussed by the interviewees. Hence, the researchers conducted a pilot coding in which three transcripts were reviewed to generate additional codes to maximize the topics included in the code list. After the pilot coding, any additional ideas not represented by an existing code was given a code of "other" so that in the second iteration, additional codes were created based on the universe coded "other." In addition, during the second iteration of coding, ideas that were deemed multi-faceted were split into two while others were combined. In the third iteration, themes were assessed that linked back to Epstein's typology as well as a category labeled "new" to indicate that it was outside of Epstein's framework.

Findings

Analysis of interview data reveal that parent involvement activities in urban charter schools generally fall within the typology set forth by Epstein. **Type 1** activities, *basic obligations of families*, reported by interviewees included expecting parents to bring their students to school on time. As one principal noted:

> The biggest problem we have is kids getting to school on time…. It's really hard for kids, if they've missed the very beginning of the day. Our middle school students every morning have DEAR, Drop Everything And Read, for the first 20 minutes, and if kids are coming in during that, it's really disruptive. Our elementary school students every morning, each teacher has a little pledge they do, like 'I will go to college, I will be successful.' If kids come late for that, it's just hard." As an incentive to arrive on time, the school is holding a competition; the first class to attain 10 days of perfect on-time will be given a party.

However, while Epstein's framework emphasizes the basic obligations of families to provide their children with basic needs such as health and safety, one third of the study schools played this role, offering "wrap around" services to students and their families. "[If families] have housing needs or food needs, we provide them," said the leader of a charter school started by a social service provider. Another school ran and employment office for parents, focusing on job opportunities for refugee parents with limited English skills. In addition to direct service provision, ten of the twelve schools offered GED, English-language, college-credit and parenting classes for parents after school hours. One of these schools held discussions on qualifying for home loans to help parents move toward home ownership. Another principal described a book study the school had started for parents to learn parenting techniques: "We have gotten one of our Hmong staff people who will be facilitating the Hmong group, and we'll also have a group

that's in Spanish, and an English group, and we're going to be offering several nights when parents can come in to discuss various portions of the book." Another principal described the opportunity for networking provided by the parent center at the school: "So many new families have moved into the neighborhood, and so the school has really become a hub for parents to find out things like how do you find the best grocery store, how do I figure out other child care options after the school day."

Type 2 activities, *basic obligation of the school*, were common across all study sites. In addition to sending home report cards and holding parent-teacher conferences, several principals mentioned the use of home visits to ensure communication between the school and family. One principal noted, "We are very flexible about scheduling meetings, and I think we go the extra mile, even to the point of going to the home rather than having them come here if it really doesn't work for them to come here…. If they can't do that, then we'll do it over the phone, we'll do whatever it takes to be in touch with parents." Another common technique, to decrease language barriers, was to translate material sent home into the parents' native language and to provide translators for school meetings. As one principal reported, "We have a newsletter that goes to the parents once a week, which is translated … into six languages." One principal described the use of headsets during school meetings so that interpreters can do "real time translation."

Type 3 activities, *involvement at school*, also were reported by each interviewee. Parents commonly helped out in classrooms, served as crossing guards before and after school, attended field trips and special events held at the school, helped out in the office, and participated in school-beautification projects. One principal noted that parents are encouraged to "come sit in a class and observe" until they feel comfortable taking a more active role: "The one thing that we tell all of our parents is after the third time you've come to observe, we're gonna put you to work." In three cases, parent surveys were used to identify what activities parents would be willing to help out with and what skills they had that might benefit the school. As one principal reported, "When parents enroll, we sit down with them and we go over the family partnership plan and point out the fact that we think it's important that they're involved, and ask if they would be willing to provide some support in the school, might that be chaperoning, might that be volunteering, and then we ask, you know, what days and times are most convenient for them." The school's parent coordinator used these data when she looked for volunteers. A common technique to increase parent involvement, used at half of the study schools, was to offer a reward for participation; for example, a school that utilizes a student uniform gives "free dress" passes to students whose parents attend school meetings.

Interviewees from each school described a range of **Type 4** activities, *involvement in learning activities at home*. In many cases, this involved encouraging parent to help their children with their homework, something for which many of the schools offered parent education classes to increase parent confidence and skills. Generally, Type 4 activities were voluntary: As one principal noted, "We received a grant in which we were able to buy parent texts, books and activities that are in a little backpack, and parents are encouraged to take them home and to do activities with their kids at home." Another principal reported, "We ask all families to read with their children, and make it really clear that they can read with their children in English or in Spanish or in Cantonese, that either one will help their child's literacy skills." Parents at another school were invited to sit in during their children's tutoring sessions to learn techniques to help their child at home. Some schools mandated involvement at home. As the principal at one school noted, "One of the things that we mandate is that our parents read for 45 minutes a night with their children and check homework. … And that's really regardless of the academic experience or their academic level that the parents may have. We feel like if there's a parent

that has some deficiencies, we can give you the help to help your kids, and that's something, as a school, we're managing our resources so that that can happen."

Involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy (**Type 5**) was found in seven of the twelve charter schools studied. One strategy was to hold parent focus groups to help shape school policies. As one principal noted, "We've done a lot of focus groups with the parents to see if there are things that they'd like to see happen in the school; we kind of use that as an avenue to get parent feedback." In other cases, schools utilized a parent survey to gauge satisfaction and plan new activities. In one school, the principal reported that they conduct an annual parent survey and in addition, "if there's a particular issue that comes up, we always survey them first" – such as changing the school day's start time. "We don't just collect information and ask parents a few things for the sake of it, we actually use it and make changes to the program based on it, and parents see that their input is taken into consideration and so they're more apt to giving it when we ask for it." In addition, five of the schools included parents on the school's governing board. One principal reported, "Traditionally the board of the school has been very parent-heavy – there's a nine-member board and usually we have six or seven parents."

Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations (**Type 6**) also were utilized by five of the study schools. In some cases, the school was started by a community organization, so that form of partnership was built in. As one principal noted:

> One of the things that our authorizer offers is this community partners program. They're pretty well-connected within the community, and they help coordinate this program of volunteers…. This is one of the avenues that the parents have to be involved, if they have a certain time during the day or a day of the week that they can volunteer, they can work through that program and become a classroom aide or they can do different projects within that program.

In other cases, community-based organizations and/or faith-based organizations partnered with the school to hold parent classes, trainings, or provide health services.

Examples of parent involvement activities reported by the study schools are summarized in Table 3, organized by Epstein's six types.

Table 3: Example of charter school parent activities organized by Epstein's typology

Type	Description of Type	Examples
Type 1	Basic obligations of families	Parents are encouraged to bring their child to school on time; school provides ELL classes, parenting classes, "wrap around services" to supplement parents' ability to provide health and safety for their children.
Type 2	Basic obligations of the schools	Home visits are conducted; material sent home is translated into the parents' native language; translators at school meetings can decrease language barriers.
Type 3	Involvement at school	Parents help in classrooms, serve as crossing guards before/after school, attend field trips and special events, help out in the office, participate in school beautification.
Type 4	Involvement in learning activities at home	Parents are required to read with their children for 45 minutes nightly, monitor their child's homework completion with a homework checklist; can take home activity books to do with their children.
Type 5	Involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy	Parents participate in focus groups, complete surveys, serve on the school's governing board.
Type 6	Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations	School partners with community organizations to help train parents, offer volunteer opportunities for parents, or provide services to parents.

Conclusions and Implications

Our data show that parent involvement activities in the study sample of urban charter schools fit Epstein's typology fairly well. However, the strategies used to implement these activities and to attract parents traditionally not as active in school are fairly innovative and differ from Epstein's typology in several important ways.

For one thing, while the study schools expected parents to fulfill their basic obligations (Type 1), they also realized that many of the parents face situations which hinder their ability to do so such as working multiple shifts, raising their children as single parents, and struggling with poverty. As noted above, to help parents meet their children's basic needs, several of the study schools offered "wrap around" services for the students and their families. Another difference was noted with parent-teacher conferences (Type 2). While these are a standard occurrence at public schools, many schools, especially in urban areas, struggle with low attendance at these conferences. In contrast, the interviewees in our study reported extremely high attendance rates at parent-teacher conferences, with some schools reporting 100 percent participation. Offering incentives (e.g., a lottery) for attendance as well as offering meetings at night, by phone, or in the family's home helped ensure participation.

Involvement at the school (Type 3) also differed in the sample charter schools from the traditional model of relying on parents to surface as volunteers. Many of the charter school leaders reported using "parent contracts" specifying the number of hours (ranging from 10 to 72 hours) of service required from each family annually. Interviewees reported that this level of expectation helped sustain parent involvement programs which otherwise might peter out once initial enthusiasm wanes or highly active parents leave the school. In addition, the type of volunteer activity often included school maintenance or beautification, activities not commonly assigned to parents at traditional public schools. Several school leaders noted the sense of

ownership derived from such activities, as well as the community aspect of involving parents in these ways. As one school leader noted, "The model for the founders was related to the idea of community as defined by Martin Luther King, and it's the idea that we create a community where everybody's safe, everybody is mutually engaged with each other and mutually responsible for each other, and mutually obligated to each other. So, the events that we have cover the whole range from just basic grade-level potlucks to work days for parents."

Three of the charter schools in the study use technology as a means of notifying parents of volunteer opportunities as well as tracking parent involvement. Using technology to enable parent involvement has the benefit of instant communication as well as reducing the time costs associated with the school calling parents or sending home newsletters. It also allows for two-way communication when parents are able to email the school, something not afforded when information is only sent from the school to the parents. In one school, the website includes a "parental involvement" tab, which links to the school's volunteer needs and to Web sites that the school has vetted and declared "safe" for children and parents to view together and use to complete class assignments. Each teacher maintains his or her own web page, updating it weekly with homework assignments, learning objectives, reference web sites visited in class, and news of upcoming class events. The school also distributes a multi-lingual newsletter and for emergencies, uses the AllCall system in the parent's language of choice. Another school complements its school website with such e-mail strategies as a weekly e-newsletter, e-blast, and Teleparent. The e-newsletter announces school activities and events; a hard copy is also sent home with students. The school uses the program Constant Contact to track the readership of and reactions to specific components of the e-mail, and to survey parents about school operational issues. The e-blast system disseminates such information as a change in schedule or a last-minute need for parent volunteers, or a special or unusual event concerning the school, parents or students. E-blasts are short and to the point, to convey a sense of urgency. Teleparent, an automated parental notification system, allows school teachers and administrators to send student-specific and general messages home over the telephone or the Internet. It can report school attendance and tardiness, schoolwide emergencies, and messages about individual student performance. Teachers can record their own voices in the Teleparent system, which has multiple language options.

One of the biggest differences between parent involvement strategies in traditional public schools and the study charter schools was seen in the decision-making role (Type 5), in which some charter schools have involved and empowered parents in decision-making and governance of the school to an extent not typically found in traditional public schools. In some cases, parents elect the charter school's governing board, which makes the board directly accountable to them. In other cases, parents serve as members of the charter school's board of directors, playing a role in school-level governance not available to parents in a traditional district environment, in which one central school board makes policy decisions for all of the schools in the district. This type of school-level governance role for parents is mandated by law in six states[2] (Butler, Smith and Wohlstetter, 2008), and utilized by choice in individual charter schools in many other states. This relationship creates a new role not only for parents but also between parents and the school leaders who are hired (and potentially dismissed) by the school's parents. It helps explain the survey finding mentioned above that charter school leaders lack confidence in involving parents, as this type of involvement is foreign to those leaders coming from a traditional public school setting.

[2] Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, New Hampshire, Tennessee and the District of Columbia

Finally, parent involvement in the study schools often was linked with increasing parent's self-efficacy. In some cases, training was provided to help parents become comfortable with school involvement. As one principal reported, "We had to really teach parents how to get involved. We had to say, 'These are the kinds of questions you ask, this is how you behave on field trips. You are not here to just parent to your child but an example to all kids'… We made pamphlets that went home with directions on how to get involved and had workshops and monthly meetings with parents about how to get involved." In other cases, training was provided on how to engage in decision-making, particularly for parents whose cultural norms dictate that school staff members are the "experts" with parents on the sidelines. At one school with a Parent Advisory Committee, the principal reported that "we've had to work really hard over the years to make sure that it is a parent-run thing, not our staff trying to lead the parents. We have to help coach them along, and it's taken a little bit of time to build their capacity and their confidence in leading something like that because many of them have never had the opportunity to do so. And so it's kind of like training them and getting them professional development in those areas."

These findings suggest the emergence of a new paradigm in parent involvement. While the study schools differed in school size, percent ELL, and student ethnicity, these factors did not appear to influence the different strategies that schools employed. Rather, a mission of parent involvement and dedication to reaching parents not typically involved in education in traditional public schools took precedence.

However, the survey results mentioned above indicate that many charter school leaders struggle to engage parents. These cases, while providing evidence that some innovation exists, should not be deemed as typical among the charter population. Indeed, the sample was purposively selected as exemplars in strong parent involvement; they were not intended to provide generalizations to the charter population. Rather, the lessons drawn from this study suggest an emphasis on involvement strategies rather than specific activities; while adhering to traditional forms of involvement like the parent-teacher conference, these schools used innovative strategies to ensure high attendance at these events. Leadership programs directed specifically at charter schools can help new leaders create parent involvement plans, as can trainings offered by charter school resource centers and member associations. While state laws and authorizers can encourage parent involvement, ultimately the schools themselves must implement meaningful opportunities for parents to be involved in their child's education.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study provides a starting point to understanding parent involvement practices in urban charter schools, several questions remain. For one thing, there may be a difference between parent involvement and engagement. Many schools, charter as well as district-run, appear interested in involvement – letting parents know the school's expectations, having parent attend school events and meeting, but not engagement where parents are an ongoing presence at the school and set school policy through serving on the school governing board or advisory council. There may be a continuum of parent participation from involvement to engagement, with a critical link to school's mission. For example, if a charter school is highly academic but serves a low-income population, they may not expect parents who have not graduated from high school themselves to become fully engaged. These schools may set a goal of having the parents involved by being supportive of their child's education rather than expecting them to help out in the classroom. Further research into how a school's mission shapes parent participation would help shed light on this difference.

Also, the study reported here utilized interviews of school leaders, but did not include data from any parents, students, or teachers. As the literature posits benefits to all of these groups and

acknowledges differences in interpreting what constitutes involvement, future research that includes the perspectives of these constituents in warranted. Further, parents' experiences in charter schools compared with traditional public schools will help illuminate whether a new paradigm has emerged.

Finally, future investigations could include different types of schools of choice – private schools, faith-based schools, magnet schools, schools attended through voucher programs – to assess whether the findings from charter schools are indicative of different types of schools of choice. Such a study could explore the extent to which our findings relate to the geographic dispersion of families versus the characteristics of the parent population.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. Tell me a little about the parent involvement at your school – what types of activities are parents involved in? (prompts: helping out in classrooms, helping out in the office, helping with field trips or extra-curricular activities, helping with their child's homework/studying at home, "parenting" classes, school governance, fundraising).
2. What percentages of parents are involved (in the activities mentioned in #1)?
    a. In your elementary program
    b. In your secondary program
3. Has your school tried to tailor PI opportunities to the needs of working parents or single-parent households? Please explain.
4. What are the goals of parent involvement at your school? (prompts: benefits to the school, to the students, to the whole family/community).
5. To what do you attribute the levels of parent involvement at your school? (prompts: is it something the school makes a conscious effort to promote?)
    a. Were parents involved in the charter application?
    b. Has the level of involvement changed over time?
6. Do you think the level of parent involvement at your school is different from other public schools in your area? If so, why and in what ways?
7. Some schools have specific policies/positions dedicated to PI. Does your school…
    a. Have a parent liaison?
        i. If so, is the position voluntary or paid?
        ii. If paid, does the money come from the general operating budget?
    b. Have a parent center?
        i. If so, what is the space used for and how often is it used?
    c. Have a parent contract?
        i. If so, what is the content of the contract?
        ii. How is the contract enforced?
    d. Have a school handbook for parents/families?
    e. Have a Web site with a specific portal for parent information? [review prior to interview]
        i. If so, what information is it used to convey [prompts: newsletter, students' grades, volunteer opportunities, tracking volunteer hours]
8. What measures do you use to monitor PI at your school? (prompts: counting number of hours, statistics on attendance to events, satisfaction surveys, etc)
9. What do you feel are the benefits of parent involvement?
10. What challenges do you face in trying to involve parents at your school? [Prompts: involving low-income parents or parents who don't speak English, sustaining involvement in the long term]
11. What sorts of parent involvement would you like to see in coming years?