

**ENGAGING PARENTS IN AN URBAN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL:
A CASE STUDY OF BOSTON ARTS ACADEMY**

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ABSTRACT

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). Schools with large populations of low-income students or students of color often have difficulties in engaging a majority of parents due to a variety of social and cultural differences among parents and teachers. While the literature on parent involvement cites many examples of challenges to parent involvement and suggestions to overcome those challenges, few models of extensive parent involvement in urban, public high schools have been described.

The Boston Arts Academy is one such example. Parent involvement was studied at this urban public high school through staff and parent interviews, documentation, and observation of family events at the school. Boston Arts Academy engages a vast majority of its parents in school-based activities through multiple events and entry points, a welcoming school environment, and frequent communication among staff and parents. By focusing on building a diverse, inclusive culture and encouraging parents to take part in the school, the academy engages parents with varied prior experiences and dispositions toward parent involvement. Parents express that the school creates an open, welcoming, and informative environment.

Findings from this case study suggest several key approaches that other schools may adopt:

- Developing a coherent school vision that focuses on including families of varying dispositions as part of the team;
- Supporting staff commitment to knowing students well and regularly communicating with parents;
- Creating multiple, diverse opportunities for parent involvement, and support for parents to avail themselves of these opportunities; and
- Allocating staffing resources toward facilitating parent communication and involvement.

INTRODUCTION

It is important that parents feel and know their input is as welcome as their presence in our school. We cannot be successful in educating students without them. (Boston Arts Academy Family Coordinator, 2002)

WHY STUDY PARENT INVOLVEMENT?

Parent involvement in education is widely regarded as a way to help students succeed in school. It is defined by researchers as including both home and school based activities, such as talking with their children, setting boundaries, helping with homework, communicating with teachers, volunteering in schools and classrooms, and attending school-sponsored events (Chavkin and Williams, 1993; Swap, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Ho Sui-Chu and Willms, 1996; Mapp, 2003). 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 (Moles, 1993; Johnson, 1997).

Many schools with large populations of low-income students or students of color report difficulties in engaging high numbers of their parents in the school community. Reasons for these difficulties have been attributed to several factors, including parents not having many opportunities to be involved or not feeling welcomed into the school community (Moles, 1993; Chavkin and Williams, 1993) and miscommunication about what schools and parents believe is the appropriate form of parent involvement in their children's education, often due to social and cultural differences among parents and teachers (Lareau, 1987; Moles, 1993; Swap, 1993; Griffith, 1998; Terrell, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey and O'Connor, 2002; Mapp, 2003).

A recent report of the Family and Community Engagement Task Force of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) confirms that many of the barriers to parent involvement cited above exist in Boston's schools,- a district with a student population that is predominantly low income and persons of color (Boston Public Schools, 2000). Within BPS, however, there are examples of schools that engage parents at a high level. One elementary school, in particular, created a successful parent engagement program by creating a welcoming culture of mutual respect and communication and actively promoting relationships between parents and the school (Mapp, 2003).

While parent involvement has an impact throughout a student's educational career (Henderson and Berla, 1994), it diminishes as students move from elementary to secondary school (Dauber and Epstein, 1993; National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Parents of adolescents often reduce their involvement as students want more independence. High schools also provide fewer opportunities and communicate less about involvement opportunities than do elementary schools (Vaden-Kiernan and Chandler, 1996). However, schools that support and facilitate many kinds of parent involvement create partnerships among school staff, students, and parents that lead to higher levels of involvement at all levels (Swap, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Sanders et al, 1999).

This study focuses on parent involvement at one urban public high school, the Boston Arts Academy (BAA). Boston Arts Academy was chosen as a case study school because it enrolls a diverse population, its students perform well on a variety of indicators of student engagement and achievement, and parent attendance at school-based events over the past few years has been consistently high.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE BOSTON ARTS ACADEMY

The Boston Arts Academy opened its doors to 160 freshman and sophomores in September 1998. The school added one grade per year and now enrolls almost 400 students in grades 9-12. Of the 381 students enrolled in 2002-03, there were 50% African-American students, 24% white students, 25% Latino students, and 1% Asian students; 56% were eligible for free/reduced lunch. This racial and socioeconomic distribution is similar to that of the total student population in Boston public high schools (CCE, 2003)¹.

The Boston Arts Academy is a Pilot School of the Boston Public Schools. 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 time², which means that members of the school community have authority for many decisions that have traditionally been made by the district. The autonomies, along with small size and their vision-driven nature, give Pilot Schools greater flexibility than traditional district schools in developing their environments. Pilot Schools use their increased flexibility to organize themselves to create environments where students are well known to their teachers (CCE, 2001).

Any child living in Boston may apply to BAA. To gain admission³, students must submit an application and audition in their choice of (up to two) arts discipline(s). In a process that is academic blind (i.e., students are not screened for prior academic achievement levels), students are accepted based on the potential and interest in the arts that they demonstrate during auditions. Many students seek to attend Boston Arts Academy -- over the past two years, approximately one in four applicants has gained admission. Research examining why students choose BAA has found that the arts curriculum is the most significant draw, while an academically challenging curriculum and career preparation are also very important (Doyle et al, 2003).

BAA provides both a college preparatory academic curriculum *and* a full arts curriculum to all students. The Academy's goal is to prepare students to have a full range of choices--both in the arts and in other pathways--after graduation. According to the school's mission statement, BAA "...is committed to a rigorous academic and arts education for students who are eager to think creatively and independently, to question and take risks within a college preparatory program."

¹ In 2002-03, Boston public high schools enrolled, 48% African-American students, 18 % white students, 23% Latino students, and 11% Asian students, with 61% of all students eligible for free/reduced lunch.

² See Appendix A for a description of each area of autonomy.

³ Boston Public Schools are schools of choice. Twelve of the twenty-eight high schools, including BAA, have a special admissions process. The other schools fill their seats by lottery, if necessary, according to students' listed preferences.

Students at BAA major in one of four arts: theater, dance, visual arts, and music. Each major has its own curriculum and requirements for graduation. All BAA students are required to take math, science, and humanities courses as part of the academic curriculum. Students also take an Advisory class each year. Advisories provide opportunities for students to work on writing, research, and interdisciplinary projects, and on developing effective work habits. They are co-led by two teachers, known as advisors⁴. In addition to teaching, advisors conduct fall parent conferences and follow-up on student progress for all classes.

Assessment in both academics and arts at BAA is primarily through exhibitions and portfolios. Students demonstrate proficiency through performance-based work that involves inquiry and connections to life outside the classroom. Members of the larger community, including parents, help to evaluate student work (CCE, 2004a).

While the unique dual curriculum (arts and academics) has proven attractive and successful, the school's student support program also contributes to the culture of student engagement. BAA has an extensive student support services program that includes: academic help through a learning center, and after-school tutoring programs/homework help; support in selecting and applying to college, and securing financial aid; counseling (including individual, group, and family counseling and referrals to outside service organizations); and issue-based and enrichment student groups, including a girls' vocalist group, martial arts group, Latina girls' group, and chess group. According to one staff member, "all 400 students...are being touched by Student Support Services."

Students at BAA perform near the top levels of Boston's high schools in student engagement indicators such as attendance, suspensions, and fewest numbers of transfers out of the school (CCE, 2003). In addition, BAA students score near the top of Boston high schools on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests in English/Language Arts and in Mathematics. A high percentage of their graduates go directly to college: 94% of 2002 graduates and 96% of 2003 graduates (BAA, 2002, 2003).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

This case study of parent involvement focused on the following question:

What has made Boston Arts Academy successful in engaging a majority of parents who have varied prior school experiences and levels of engagement?

The focus of the study emerged from an earlier study of parent involvement practices across the Pilot Schools Network (Ouimette et al., 2002). A broad conception of parent involvement was utilized, encompassing both school-based parent interactions and home-based parent support of their children's education (Chavkin and Williams, 1993; Swap, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Ho Sui-Chu and Willms, 1996; Mapp, 2003). For simplicity, "parent" refers to students' primary adult

⁴ All academic and arts teachers serve as advisors. Students' advisors during their junior and senior years are teachers from their arts major

caretaker and includes legal guardians and adult family members/friends who have primary responsibility for the student.

INTERVIEWS

School staff

Researchers⁵ conducted interviews lasting for forty-five to ninety minutes with the community outreach coordinator, student support services director, one administrator, three teachers, and the family coordinator. Staff interviewees were chosen based on their roles in the school. Teachers who were interviewed volunteered and represented academics and the arts. The formal interview with the family coordinator was supplemented by several informal conversations.

Parents

Researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews ranging in length from thirty to seventy-five minutes with twenty-three parents, representing twenty-six students. Parents were selected for interviews in two ways. In order to interview parents with a range of involvement levels, school event attendance records from four events (including two required events) during the fall of 2002 were used to generate two groups: *high*- parents who attended more than the two required events; and *medium*- parents who attended the two required events or fewer. Parents were chosen at random from each group to participate in an interview. Members of the school's Parent Council were then randomly selected to be interviewed.

We had initially planned to include a "low involvement" group consisting of parents who had not attended any of the four events during Fall 2003. Though attempting to contact twenty parents from this group, researchers were only able to complete one interview. Parents in this group represent roughly 10% of the total student population for BAA, while parents in the high and medium groups represent roughly 20% and 70%, respectively.

For the purposes of this analysis, members of the Parent Council are included with the high group. Overall, eleven parents from the high group and twelve parents from the medium group were interviewed. All of the parents in the high group were interviewed in person while ten out of the twelve medium parents were interviewed over the phone. While researchers attempted to contact seventy-two parents for interviews, 92% of the high parents and 20% of the medium parents who were contacted for an interview were actually interviewed. It is important to note that the high group and medium group designations are based solely on school-based involvement activities, which are not necessarily correlated with parents' participation in their children's lives outside of school.

Demographics of the parent sample

The educational and cultural backgrounds of the parents and students are important to understand, as they influence perceptions of school and the role of family involvement (Lareau,

⁵ The researchers for the study all work in the Research and Evaluation program at the Center for Collaborative Education in Boston, which is the coordinating agency for the Boston Pilot Schools Network.

1987; Hoover-Dempsey and O'Connor, 2002; Mapp, 2003). We present demographics of the sample of parents and students according to race and family income level, measured by eligibility for free/reduced lunch.

During the 2002-03 school year, the racial composition of BAA students was 50% African-American, 24% white, 25% Latino, and 1% Asian. Fifty-six percent of students qualified for free/reduced lunch. Our overall sample⁶ is 42% African-American, 31% white, and 23% Latino, with 38% of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch. Therefore, our sample slightly under-represents African-American students and slightly over-represents white students. It also over-represents students who do not qualify for free/reduced lunch⁷.

OBSERVATIONS

Researchers observed ten parent/family events over two school years at the Boston Arts Academy, including orientation, parent council meetings, student assessments, and performances.

DOCUMENTATION

Researchers reviewed school publications, parent attendance data, and meeting announcements for the 2001-02 and 2002-03 school years.

Researchers read transcripts of all interviews and noted general themes. Transcripts were then coded and analyzed using HyperRESEARCH.

FINDINGS

The findings are organized into three sections below. The first section describes BAA's vision of parent involvement. The second section describes strategies for moving towards that vision, including staffing for enhanced parent involvement and providing multiple entry points and opportunities for involvement. The third section provides evidence that parents experience those strategies as successful because they express feeling welcomed and well-informed about their children's education.

THE VISION OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT AT BAA

Parents have been an integral part of the Boston Arts Academy community since the school opened in 1998. Its founders, who still head the school, believe that parent support is a key component of student success. With this vision in mind, they designed a school which offers parents many ways to support their children's education.

⁶ Racial and lunch status demographics are listed by student, rather than by parent. This is more accurate because some families have more than one child in the school.

⁷ We do not have the demographic breakdowns for the high and medium groups school-wide; therefore it is difficult to ascertain whether the demographics of the sample groups are similar to the actual attendance rates of parents across the school.

...we wanted to give different entry points to parents. So those who never used to come to anything, those are the ones we wanted to reach out to. We have the parent newsletter. We have room parents that reach out, as well. So there are different ways to get involved. And then for those parents that will come to everything, and want to dial up about the bigger picture, we have things like the parent coffees and opportunities like that to have conversations about education in general, not just for their child. I think that we're providing a variety of opportunities for parents to be involved at different levels. [Administrator]

The founders deliberately chose to start a small school, where it would be easier to know students and their families on an individual basis.

In designing the range of opportunities for parent involvement, staff tried to understand different parent dispositions towards engagement with the school. Parents' attitudes towards school and their role in a school are formed by many factors, such as their cultures, their previous experiences, or their available time.

Parents who have paid [private school tuition] before usually feel it's their right to question. And I think parents from public education usually don't feel empowered, or feel like they're being intrusive.... Families in most Latin American countries, the teachers are like your priests, and doctors. It's different in our society. You don't question [whether] the teacher knows what he or she is doing. Your kids are supposed to respect the teacher just like you respect your parents. And if the teacher says that this is green, it's green. Even if it's white, it's green.... So I think those parents are less likely to challenge what the teacher does, or anything that they might feel not quite right about. When you ask them what would they change, it's like they're not to say, not to question the experts. [Administrator]

BAA STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING THEIR PARENT INVOLVEMENT VISION

Building a Community Around the Parent Involvement Vision

Staff Buy-In

BAA staff recognize that parents have had diverse experiences with regard to school and schooling. They have designed the parent involvement program to help all parents feel welcome and comfortable participating in school activities and voicing their opinions to staff. BAA hires teachers and staff who are committed to the school's mission and the idea of parents as partners in education.

The staff feel that parents are part of a three-part team that will lead to students' success. Through orientation and the school's handbook, staff at BAA reinforce the idea that parents are as important as staff in ensuring that children succeed. The goal of family involvement is to maintain open communication among the team of school, students, and parents, which creates a "safety net" through which students cannot fall.

The parents in our school are integral to the operation and the success of our students. I'm a big believer that education happens not only in schools, but it's a daily process and it happens from day one to forever. Students learn from their families, their communities, the larger world. But parent involvement is definitely, definitely a key to all the success that our students see here. We introduced student conferences and parent phone calls, and making sure the students' parents stay involved in the process, and we've seen much higher success rates. [Teacher]

Parent Buy-In

At the beginning of each year, students and parents are asked to sign a contract saying that they understand the rules and responsibilities that students must uphold and that as parents they “commit to support the students by attending certain conferences, meetings, and other events, as described in the Community Handbook”. While the school gives parents a range of opportunities for involvement and does not expect all parents to attend all events, it does expect parents to at least attend the orientation and two parent-teacher-student narrative conferences. In addition to school-based involvement, BAA expects parents to “stay involved in their student’s education and to communicate regularly with Arts Academy faculty members” and “read and regularly review [the] handbook” (BAA student handbook, 2002-03, p.10).

If parents cannot attend the required events, the school will cite the contract when it calls the parents either to reschedule a conference or to have a phone conversation with the parent. The school will also mail any materials that the parents have missed to their homes. Due to a variety of circumstances, there are a few parents who can not or will not attend these events or do not respond to the schools repeated attempts to contact them. In those cases, the school will work to provide the support that the student needs without parental assistance.

Specialized Staffing for Parent Involvement at BAA

A major way that the school ensures open communication is through creative staffing. Using its budget and staffing autonomy, the school has created two staff positions to welcome parents into the school community and keep them involved. The Community Outreach Coordinator ensures that students and their parents know that the school is an option for them and provides assistance with the application if necessary. Once students are accepted to the school, the Family Coordinator becomes parents’ link to information and resources at BAA. The Family Coordinator, a full-time staff member and parent at the school, keeps parents well informed and encourages engagement in the school community. The following section describes the roles and responsibilities of the Family Coordinator in relation to parent involvement.

The Family Coordinator serves two main roles at BAA: liaison between parents and the school, working with parents throughout a child’s enrollment at BAA; and parent representative on school teams, providing a parents’ perspective on decision-making committees. Employing a family coordinator is a way for the school to ensure that parents

- are provided with the information that they need;
- have an advocate who represents their interests and perspectives at the school; and
- have someone at the school that they can always contact.

The Family Coordinator’s contact with parents includes the following activities:

- communication on school policy;
- coordination of events at the school, such as family conferences and performances;
- liaison between parents and the school faculty;

- mediator of situations that arise between parents and school faculty; and
- convener of the Parent Council Board, the executive committee of the Parent Council.

While parents can always contact the Family Coordinator with concerns, they are encouraged to contact the other staff with specific concerns related to their roles. The Family Coordinator facilitates connections between parents and staff members. BAA staff members view the Family Coordinator position as being essential to the success of the school's parent involvement program, and mentioned that she makes it easier to contact parents and to field inquiries about the school.

BAA staff members expressed appreciation for the ways that the Family Coordinator facilitates parent involvement, especially for her work in scheduling parents for conferences and for her ability to "bridge" parents and teachers.

She's a neutral party, particularly when a parent feels he or she is not getting the answers they want, or the response that they want, or feels that they were treated unfairly. Then I think what [the Family Coordinator] does is to advocate putting it into perspective. And, if indeed the parent was treated unfairly or didn't get what they wanted or was misunderstood, then she would call us on it and say, "I would have handled that differently," and to help us mend that bridge again... Sometimes I use her as prevention. If I know that a parent wants to be confrontational, I'll say, "This parent might not be willing to hear what I have to say, and maybe you could sit with us and neutralize the [situation] here." [Administrator]

The Family Coordinator is a member of the following BAA committees, where she provides a parents' perspective and acts as their advocate:

- Student Support Team (SST)- described above;
- Leadership Team- school-based decision-making body;
- Governing Executive Board- sets overall school policy, mission and philosophy;
- Foundation Board- a separate non-profit fundraising group for the school.

Of the sixteen parents who talked about the parent coordinator role in their interviews, many discussed the key role that she plays in facilitating contact, dialogue, and problem solving among parents, students, and school staff. Because she is on the staff of BAA and serves as a parent advocate, the parent coordinator can build bridges, which lead to more responsive, open communication about student needs and issues. Examples include compiling homework from all teachers for a student's extended sick leave, relaying messages between teachers and parents when they are having trouble getting in contact, filling in details for a parent about a student's behavior or performance when the student is not communicating, and providing information about upcoming events. Her accessibility and prompt responsiveness allow her to build relationships with individual parents, which encourage trust both in her and in the school.

When you can't reach anybody else, you can reach her... And she gets back to you. She really is truly a parent advocate. She's that one voice when you can't get anybody else. Just call her.
[Parent 7]

Multiple Entry Points for Parent Involvement at BAA

The school community offers many different opportunities for parent involvement. As at the other Pilot high schools, family involvement activities are classified into three categories: events, membership, and communication. Opportunities include:

- parent-teacher-student (narrative) conferences;
- orientations;
- student performances;
- reviews of student work,
- workshops on the college admissions process;
- volunteer opportunities, such as providing support at performances; and
- membership in school groups, such as the Parent Council Board.

This variety allows parents with different interests, schedules, and constraints to get involved to a degree that feels appropriate to them (Ouimette et al, 2002)⁸.

Attendance at Family Events

We present BAA parent attendance figures from selected first semester school events for the 2001/2002 and 2002/2003 school years. Attendance at the events was generally high. We describe two of these events in the next section and share parent perspectives on them.

Event	2001 Families in Attendance	2002 Families in Attendance
Orientation Meetings	69%	60%
Community Night ⁹	12%	17%
Open House ¹⁰	22%	18%
Family Narrative Conferences	82%	80%

What Parents Experience of Involvement Opportunities

In the following section we share parent perspectives on the multiple entry points provided by BAA. We then examine parents' involvement in their children's education at home.

From interviews with parents, we find that all parents participate to a high degree in any events or activities directly related to their own children's school work, such as parent/teacher/student

⁸ See Appendix B for a description of each of these opportunities at Boston Arts Academy.

⁹ Two weeks after Orientation, all parents are invited to attend a BAA Community Night. The meeting serves as the first Parent Council meeting of the year and parents are elected to fill the vacant spots on the BAA Parent Council Board.

¹⁰ At Open House (scheduled during a school day early in October), BAA parents can experience a typical school day. Attendance at Open House over the past two years has ranged from twenty to twenty-five percent of parents.

narratives, performances, and exhibitions. There is little difference between the rates at which high parents and medium parents are involved at the school in terms of events related to student work.

School-based Parent Involvement Related to Student Work

Orientation

Orientation for parents and students occurs on two evenings just before the start of the school year. At each orientation, parents and students from two grades (nine/ten and eleven/twelve) convene in a large group for introductions and an overview of the school and handbook, and then break into smaller groups according to students' advisories. Attendance at Orientation is one of two events required by the contract and varies by grade, but is generally high, with approximately two-thirds of all parents participating each year.

At orientation, parents have the opportunity to meet teachers and advisors. Parents and students also learn about the school's expectations and regulations in terms of students' academic and arts performance. An important point that is made during orientation is that academics and arts are equally valued at BAA. Medium parents talked about orientation more than high parents. Parents describe the orientation as informative.

I went to the orientation and found out more about the academics of the school, the structure of the school, the fact that the performing arts were not going to override the academics....I just got a good feeling once we went and received more information. [Parent 13]

Narratives

Family narratives are the parent-teacher-student conferences that are held twice a year. Parents and students meet for half-hour scheduled appointments with the student's advisory teacher, who has collected written assessments of the student's work from each of his/her teachers. According to the contract, families must participate in narratives. Attendance at these conferences is very high; at least eighty percent of parents attend each year. For parents who cannot attend, alternate arrangements are made. Including these arrangements, more than ninety percent of families participate in the narratives.

High involvement parents express high satisfaction with these narratives for several reasons. They are able to experience first-hand how the close relationships between teachers and students translate into a deep knowledge about students' learning and needs. They also appreciate that teacher praise, concerns, and expectations are conveyed to the student directly, rather than through the parents.

The teachers know the kids. They really know them. It's almost like a family.... They know their likes, their dislikes, their moods. They know their weaknesses and they know their strong points. And they tell them. I've never been to a parent conference in the nine years of school before BAA where a teacher has told me in front of [my child], "..., you know you really [need improvement] at this, but you're capable of doing that."... They tell them right out. Like I would.... They spend so much time together. They know the kids. They care about the kids. [Parent 3]

When medium involvement parents discussed the narratives, they gave more details about the logistical aspects, including how they were contacted for the appointment and whether it was convenient for them. From them, we learn that the conferences are generally convenient and that staff will make alternative arrangements to suit a parent's schedule; this was especially important

to parents who had inflexible work schedules. Overall, parents were satisfied with the communication through the narrative conferences.

BAA staff members agree that the parent-student-teacher narratives are valuable for sharing information about a student's work as well as creating plans to address concerns. While parents valued the narratives as an information-gathering venue, staff emphasized the value of narratives for enhancing student accountability.

It's helpful because you see the kid from a variety of different vantage points...You see different teachers saying, by and large pretty much the same things...And then you can get a kid to say why these things are happening, and what they're going to do to prevent it. You can get the parent on board with that often, so you all as a group turn to the kid. [Staff Member]

Performances

Parents talked about enjoying the high quality student arts performances. One parent said she even went to performances of other students because they were so entertaining. Parents all want to see their own children perform and will try to attend all performances that do not conflict with work schedules and other home obligations.

Exhibitions

Exhibitions in humanities, science, and math occur several times a year at BAA. They involve presentations and demonstrations of student work, usually in project form. For example, students present their thinking behind a math problem and parents, along with other community members, use rubrics to evaluate the project or presentation. Parents appreciate the exhibitions because it gives them a chance to see and evaluate their own child's work along with the work of other students. They also have the opportunity to meet other students and parents. Students benefit by receiving feedback from more people than their teachers and their parents.

We're given a metric to use and we grade them on presentation, and how many resources they used, and whether they addressed this or that issue. So we actually go around to other kids' exhibits and talk to them about it...the kids get feedback from people other than their parents and other than their teachers...It's more like the real world. A little less sheltered. [Parent 1]

I think [exhibitions are] excellent...I think it gets parents involved and asking questions, and seeing their child's work within the spectrum of other students' work. [Parent 21]

School-based Parent Involvement Not Related to Student Work

In addition to the opportunities for parents to see and evaluate student work, BAA provides opportunities for parents to become involved with supporting the school for the current as well as future students. This section shares parent views on Parent Council and volunteer opportunities.

Parent Council

The Parent Council at BAA is open to all parents. Eight of the eleven high involvement parents interviewed are Parent Council Board members. Members of the Parent Council believe strongly in having a voice in school decisions. Medium involvement parents were less likely to attend

Parent Council meetings. Eight high and three medium involvement parents that were interviewed talked about attending Parent Council meetings.

[Parent council meetings] were very helpful. You know, you have to participate in order to know what's going on. And I think it's important. [Parent 16]

I think the parent council should exist. But I think it needs to be clearer about what its mission is. And I think it should really be the voice of parents. I've never had a parent call me up and say, "Would you represent this view?" I've never been asked to write a report to parents as to what's going on, and how we view it from a parent viewpoint...I'm trying to create an empowered situation. [Parent 8]

Volunteering at the school

At BAA, there are many opportunities for parents to volunteer their time and services. Examples mentioned by parents included being a room parent; helping with auditions, performances, and fund-raising events; assisting with teacher appreciation events; providing food for rehearsals; and serving as a translator. Both high and medium involvement parents talked about their willingness to volunteer for these activities. However, medium parents were more vocal about constraints. Two of them noted that they had indicated their willingness to volunteer in writing, but felt out of the loop because they have not been contacted. Medium parents also refrained from volunteering due to time constraints; they did not want to make a commitment they could not keep.

I wouldn't want to do something that I could not give what it deserved, in terms of my time. I don't believe in that. If you commit to something, do it. [Parent 13]

Home Parent Involvement

Both high and medium involvement parents were actively engaged in their children's education outside school. Two ways of such involvement are: 1) talking about education during times they spend together; and 2) homework.

Talk About Education

Parents found many opportunities to talk with their adolescents about school, the purpose of education, and working towards future goals. These conversations occurred at home in the evening, before or after performances, at church, driving to and from school, and going out for dinner. The talk was not necessarily about schoolwork; it also included social interactions, peer relations, academic expectations, books they read, and life skills. Some parents, predominantly medium involvement parents, talked about the importance of knowing their children's whereabouts for safety reasons.

That's my job, to find out every time my son comes home what happened in school today. What did you do in school today? What subject did you do? Do you have any homework on that subject? What's happening? I find out. [Parent 19]

And the other thing I tell them is that I'm responsible for them. So if someone asks me what my children are doing and where they are, I need to be able to answer those questions. [Parent 13]

Because they're at the teen age, the dangerous age, where I have to be very tough with them...I do life skills with them, teach them what's good and what's bad and what's going on on the streets, what's going on in society. And, you know, once I do that, then they choose the positive and leave the negative alone. But if they do the negative, they get punished. [Parent 19]

For the most part, parents (both medium and high involvement) talked with their children about directions and decisions in life. Parents describe their support as guiding and letting their children make their own choices rather than directing their children in what to do.

I just think at a certain point in a child's life, a young person's life, a little bit after childhood, you have to find out what they want to do. And once you find out what they want to do, you just proceed to do it...Like with him, he wanted to be in the arts.... Well, there's a process to it, there's a program, rules, regulations, understanding, discipline. You know, you let them know how serious it is, because it's their choice. That they make the choice of what they want to be in the future, and you just help them accomplish it and hold them to it...I think he's at that point where he's disciplined enough within himself to do what he has to do. My role, at this point in time right now, is more of an inspirationist (sic). I inspire him as he inspires me. [Parent 16]

All we can do is give her guidance. You can't force her to do something that she doesn't want to do. I'm sure we'll not always agree on her decisions, but I feel if we have an open communication we can at least express ourselves and ultimately, she makes the decision. That's all we can do is to prepare her. [Parent 5]

Like I say, we just want you to have a profession ... Because we are not millionaires, we are not rich, and we cannot unfortunately, leave you money when we die. But, we would like to leave you a wonderful education where you can support yourself and become a wonderful professional in the future, in the near future. And that's what we basically talk about. But, it's up to her...We try to give her ideas so that she can just basically contemplate and think about it...So, we're going to always be there for her and try to give her the best. [Parent 17]

Homework

Most of the interviewed parents made themselves available to help with homework and asked questions about it, but did not often help with doing the work.

She knows that if she needs me to help her, then I'm there to help her. [Parent 4]

Outside of school she asks if she needs help with something in terms of homework, math, that kind of thing, instead of our initiating that. That's the main way. We let go of the details more and more as she's getting older. Letting her ask for what she needs. [Parent 6]

There were extremes in terms of involvement with homework. Two high involvement parents did not want to be involved with homework at all, and thought students should be able to use their own resourcefulness to figure it out themselves or go to a teacher for help.

I've never been into looking at their homework...They do have to learn how to do it themselves. [Parent 2]

I always discouraged coming to me for help. I went to high school. I did my part. I don't feel I should have to do anybody else's work, too. [laughter] [Parent 10]

On the other hand, one high involvement parent asked to see all the work that the child brought home each day.

I'm involved in all of the at-home stuff to a fault, in terms of making sure that she knows what she's supposed to do. I want to know up front, "What projects do you have, and how long do you have to do them? What's your homework? Let me see your homework." [Parent 8]

Three parents talked about how they don't know enough content of the homework to help their children with it. These parents represented both high and medium involvement parents.

Well, in her homework, sometimes I try to help her out. But it's homework that I myself don't understand. [Parent 20]

Finally, almost all parents discussed providing home support in the form of materials and supplies, both for academics and for the arts. They help find, purchase, and/or make supplies, such as costumes and provide resources in the home including computers access.

BAA'S STRATEGIES RESULT IN PARENTS FEELING WELL-INFORMED AND WELCOMED

Parents in general wanted to be involved as much as possible at the school in order to know what was going on with their children. They expressed an interest in attending as many events as possible, taking into account jobs and family responsibilities. People are comfortable going into the school and they feel known at BAA, which was not always the case at other schools. Several parents said that BAA is accessible and provides many ways to be involved. Involvement at the school helps staff at the school to know parents and work together to address concerns.

I get the support on the other end from the teachers and from both principals to encourage him in the same manner that I am. So, it's the unity that I like about it. That I can call [the parent coordinator], or I can call the principal, or I can drop in. Even some teachers were just encouraging me, "Stop in. Whatever we have to do." When I have an issue, I can email or I can get a message to someone, and I can get a response back. They are letting me be aware of what's going on with him. I'm not hearing it second hand. It's like really being there. You're not in the classroom, but it's like being there because you know what's going on. [Parent 7]

Overall, parents in both groups were happy with the school and satisfied that it was doing a good job. There were no significant differences in the responses of parents in both groups in terms of satisfaction with the school.

Every parent talked about his/her communication with teachers. At least five parents described teachers as open to working together on improving students' performance, responsive to a dialogue, and accessible by phone, email, or in person. Parents also observed that teachers shared their assessments of student performance directly with the students- not just with parents. Adjectives and phrases used to characterize teachers and their communication styles included: open, friendly, communicate with students in an age-appropriate way, understanding, honest, dedicated, hard-working, focused, and empathic with teens.

Sometimes the life of a young person is not so easy. And I see that the teachers... understand what they go through in life. [Parent 20]

...the teachers actually know who we are, and they contact us, and we even have a list and e-mails. I mean, there's nothing we don't have. We have their home numbers.... We have cell phone numbers.... You know, they're open to speak to us when we need to speak to them. And they're really honest ...-- "As far as we're concerned, your son isn't doing what he's supposed to be doing." And they're not going to say it behind his back; they will say it to their face. [parent 15]

Another frequently cited reason for parents liking BAA is the fact that their child likes the school. Three of eleven parents in the high group and five of twelve parents in the medium group mentioned this factor.

[My child] actually looks forward to going to school where before it was really a struggle every day. [Parent 4]

Our interviews revealed very few concerns about BAA. Though there weren't areas of common concern across the parents, particular issues mentioned included: budget cuts in Boston and how those would affect the quality and sustainability of BAA; academic challenge for students who come to the school well-prepared; structure of the arts major; and rigidity of some rules and requirements.

DISCUSSION

BAA PROVIDES A SUCCESSFUL MODEL FOR HIGH SCHOOL PARENT INVOLVEMENT

While there can be many barriers to creating a successful school-based parent involvement program in urban schools, previous studies have demonstrated that parents from diverse backgrounds are involved at higher rates when schools reach out and provide many ways for them to be involved in their children's education (Dauber and Epstein, 1993; Sanders, et al., 1999; Mapp, 2003). BAA provides a model of successful parent involvement at the high school level. According to parent attendance levels at school events and parent interview responses, BAA has been effective in engaging a diverse range of parents in the school community.

This paper distinguishes between two types of parent dispositions toward school involvement: high and medium. By the time their children reach high school, parents have had many years of prior school experiences. These experiences, combined with daily obligations, impact a parent's disposition toward involvement in the school community and in their children's education at home. BAA finds ways to reach out to both high and medium involvement parents, and provide them with information and access to the school.

Our data show that at BAA, the needs of diverse parents are met. All parents have opportunities to contribute to the overall school community in addition to supporting their children. Even parents who have a difficult time attending events due to work schedules and family obligations say they are well informed about the school. Many of these parents state that they are better informed and have better communication with BAA than with their children's previous schools (unpublished data).

WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO BAA'S SUCCESS IN ENGAGING PARENTS?

BAA is successful at engaging families in their children's education because the school is vision-driven, autonomous, and small in size.

A central element in BAA's success with parents is a school vision that focuses on the value of a parent-teacher-student team. The leadership believes that parent communication and support are vital to student success. From the school's beginning, BAA's leadership has set high expectations for parent involvement, and, along with other staff members, established a framework to facilitate it. Anticipating that BAA families would come from diverse backgrounds, the leadership designed a program to encourage participation by parents who may

not have been active in their previous school communities. These opportunities reach parents with who have varying dispositions towards school; all contributions are valued.

The freedom to hire staff who are willing to work on a team with students and parents, and who take responsibility for engaging parents, is crucial to the strategy. BAA uses its freedom over budget, staffing, and professional development to hire, train, and support staff in effectively working with students and parents from diverse backgrounds (CCE, 2004b). BAA has created a full-time Family Coordinator position to facilitate regular communication with parents. The school also hires teachers, administrators, and other personnel from diverse backgrounds who are committed to maintaining a climate that is welcoming for families.

The school's smallness allows the personalization necessary to reach parents of varying dispositions and cultures. Staff know students well, are able to address their individual learning needs, and learn how best to inform and engage their parents. This level of understanding contributes to a school culture that is trusting, receptive, and respectful to all parents. Staff work diligently to understand parents' points of view and make accommodations so that potential barriers, such as not speaking English or working long hours, will not hinder parent involvement at BAA. For parents who have often been under-represented and uncomfortable in schools, developing this relationship is a vital step to encouraging family involvement.

HOW CAN OTHER SCHOOLS ADAPT BAA'S PROGRAM TO FIT THEIR LOCAL CONTEXTS?

While BAA's Pilot status provides unique advantages for implementing a parent engagement strategy, other schools may learn from the model, even if they do not have autonomy or are not small. Key elements from the BAA model that other schools may adopt include:

- Developing a coherent school vision that focuses on including families of varying dispositions as part of the team;
- Supporting staff commitment to knowing students well and regularly communicating with parents;
- Creating multiple, diverse opportunities for parent involvement, and support for parents to avail themselves of these opportunities; and
- Allocating staffing resources toward facilitating parent communication and involvement.

If schools are willing to reach out to parents who have a variety of dispositions towards involvement, and think about parents as valuable teammates, many of BAA's strategies may prove to be useful in creating a stronger school community.

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APPENDIX A: DESCRIPTIONS OF THE PILOT SCHOOL AUTONOMIES

Boston Pilot Schools, unlike most public schools, have autonomy over their budgets, staffing, curriculum/assessment, governance and policies, and the school calendar. Along with the commitment to creating and maintaining smallness, these freedoms are necessary to promote successful learning.

Budget: Pilot Schools have a lump sum per pupil budget. Each school may spend its money in the manner that provides the best programs and services to students and their families. A Network Fiscal Autonomy Committee, works in collaboration with the district to increase the percentage of the budget over which schools have autonomy.

- 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. In particular, research supports a correlation between faculty planning time spent on teaching and learning and increased student achievement. Scheduling which allows for summer and school year faculty planning time contributes to a more unified school community and educational program. Pilot Schools use this flexibility to:

- Increase planning and professional development time for faculty
- Increase learning time for students
- Organize the school schedule in ways that maximize learning time for students and planning time for faculty

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.

- Pilot Schools have autonomy from local district curriculum and testing requirements—they can choose what content to cover and how to cover it
- Promotion and graduation requirements are set by the school, not by the district, with an emphasis on competency-based, performance 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, including the following:

- Principal selection, supervision, and firing, with final approval by the superintendent in all cases
- Budget approval
- Setting of school policies, including schools' promotion, graduation, attendance, and discipline policies

Staffing: Pilot Schools have the freedom to hire and excess their staff in order to create a unified school community.

- Each school can decide on the staffing pattern that creates the best learning environment for students
- Each school may hire staff who best fit the needs of the school, regardless of their current status (member of the district or not, although every teacher hired becomes a member of the local teachers union)
- Schools may excess staff (into the district pool) who do not fulfill the needs of the school

APPENDIX B: MULTIPLE ENTRY POINTS

Parent/Family Events

Boston Arts Academy takes a multi-pronged approach to family involvement, creating many opportunities for different levels of involvement at different times of day. Family involvement activities fall into three categories: events, membership, and communication. This variety allows parents with different interest levels, schedules, and constraints to select from a menu of options.

- *Parent-Teacher-Student conferences:* Known as family conferences or narrative conferences, these are held twice a year, with more than three-quarters of families attending in the fall and more than half of families attending in the spring. In the fall, parents and students meet with the student's advisors for 30-minute appointments on one of two days set aside for conferences. The advisors, who have written remarks from all of the student's teachers, review the remarks with the parent and student and discuss the student's progress in the advisory or seminar. Parents, students, and advisors then talk about the student's goals for the year and set action steps for how the student can work toward the goals. During the spring conferences, parents and students can meet with any of the student's teachers for 10-minute intervals. Meetings occur on a first-come, first-served basis on the afternoon and evening of one day and the morning and afternoon of the next day.
- *Performances and exhibitions where families look at student work:* In all of the arts disciplines and academic subjects, parents and family members view the work of both their children and other students in the school. Performances and exhibitions are held throughout the school year in all of the arts disciplines and in Humanities, Science, and Math.
- *Participating in reviews of student work:* Parents and other community members are invited to help evaluate students at BAA through the use of rubrics and evaluation forms in several subject areas, often in conjunction with exhibitions and performances of student work.
- *Engaging parents to support their children's learning:* Boston Arts Academy provides many opportunities for parents to learn ways to support their children in high school and in the future. The school holds orientations for all parents at the beginning of each school year, where parents are given information and can ask questions about school policies and expectations for their students. Parents also receive assistance through an extensive college planning program that includes mandatory meetings for parents and students over the course of two years.
- *Engaging parents to develop their own knowledge/skills:* The Family Coordinator, a trained Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) facilitator, coordinates a SEED discussion group for parents at BAA. Through SEED meetings, which occur at several times throughout the year, parents develop a stronger awareness of themselves and their children by discussing how diversity and equity impact their lives.
- *Social events:* The Parent Council Board coordinates events for parents, such as dances and fundraisers.

- *Volunteer opportunities at the school:* Parents volunteer at auditions to answer questions and provide information for parents of prospective students; they support performances and exhibitions in many capacities from bringing food to helping out backstage; they provide clerical and administrative support to the school; and they provide classroom assistance.

Membership Opportunities in Parent Groups

This section provides some explanation of governance opportunities at Boston Arts Academy.

- *Parent Council Board:* This board consists of fourteen elected members, who serve two-year terms and meet monthly, convened and facilitated by the co-chairs of the council, with assistance from the Family Coordinator. All parents in the school are welcomed and encouraged to attend. Topics at Parent Council meetings include school policy, fundraising, special events, planning upcoming events, and political action (such as speaking out against school budget cuts).
- *Governing Board:* Two representatives from the Parent Council Board are elected by the Parent Council Board to serve on the school's Governing Board in order to provide parent voice and input from the Parent Council. Each parent representative is a full member of the Governing Board.

Communication Structures to Keep Parents Informed

- *School-to-parent liaisons:* Both the Family Coordinator and the Community Outreach Coordinator serve to facilitate two-way communication between the school and students' homes. During the application process, parents communicate with the Community Outreach Coordinator to obtain information and assistance. Beginning at freshman orientation, parents are encouraged to contact the Family Coordinator with questions and concerns. She facilitates communication between parents and the school by: helping to orient new parents to the school, fielding and addressing parent concerns throughout the school year, coordinating the Parent Council, publishing the school newsletter and calendar of events, organizing parent events, and recruiting parent volunteers for school events.
- *Newsletter:* BAA prints a monthly newsletter that includes announcements and a calendar of upcoming events at the school, important dates in students' academic/arts calendar, school policy reminders and a parents' column that lists, among other things, upcoming parent involvement opportunities. All families receive the newsletter via mail.
- *School website:* BAA maintains a detailed website where parents can access information about school policies, contact information for the staff, and the school calendar.