

**PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE BOSTON PILOT SCHOOLS:
LESSONS FROM A UNIQUE URBAN NETWORK**

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When we came together as a staff and talked about family involvement, we talked about it in terms of families being engaged in the school in very meaningful ways...families being engaged beyond the bakesale. We really wanted them to be on curriculum committees and hiring committees and really being part of the school environment in a very significant way so that it really spoke to the culture and the climate of the school and we felt like parents and families were the ones that were going to construct and set that culture in that school....With autonomy,... there's freedom. I equate it with having the freedom to construct what you think are the best places for kids...[a] vehicle by which you can actually operationalize a vision and mission. (Pilot School Founding Director, 2002)

They really believe in this idea of collaboration and partnership with parents. It's one thing to say it, to have it in your catalog, but it's another thing to actually live it. To decide to endure the growing pains of having to live it. (Parent of Pilot School Student, 2002)

Parent involvement in their children's education is widely regarded as a way to help students succeed in school. High parental involvement has been linked to increases in student achievement and engagement in school (Moore, 1992; Swap, 1993; Henderson and Berla, 1994; Fuller and Olsen, 1998). As a result, efforts to increase parent involvement in their children's education, both in and out of school, have been included in many school improvement and reform efforts over the last two decades (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1994; Moles, 1993; Johnson, 1997).

In recent years, expectations for parent involvement in schools have increased. While parents were once only expected to help with homework and support school decisions, schools now want parents to do much more, ranging from volunteering in the school to actively participating in school policy decision-making. Unfortunately, schools have had particular difficulty in involving low-income parents and parents of color, despite research which suggests that these parents want to be involved in their children's schools (Trumbull et al, 2001).

Research indicates two significant barriers to creating schools which are inclusive and welcoming to all parents. First, there is a lack of communication between families and schools over expectations for parent involvement. Parents' ideas about their proper role in their children's schooling, influenced by social and cultural factors, are often different from what the school expects (Lareau, 1987; Moles, 1993; Swap, 1993; Griffith, 1998; Terrell, 2002; Mapp, 2002). Without adequate communication and outreach on the part of the school, many parents are not comfortable participating in school activities. For example, while most schools expect parents to visit the school several times during the school year, many immigrant parents may expect to delegate authority to the school and feel that it is inappropriate or a sign of disrespect to visit the school or participate in school activities (Swap, 1993). As a result, some parents may not be considered by the school as participating in their child's education, when in fact, they care about their children's education and are providing support for them (Moles, 1993; Swap, 1993; Terrell, 2002; Mapp, 2002).

A second major barrier may be found in the organizational structure and culture of most public schools (Swap, 1993). Under a hierarchical model of decision-making, many decisions about school policies are made at the district level, while the remainder of decisions are made by the administrators at the school. As a result, there is little opportunity for input in decision making by teachers, parents, and students in the school community.

A more collaborative approach to school decision-making makes it easier for parents and schools to communicate and develop opportunities for high-quality involvement (Swap, 1993; Seeley, 1993; Moles, 1993; Rich, 1993; Epstein, 1995). Schools that are open to collaboration among all members of the school community enable parents and schools to become partners in helping students to succeed in school. According to Swap, a “true partnership” among families and schools contains four elements: “creating two-way communication, enhancing learning opportunities at home and at school, providing mutual support, and making joint decisions” (1993, p. 59). While developing partnerships among families and schools may take time, there is evidence to support that these types of collaborative relationships work: parent involvement has been ‘directly linked’ to the school policies that include parents at the school and assist parents in helping their children at home (Dauber and Epstein, 1993).

Boston Pilot Schools Network

Schools that espouse a collaborative approach to decision-making may be better able to develop relevant parental involvement opportunities in their schools. The Boston Pilot Schools are examples of urban public schools that strive to provide a more collaborative approach to decision making. Created in 1994, Boston Pilot Schools were designed to improve the quality of education and to promote increased choice options within the Boston Public School District. Each Boston Pilot School has control over its budget, staffing, curriculum, governance, and time¹ which means that most decisions are made at each individual school by members of the school community. The areas of autonomy, along with small size and their vision-driven nature, give Pilot Schools greater flexibility than traditional district schools in developing their school environments.

Recent research has shown that Boston Pilot School students, while demographically similar to their counterparts in the rest of the district, perform comparably or better than students in other Boston Public Schools in terms of student engagement and achievement. High attendance rates, test scores, and graduation rates as well as low transfer, suspension, and grade retention rates characterize Pilot Schools. (CCE, 2001a) Pilot Schools use their autonomies and increased flexibility to organize their schools to meet two conditions known to support high student achievement (Hawley-Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998; Newmann, 1996) —creating environments where students are well known to their teachers and providing teachers with adequate time to collaborate (CCE, 2001b).

Another potential reason for the success of Pilot School students is that Pilot Schools work actively to involve parents. Pilot Schools have a commitment to include parents in the ir school communities, which, when combined with Pilot Schools’ collaborative practices and decision-

¹ See Appendix for a description of each autonomy.

making among staff, may make Pilots likely to espouse partnership-like policies in their interactions with families.

Research Questions/Methodology

This paper focuses on preliminary findings of a study on parent involvement in the Pilot Schools. The goal of this paper is to present the range of opportunities that Pilot Schools provide for parents in their communities. As it is the first in a series of reports, it forms a base for future studies on the impact of parent involvement in the Pilot Schools. The guiding question for this study is:

- What opportunities do Pilot Schools provide for parental involvement in the school community?

School documentation, direct observations of parent-school activities, and informal conversations with parent attendees at eight of the eleven Pilot Schools during the 2001-2002 school year, provide the data. For the purposes of this report, parent involvement refers to parent participation in school-based activities.

Results

Pilot Schools encourage a high level of parent involvement in school-based activities by providing multiple and varied opportunities for parents and families to become involved in the school community. These opportunities for parent involvement in the Pilot Schools range from traditional to innovative activities. This section provides an overview of the types of parent engagement opportunities. There are three main categories:

- Parent/family events at the school;
- Membership opportunities in parent groups; and
- Communication structures to keep parents informed.

Parent/Family Events

Parent/Family Events are opportunities for parents and children to spend time at the school. These events may be organized by the faculty, parents, or both and are often held in addition to the regular school day. This section describes seven types of events held by Pilot Schools to engage parents.

- *Parent-Teacher-Student conferences*

Each Pilot School holds parent-teacher-student conferences at least once a year, with many holding them twice. Parent-teacher-student conferences give parents, teachers, and students a chance to discuss students' academic growth and progress, as well as challenges. Conferences usually include written teacher reports on the student and may include students' written reflections on their own work and student academic goal-setting. To accommodate parents' schedules, schools offer conferences over the course of two or more days and at different times of the day.

At one Pilot High School that is divided into three houses, spring narratives are held during the afternoon and evening on one day and on the afternoon of the following day. Parents make appointments, in advance, to meet with the teachers in their child's house. All students in the school are encouraged to attend with their parents. Each house structures its own conferences: in the group conferences, all teachers from a house sit together with one parent at a time and discuss the student's progress with his/her parent; in individual conferences, parents sit at tables around the room and teachers from the house rotate around the room.

- *Exhibitions where families look at student work*

All of the Pilot Schools exhibit the work of students in a celebratory event at one or multiple points during the school year. Exhibitions/celebrations of the work of students provide opportunities for parents and families to view and share the work of students. They are also a way to welcome parents into the school.

At one exhibition, student projects from all subject areas were exhibited throughout the building and student demonstrations were held in various classrooms. Students acted as tour guides for parents, families, and other community members. Teachers talked to families about the work that students put into their projects. In a culminating assembly at the end of the evening, school staff presented certificates to students who received honors for the marking period and thanked the parents and family members for their support by reminding families that it is "impossible to do this work without you".

- *Participating in reviews of student work*

Most Pilot Schools provide opportunities for parents to act as reviewers of the work of their children. Unlike exhibitions in which parents act as observers of work that has already been evaluated by teachers, these are opportunities for parents to be present during the grading process. In several schools, parents also participate in the scoring process for the work. This happens at both the elementary and high school levels.

One Pilot School requires students to present a portfolio of their work to graduate from the eighth grade. In addition to teachers, parents and members of the larger community sit on the portfolio review boards for students. This gives parents an opportunity to look at their child's work and collaborate with teachers to score the student's work. Rubrics are used to score each section of the portfolio. Parents, like teachers and other reviewers, must use the rubric to score each section.

- *Engaging parents to support their children's learning*

Pilot School faculty give parents tools they will need to support student learning. These include demonstrations of curriculum teaching techniques and ways that parents can help students do their homework.

One Pilot School, serving grades K-8, recently switched its math curriculum to the Connected Math Program (CMP). The structure and methods used in CMP are different from traditional math curricula and are therefore most likely different from the ways that parents learned math. To introduce the new math curriculum and give parents strategies to help their children at home, the faculty organized two math curriculum nights, one for parents of students in the elementary grades and one for parents of the middle school students. The general structure of the two evenings was the same: a faculty presentation of the new math curriculum followed by an opportunity for parents to practice some math strategies with their children. At the elementary level, parents and children played math games together; at the middle school, students led their parents through math exercises. At the end of the evening, families were given resource packets to use at home.

- *Engaging parents to develop their own knowledge/skills*

A few Pilot Schools provide opportunities for parents to improve their own knowledge and skills. These opportunities for parents include job skills and diversity training.

Through a family technology program at one Pilot High School, students teach computer literacy classes to their parents. Once the program is complete, families receive a computer and free internet access.

- *Social Events*

Many Pilot Schools hold events for parents and families that may include time for celebrating student work, or looking at the curriculum, but are primarily social events and community building activities for families and children to come to the school and spend time in a relaxed manner. Dinner, provided by either the school or parents, is usually served at these events. After dinner, there are usually activities for parents and children to participate in together.

One Pilot Elementary School holds 'family nights' throughout the school year for families in each of its two houses. At a family night for one of the houses, parents, students, and school faculty came together for an informal evening at the school. The evening began with a potluck dinner, composed of dishes prepared by parents and teachers. After dinner, parents and students visited various learning stations that were set up in the classrooms and corridor. Parents also spent time informally talking to other parents and teachers.

Membership Opportunities in Parent Groups

Each of the Pilot Schools provides opportunities for parents to participate in advisory and/or decision-making groups in the school, through Parent Councils and School Site Councils/Governing Boards. This section provides some explanation of these opportunities for parent involvement in school groups.

- *Parent Councils*

While all parents in a school are members of the Parent Council, not all parents attend parent council meetings. In practice, Parent Councils at the Pilot Schools vary in the frequency of meetings and types of things that they are involved with in the school. Parent Councils serve many functions, including: planning (or contributing to the planning) of school events; providing a forum for parents to broach and discuss concerns; advocating for parents and students in the school; and providing a parent voice and serving in an advisory capacity to the school administration and governing board.

One Pilot High School recently added an honors component to its curriculum in response to parent concerns that some students needed to be challenged more in order for them to remain engaged in their schoolwork. While parents acknowledged that the school was doing a good job of providing extra help for students who needed it, parents wanted the school to provide a more challenging curriculum for students who were ready for it.

- *School Site Councils/Governing Boards*

Every Pilot School has a school-based site council or governing board that acts in both an advisory and governing capacity in various aspects of the school community. These boards are commonly comprised of school administrators, teachers, parents, and community members. Parents on these boards are elected by the other parents in the school. As a result, parents in the school community have either direct voice on the board (by being members) or an indirect voice (by electing members).

School Site Councils or Governing Boards meet several times during the school year. Agenda items vary, but commonly include discussions of topics related to school climate, the school's annual budget, hiring of staff, and other school policy related issues. Across Pilot Schools, there is a range in both the topics that a School Site Council or Governing Board considers, and the areas over which it acts in an advisory capacity or has decision-making authority.

For certain decisions, the School Site Council/Governing Board works with the Parent Council to solicit the input of parents. A recent change in the administrative structure at one of the Pilot Schools, from a Director and Assistant Director model to a Co-Director model, provides an example of a governing board and Parent Council working together to ensure that the change would be influenced and accepted by all in the school community. Parents were consulted in every step of the decision-making process, from developing the job description to making a hiring recommendation to the governing board. Parent input was solicited primarily through Parent Council meetings and a phone survey conducted by members of the Parent Council.

Communication Structures to Keep Parents Informed

- *School-to-parent liaisons*

Most of the Pilot Schools have a designated staff person to maintain contact between the parent councils and the school. Other duties may include publishing the newsletter, and helping to plan and organize parent events.

One school has a full-time parent coordinator/liaison to help organize parent events and facilitate communication between parents and school staff. Parents are introduced to the coordinator at student-parent orientations at the beginning of the school year. Duties throughout the year include: orienting new parents to the school, fielding and addressing parent concerns, coordinating the Parent Council, publishing the school newsletter and calendar of events, organizing parent events, and recruiting parent volunteers for school events. The school also employs an outreach and community coordinator who works, in part, to provide information about the school to students and families throughout the city of Boston.²

- *Newsletter*

To keep families informed about the school, eight out of the eleven Pilot Schools mail a newsletter to families. Newsletters contain updates on school events, clarifications on school issues, and reminders to parents about school policies. The frequency of the mailings among schools varies from a few times a year to weekly and the range in length from two to eight pages. At one school, parents can email the parent coordinator with articles for each edition of the monthly newsletter.

- *School website*

Several Pilot Schools maintain websites containing information about the school. While the content of school websites varies by school, the range includes school calendars and handbooks, access to grades, and teacher contact information. One Pilot elementary school maintains a detailed website containing a variety of information and resources for parents and other members of the school community. One unique feature of the website is a ‘virtual tour’ of each classroom which includes information about the class, class projects, and expectations.

² Family engagement begins with the choice to attend a Pilot School. A controlled choice plan is in place for Boston’s elementary and middle schools. Under the plan, families list their top three school choices for their children. If there are not enough seats in a school to accommodate all the families that choose it, the seats are filled by lottery. High School Students may apply to any high school in the city. Due to the choice, parents must have access to information to select a school that is right for their children.

Discussion

Autonomies provide flexibility to create varied opportunities for parent involvement, particularly in the areas of teaching and learning

The autonomy that Pilot Schools have over curriculum and assessment, governance, staffing, budget, and schedule helps them to collaboratively structure school environments, utilizing input from those closest to the learner. According to a recent study, Pilot School directors view the autonomies as a way to create school communities that will “lead to sustained student learning” (Center for Collaborative Education, 2001b). While each Pilot School does this according to its own unique vision and mission, structuring an environment for “sustained student learning” includes parents. Pilots create many opportunities for meaningful parent involvement as a result of the freedom and responsibility that they have to construct their communities and school cultures. In traditional district schools where the budget, curriculum, schedule, and hiring practices are set by the district, it may be more difficult for parents to help shape the school environment.

The following is a list of specific ways in which the autonomies impact and help shape parent involvement opportunities:

Curriculum and Assessment

Pilot Schools have the freedom to choose their own curriculum and design their own assessment measures. As a result, there is flexibility at the school level to change, modify, or adopt curriculum. Pilot School parents are involved in many aspects of teaching and learning at the school level. Schools invite input from parents and respond to their concerns about the curriculum and, at many schools, include parents in the assessment of student work. When parents at one school expressed a concern that not all students were being adequately challenged by the curriculum, changes were made to add an honors component to the curriculum.

Pilot Schools reinforce the value of parents in their children’s school success by providing opportunities for parents to be involved across the range of their children’s academic experiences, from curriculum development to academic goal-setting to assessment. By holding parent-teacher-student conferences rather than the traditional parent-teacher conferences, Pilot Schools provide opportunities for students to sit down with their parents and teachers and discuss their progress and set academic goals for themselves. Many Pilot Schools also provide opportunities for parents to act as evaluators of their children’s work, which helps parents to understand the work that their children are doing, the grading system, their children’s academic strengths and weaknesses, and may provide insight as to how parents can help their children to learn more.

Governance

Pilot Schools provide opportunities for parents to have a direct voice in school governance decisions through seats designated for parents on the School Site Council/Governing Board. Due to Pilot Schools’ autonomy, the governing board has an important role in shaping annual budget,

staffing profile, and school policies. As a result, parents have a voice in making decisions and shaping aspects of the school culture that would ordinarily be made by the school district.

Pilot School parents often contribute to discussions around school climate. Whether a school is considering how to handle discipline problems or making a change to its curriculum, parents usually have a voice in the decision-making process, either as members of the school's Parent Council or School Site Committee/Governing Board. Parents not only contribute to discussions raised by the administration, but they also have the power to initiate school-wide discussions of issues that they feel are important. While Parent Councils provide a formal means to broach parent concerns, many school administrations also encourage parents to bring concerns directly to them.

Scheduling

Pilot Schools have flexibility to structure their schedules in ways that are appropriate for their students. Using this flexibility, Pilot Schools can also arrange schedules to accommodate the needs of parents in the school. Examples of this include the scheduling of parent conferences and portfolio assessments at different times of the day in order to accommodate parents who may work or have other obligations at times when parent conferences are traditionally held (evening, late afternoon).

Staffing

Parents sit on the hiring committees at several Pilot Schools. They are involved in modifying job descriptions, screening resumes, interviewing potential candidates, and making recommendations to the School Site Council/Governing Board. Parents have input in hiring teachers and administrators who are going to be responsive to student needs.

Budget

Pilot Schools use their budget autonomy to configure staffing plans that serve the needs of the school. At one school, teachers receive a stipend for the time that they spend at the school in addition to teaching time. This is specifically used, in part, for time spent in parent/family activities. The stipends and the hours spent at school in addition to teaching during the regular day are built into the teachers' contract.

Another school created the full-time positions of Parent and Family Coordinator and Outreach and Community Coordinator to recruit students and families to the school and to engage them once students are enrolled in the school. Their responsibilities include: providing information about the school to parents and students, helping them through the admissions process, maintaining communication between parents and the school, and providing a place for parents to voice and seek action on their concerns.

Conclusion

This paper focused on data gathered through school documentation, observations of family-school events, and conversations with parents at school events as a foundation for an ongoing study of parent involvement and engagement in the Pilot Schools. From this study, we take away three lessons. First, Pilot Schools foster parent engagement through multiple avenues of involvement with the school. Second, the Pilot School autonomies over curriculum, governance, schedule, staffing, and budget help school staff structure their schools in ways that encourage and facilitate parent involvement and engagement in the school community. Third, the Pilot Schools strive to develop meaningful collaboration among families and schools. Through their autonomies, Pilot Schools can integrate parent input and feedback in ways that schools without the autonomies cannot. Structuring the curriculum with parent feedback, modifying the curriculum according to parent concerns, giving parents a voice in school governance issues, including parents in the assessment of their children and including parents in the staffing decisions at the school are all examples of ways that Pilots use their autonomies in collaborative ways with parents.

We need to examine these lessons more deeply to fully derive their implications for fostering parent engagement in schools. To that end, our next steps involve interviews with parents and school staff to learn more about their perspectives on parent involvement in the Pilot Schools. Their perspectives will provide insight into the range of expectations that school staff and parents have for both the level and type of parent involvement in schools. The experiences of parents will shed light on ways that different aspects of Pilot Schools—multiple opportunities and events, autonomies, and school culture—nurture and encourage family involvement in the school community.

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Appendix

The following is a list and description of the autonomies.

Budget- Schools receive a lump sum per pupil budget, the sum of which is equal to other district schools within that grade span and that includes salaries, instructional materials, etc. The district has itemized all central office costs and now allows Pilot Schools to choose either to purchase identified discretionary district items and services or to not purchase them and include them in the school's lump sum per pupil budget

School Calendar: Pilot Schools have the freedom to set different school days and calendar years for both students and faculty in accordance with their principles or school reform models.

Curriculum and Assessment: Pilot Schools have the freedom to structure their curriculum and assessment practices to best meet students' learning needs. While acknowledging that all Pilot Schools are held accountable to state-required tests, these schools are given the flexibility to determine the school-based curriculum and assessment practices that will best prepare students for state and district assessments.

Governance and Policies: Pilot Schools have the freedom to create their own governance structures that give school staff increased decision making powers over budget approval, principal selection and firing, and programs and policies, while being mindful of state requirements on school councils. The school's site council takes on increased governing responsibilities.

Staffing: Pilot Schools have the freedom to hire and excess their staff in order to create a unified school community. (Center for Collaborative Education, 2001a)