Literature Review

Family Engagement for School Reform

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IDRA EAC-South

Contents

Serving 11 states and D.C., the IDRA EAC-*South* is one of four federally-funded centers that provide technical assistance and training build capacity to confront educational problems occasioned by race, national origin, sex and gender, and religion.

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Introduction

Family engagement goes hand-in-hand with meaningful school reform. Though involving parents more broadly in their children's education and the school environment is not the only factor for change, it is a major component of student-centered school improvement. Research shows that increased parent and community involvement leads to better academic outcomes, students staying in school longer, and more students pursuing a college education (Henderson, et al., 2007; Mediratta, et al., 2008; Ferguson, et al., 2010; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011; Ishimaru & Lott, 2015; Weiss & Stephen, 2010; Chavkin, 2017; Lindsey & Lindsey, 2011).

In addition to better academic outcomes, students also see an increase in their social and emotional well-being. This link is not limited to research on schools in the United States; studies from around the world have found strong ties between family engagement and student success (Chavkin, 2017).

More broadly, school improvement requires strong school leadership, a high-quality faculty, robust community engagement, a student-centered learning climate, and effective instructional guidelines for staff (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Efforts to change a school's culture to better facilitate student success should be comprehensive and systemic, not piecemeal and fragmented. As Ferguson and his colleagues specify in their guide, *Working Systemically in Action*, "A systemic approach enables family and community members to become collaborative agents of change who support improved outcomes for students, schools and communities." Family and community involvement should (Ferguson, et al., 2010):

- Move from an **individual responsibility** on behalf of the parent or teacher to a **shared responsibility for all stakeholders.** The guiding wisdom is that when all stakeholders make educating all children central to the process of improvement, genuine relationships can form that drive meaningful change.

- **Deficit-based approaches** to parent involvement that see parents as obstacles to their children's education must become **asset-based, collaborative approaches** that use parent and community strengths to effect change. Far too often, parents and the community have been labeled as "the problem," isolating school and home from one another and creating an oftentimes adversarial climate between parents and teachers. Working toward systemic change allows educators to see the assets that family and community bring to the classroom, and parents can become community leaders and agents of change who fully understand

how to improve their children's education and the incredible value they already have.

- **Add-on programs** that require little parent input must shift to **integrated programs** of involvement that support positive change. Top-down, one-size-fits-all models of parent engagement must give way to dynamic, community-based efforts that can meet the unique needs of their communities.

- **One-shot projects** must become **sustained efforts**.

- **Compliance-driven actions** shift to **continuous improvements** that are constantly evaluated to evolve with the needs of the students.

Collaboration and building common ground between schools and their communities are central to developing family and community engagement practices that work. This includes resolving issues faced by communities of color who have been historically excluded by traditional parent engagement models.

IDRA's research and field experience point to key elements that define true family leadership in education (Montemayor, November-December 2007; Montemayor & Romero, 2000). With a vision of all families as advocates of excellent neighborhood public schools, leadership is:

- inclusive,
- expanding,
- based on peer support and rotating responsibilities,
- ongoing invitation and support of new leadership,
- connecting parents and communities across race, ethnic and class divisions,
- focusing on collective action for the good of all children, and
- building relationships and trust that are essential to the process.

This process supports parents in learning to work in groups, planning and carrying out activities, speaking in front of groups, and developing other personal skills and traits that develop the individual. The emphasis is on collective action, listening to peers, and revolving tasks and leadership roles.

Building Capacity at the Top

Schools must build capacity around the unique communities that they serve. Too often, schools will look at their families as an issue that needs resolving, which isolates educators from the families and students they serve and reinforces harmful stereotypes (Warren, et al., 2009). Barriers to rethinking and restructuring family engagement include laws and policies and securing the proper resources and funding for robust family engagement programs.

State and Federal Law

Realizing the vision of improved schools and better family engagement requires policy reform at the highest level. Despite decades of research showing the vital importance of family engagement to student success, the issue remained on the periphery of educational policy and reform efforts in federal and state government (Weiss & Stephen, 2010). The emphasis on improving education at the federal and state level involved assessment, such as with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Weiss & Stephen, 2010).

Family engagement as a major component necessary for academic success has roots in federal policy via Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA) requiring that Title I schools develop policies involving parents and "school-family compacts" outlining how educators and families will work together to ensure academic success (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Increasingly, state governments are adding parent engagement as an educational foundation.

In January 2010, 39 states and the District of Columbia enacted laws calling for family engagement (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). School districts also are embracing more robust models of family engagement through policy, which is a first step in reforming the way that we think about parent and family engagement in education (Chavkin, 2017).

Resources and Funding

To enact meaningful reform, equitable resource allocation and accountability must accompany policy changes (Chavkin, 2017). The fragmentation of parent involvement efforts across education and federal departments has "siloed funding streams, programs and advocacy efforts, making it difficult to develop coordinated, comprehensive and continuous – never mind sustained – family involvement efforts" (Weiss & Stephen, 2010).

This division across departments in the federal government creates small, poorly resourced programs and numerous difficulties in monitoring and accountability. Siloed funding often leads to isolated parent groups and advocacy efforts with limited funds. Attempts to rectify this situation

are all too often small and unsustainable, and the result is that resource allocation and policy continue to create solitary, rather than collective, efforts to reform family engagement (Weiss & Stephen, 2010).

Resources to build capacity among educators and the community are relatively underutilized at the federal level, despite their real potential to effect change and help build partnerships between schools and their families (Weiss & Stephen, 2010). This lack of investment pushes the financial burden on the schools themselves to build capacity and make the most of limited resources to pursue the proper training and create sustainable programs that connect with the community. Additionally, teachers do not always have the requisite resources or knowledge to address the needs of minority, low-income or immigrant students (Araujo, 2009).

Surveys concerning the relationships between teachers, parents and students have shown some important patterns related to partnerships and parent involvement. Specifically:

- Stakeholder partnerships tend to decline across grade levels *unless* schools and teachers work to develop partnerships at every stage (Epstein, 2002).
- Affluent communities have more positive family involvement on average *unless* schools and teachers in low-income communities work to build positive partnerships with their families (Epstein, 2002).
- Schools in low-income areas contact parents more often about problems with their students *unless* they work to build relationships that also emphasize the positive accomplishments of their children (Epstein, 2002).
- Single parents, parents employed outside the home, parents who live far from their children's schools, and fathers are less involved on campus *unless* the school itself is flexible and offers various opportunities and times for parents to volunteer and support their children (Epstein, 2002).

These patterns emphasize that the first step to improving parent involvement is to establish constant communication and to build genuine partnerships between parents and the school regardless of parent and community characteristics.

Eliminating Assumptions and Stereotypes

A major barrier to interactions between educators and the families they serve are conflicting or inaccurate assumptions about the school and home. Though research has shown that family engagement leads to better academic outcomes, programs can too often assume that educators and families already possess the collective capacity – the requisite skills, knowledge, confidence, and belief systems – to successfully implement and sustain partnerships (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011). Teachers do not always have the training and resources to properly reach out the families. Parents – particularly low-income and non-English speaking – face numerous difficulties in understanding their children's teachers and schools. Isolated families can lack the social capital – resources found in social relationships and contacts – to effect change (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011).

Additionally, there is an inherent power imbalance between educators and low-income, minority, and immigrant communities. Parents with little experience navigating the U.S. school system or who do not necessarily fit the traditional, isolated model of parent and family engagement, can often feel like lesser actors in their children's education. Educators, in turn, may distrust the family environment or blame all academic struggles on the cultures of minority or low-income communities. This can reinforce stereotypes and negative attitudes. Teachers may fear losing the power they possess to educate the students in their care by allowing what they consider to be adversarial parents into their classrooms (Hong, 2011; Montero-Sieburth, 2011).

Engaging Immigrant and Low-Income Families

More than 50 years after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the decision that overturned school segregation, public schools in the United States continue to struggle to provide a quality education to minority students (Dotson-Blake, et al., 2009). The issues of culture and race in education continue to be oversimplified and overlooked. In particular, Mexican immigrant families have a silent presence in the public education system and experience high levels of segregation and isolation (Dotson-Blake, et al., 2009). These children and their families are a growing force in the United States education system. The number of Latino families has steadily been increasing in the United States. By 2000, 17% of all students enrolled in public schools in the United States came from Latino families. To date, this growth has not been met with enough collective efforts to serve this population.

Low-income and non-English-speaking families fall outside of the traditional models of parent-teacher interaction and engagement. These families may not have access to the same resources and social ties as more affluent or English-speaking families. Generally, low-income and families of English learner students benefit little from conventional models of engagement, such as parent teacher associations (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; Montero-Sieburth, 2011). If parents approach involvement in an activity-based, individual manner, they rarely find opportunities to forge meaningful connections with educators and school staff (Hong, 2011). Educators also face barriers when serving EL students on the basis of language and culture (Araujo, 2009).

Access to Resources

Low-income families face significant barriers that White, middle class families do not, which has required researchers, advocates and educators to think differently about how best to involve these children and their families in school (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011). These barriers often include a dearth of resources that make it more difficult for parents to be involved or for schools to have the capacity to better accommodate their needs. Research shows that the quality and nature of parents' resources and social capital are what allow them to understand and participate in the school system in addition to dictating how much time they can spend helping their children with academics. Families that are challenged meeting their daily needs, such as food, employment, and healthcare, will not possess the natural time or resources to be fully committed to family engagement at school in traditional forms (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011). Low-income families often work long hours and face transportation and childcare issues that can impact their availability (Chavkin, 2017; Montero-Sieburth, 2011). Regardless, a lack of time or

resources due to long work hours or transportation issue should not be mistaken for a lack of interest or investment in a child's education. Educators should be trained and provided the proper resources to work with busy parents on their own time and meet them halfway in becoming fully engaged as partners in their children's education.

Dispelling Fear and Stress

Major stressors for immigrant and Latino families new to the United States are conflicting cultural values between home and school, socioeconomic status, isolation due to language, intergenerational conflicts from different levels of acculturation, and fear related to possible undocumented status (Dotson-Blake, et al., 2009). Undocumented immigrant families undergo extreme levels of stress and fear of being found out and being deported and losing their families (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011). Children of undocumented immigrants are often anxious about being distinct from their peers out of fear that their families will be separated (Dotson-Blake, et al., 2009). The dread and suspicion felt by these families is profound and can lead to a cycle of stress about not being able to provide basic needs or fully participate in their communities.

Culture of Poverty Myths

People who are poor have assets, gifts and strengths that far outweigh the stereotypical negative traits ascribed to them (Gorski, 2008). In "The Myth of the 'Culture of Poverty,'" Gorski identifies and rebuts some misconceptions of poor people. Building on this work, Montemayor contrasts each myth with an asset-based truth.

- Myth: Poor people are unmotivated and have a weak work ethic.
- Asset: Poor people survive and subsist under trying circumstances, often taking difficult and severely underpaid jobs.
- Myth: Poor parents are uninvolved in their children's learning, largely because they do not value education.
- Asset: Families see education as critical to success in life and counsel their children to get educated so that they don't suffer the same poverty as their parents.
- Myth: Poor people are linguistically deficient.
- Asset: Families talk in many registers and with their own unique vocabularies.

Research and practice supports the work of community developers who operate from an asset perspective. Kretzmann & McKnight, in the early 1990s, provided asset-mapping training for helping communities help themselves based on their early experiences in urban ghettos (Asset-Based Community Development Institute, 2009). Similarly, Luis Moll and other educators began

looking at the talents that bilingual students brought to school from their homes (González, et al., nd). In doing so, Moll uncovered and documented previously unacknowledged family resources.

Creating a School Culture that Values Diverse Families

School reform is a complex, multifaceted process that requires a multifaceted, research-based approach to inspire continuous improvement (Mediratta, et al., 2008). It should be noted that change, especially systemic, sustainable change, is not easy nor does it happen overnight (Warren, et al., 2009; Chavkin, 2017). Interactions between school and home are complicated, dynamic and even contradictory (Hong, 2011). School reform requires resources, policy, commitment, mutual respect, and even belief in self to change when it comes to how schools and families think about and interact with each other. All stakeholders must be involved. The results are worth the effort, but it will take persistence, passion and hard work to enact meaningful change (Warren, et al., 2009).

Educators must begin by rethinking their relationships with families and the community, particularly in low-income schools or when they are primarily serving a race, ethnicity, or nationality different from their own. Empathy, or human-centered design, is one way to approach families. A human-centered approach begins with compassion or trying to understand what someone else feels and experiences based on their unique circumstances (López, 2016). Cultivating empathy can help educators more equitably engage families and lead to meaningful and effective interactions (López, 2016). Any models for meaningful family engagement should not reinforce existing inequalities.

Successful schools that effectively engage families from diverse backgrounds have the following characteristics (WestEd, 2007; Epstein, 2002):

- Focus on building trusting and collaborative relationships among educators, families, and community members.
- Recognize, respect and address their families' needs.
- Embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared between school and community.
- Incremental progress as the program evolves.
- A connection to curricular and instructional reform – as the culture changes, so too should training for educators and the materials and approaches with which students are being taught.

Shared Vision

A common philosophy about the value of family and community engagement among all educational stakeholders is necessary to enact lasting, significant reform. A primary component is respect. Educators also must acknowledge and resolve negative power dynamics (Dotson-Blake et al, 2009). After all, it is children who feel the most tension between school and their families, and it is their success that is the goal of families and educators (Hong, 2011).

Building trust and empathy between the school, families and their communities is paramount. Parents and families should be welcomed to leverage their power as members of the community and primary stakeholders in their children's education for its ultimate improvement alongside teachers, administrators, community members, and even legislators (Montemayor, 2011). Education should be conceptualized as a process, that begins in the home and continues beyond the school environment. Learning is a lifelong process and all stakeholders are imperative to an individual's success (Mediratta, et al., 2008; Chavkin, 2017).

Henderson and her colleagues outline four elements of trust that must be developed between the family and school (2007):

- **Respect:** Recognizing the important role each person plays in a child's education. Practically, this involves:
    - Genuinely listening to one another.
    - Parents feeling they have a say in what happens to their children.
    - Teachers feeling that school administrators will listen to their concerns.
    - Principals feeling that their teachers actually care about their school and will sincerely consider their proposals.
- **Competence:** The feeling that colleagues work together to create an effective environment and to get the job done. Generally, this involves:
    - Colleagues working hard and providing challenging teaching to their students.
    - Administrators providing an orderly, safe school environment.
    - Parents providing for their children's basic needs and supporting their learning at home.
- **Integrity:** The feeling that colleagues will keep their word and do what they say they are going to do. Practically, this involves:
    - The words and actions of all stakeholders being consistent.
    - The school placing the highest priority on its students' best interests, and this being the highest purpose of the school.
- **Personal Regard:** The feeling that colleagues care about one another and are willing to go

out of their way to help each other. Essentially, this involves:

- Teachers staying after hours to meet with parents.
- Teachers taking initiative to help each other and train new educators.
- Teachers being willing to give their students extra help when necessary.
- School staff being involved in local, community matters.

Developing a common understanding of the importance of family engagement requires moving from a deficit-based approach to an asset-based one. Key characteristics of an asset or strength-based approach to family engagement are (Chavkin, 2017):

- Changes schools through engaging families, schools and community organizations.
- Centers on families and students.
- Uses volunteers who are accountable to their communities.
- Sees relationships as a key resource.
- Encourages self-awareness.
- Focuses on self-recognition.
- Develops leadership.
- Uses effective communication.
- Emphasizes collaboration.
- Stresses working together.
- Grows over time.
- Measures success as capability and sustainability.

Change can begin as easily as acknowledging that parents of all races, ethnicities, economic status levels, and religions have dreams for their children and want what is best for them. Low-income and minority parents are often mischaracterized as “not valuing” education, but this is an untrue assumption (Henderson, et al., 2007).

School personnel also must believe and acknowledge that all parents have the capacity to support their children’s learning. Regardless of their background or relative academic skills, all parents have valuable ways to contribute to their children’s education. Parents and school staff should think of each other as equal partners instead of as barriers or adversaries. This involves rectifying the lopsided power dynamic between the school and home environments and coming together to educate their children. The responsibility for taking the first step and building these partnerships begins with the school staff, especially school leaders. Administrators are especially vital in developing a school culture that values parents so that their educators and staff can learn from their example and mindset (Henderson, et al., 2007).

By seeing that the locus should be on the family, school strategies must include personal outreach, home visits, multiple settings for meetings and seeking creative ways to inform families who, because of work and other circumstances, are not able to attend an evening meeting on campus (Montemayor, 2015). As stated by López, et al.: "A home-school relationship should be a co-constructed reciprocal activity in which both the agency and sense of efficacy of parents, and the involvement opportunities provided by schools and other institutions that work with children are important" (2004-05).

Building Capacity

Change at the local level, in the home and the classroom, is something that can be done by collaborating within a community. This is an important step for helping achieve change, but an individual classroom is not the last stop. Systemic, sustainable change must happen at all levels – on the national scale down to campuses and classrooms. This requires changing minds as well as policy. Resource allocation – from funding to creating sustained programs all the way down to organizations that help impoverished families obtain the resources necessary to meet their basic needs – is a major component of school reform and improving family engagement. Goals for school improvement and family engagement should be specific, concrete, measurable, feasible and timely (Chavkin, 2017). All educational stakeholders must demand improvement, and this should be a continuous process.

- **National**: At the national level, legislators can address standards and accountability in education. It is vitally important that family engagement be a major component as a policy issue when enacting standards, setting goals, and providing funding for education (Ferguson, et al., 2010). Federal policy can position family engagement as a central component of school reform (Weiss & Stephen, 2010). John Kingdon, a political scientist, pointed to three elements that are vital to impacting a public policy agenda: recognition of the problem, an available solution and the correct political climate for change (Weiss & Stephen, 2010). Advocates for reform and all concerned stakeholders can help make the climate right by providing the research, data and personal stories of success about innovative and collaborative family engagement programs. Legislators must find the political courage and will to take meaningful action. Change at the national level is one important way to secure the resources needed to build capacity.
- **State**: The state is responsible for following national policy, but individual states also enact their own educational policies focusing on standards, accountability and procedures. State agencies can support family engagement directly by identifying it as a necessary component to student success (Ferguson, et al., 2010). In turn, this can build capacity and connect schools and districts to community-based organizations that can provide technical

assistance and support.

- **Intermediate Service Agencies**: Agencies provide support and assistance to districts and schools to improve academic performance and enhance collaboration between the two (Ferguson, et al., 2010). Parent Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs), conceived by Congress under the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act,* provided information to parents, schools, and outside organizations that work with families on how children develop and succeed (WestEd, 2007). Community-based organizations in particular, are embedded in their communities.
- **District**: School districts oversee implementation of national and state policy. They set the tone for how their schools operate and provide clear guidance on how schools can engage with their families and communities (Ferguson, et al., 2010). In addition to devising new policies to bolster family engagement, it is vitally important to seek the input of families and the community on existing policies to identify problems and make changes (Dotson-Blake, et al., 2009).
- **Community**: Community-based organizations, agencies and service groups can provide support to their local schools and districts and can help bridge relationships between school and home (Ferguson, et al., 2010). Community organizing can help build capacity by creating support for reform, increasing equity in how resources are distributed and facilitating meaningful parent and community engagement in the name of improved student learning (Bojorquez, 2014). Community engagement can help build relationships between the school and community, increase parent involvement, build school community and trust, and improve teacher morale (Mediratta, et al., 2008). In other words, community organizing can work as the "how" of meaningfully connecting families and schools (Hong, 2011).
- **Campus**: The school level is far more personal to local communities. While individual schools also must be compliant with national, state and district policy, individual schools can find unique solutions to interacting with their communities (Ferguson, et al., 2010). Administrators and educators must be willing to share power with the community and rethink the role of the family in education. Deficit-based models of thinking must be replaced by asset-based ones that value all families for their unique contributions (Montemayor, 2010).
- **Classroom**: Teachers facilitate learning directly at the classroom level, and with the proper support, can join with parents to be an agent of positive change in each student's life (Ferguson, et al., 2010). It is vital to secure resources and community agents to help with technical support, professional development, ongoing education and properly connecting with the community to build authentic relationships (Hong, 2011). Educators can learn a great deal from parents, but they need to be involved in the parent engagement process from the start, not only told to contact parents without the proper training and support (Henderson, et al., 2007).

- **Home**: Expanding family capacity helps improve academic outcomes for children and assists the school in understanding and identifying student needs (Mediratta, et al., 2008). Families support learning in the home, but a key aspect of meaningful parent engagement occurs beyond the home's boundaries – into the community and school environments (Ferguson, et al., 2010). Parents as leaders and advocates can build their knowledge of their rights, the school system and genuine relationships with educators and policymakers. Improved knowledge about the school system and how families can help not only builds awareness among parents, but passion for civic engagement (Mediratta, et al., 2008).

Building capacity for family engagement should also ask the question of how parents' knowledge and attitudes impact behavior and learning in and outside of the classroom. What is often identified as stress and reluctance in minority and non-English speaking communities is actually just a general lack of knowledge about or comfort with the processes of the U.S. academic system (Hong, 2011).

In many instances, the focus of family engagement needs to shift (Hong, 2011):

- From school to family.
- From isolated activities to active engagement.
- From a deficit view to an asset-based view of families.
- From limited participation to broad participation.
- From only focusing on parenting practices to changing the school, family and community culture.

Families should have a greater understanding of school culture, the school culture must change to suit the needs of families, and the community itself must shift to meet the needs of school and its families (Hong, 2011).

Collaboration

Shared values are central to the idea of collaboration. Though the school environment can be a stressful place for diverse parents, enabling them to be active participants in the educational setting – as advocates and experts on their communities and children – can alleviate this stress and encourage collaboration. For immigrant families, it is especially important to harness the resources offered by these collaborations to address their concerns and improve their situations (Dotson-Blake, et al., 2009). Collaboration does not mean that teachers lose their authority as experts in education, but it does require that educators enter authentic, meaningful relationships with families and community members (Warren, et al., 2009; Hong, 2011).

Creating a School Culture that Values Diverse Families

In addition to the bond between families and their schools, parents also gain confidence and power collectively by forming groups and leading in their own communities. Not only can parent groups enact real change in their communities and help set policy according to their own needs, they also can leverage resources and social capital to help struggling families thrive (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011; Warren, et al., 2009). Leadership skills can empower parents to take individual actions to directly help their children and collective actions to enhance the community itself. Collectively, parents can be agents of social change, build networks and connections to assist the school and their own communities as full participants and decision-makers (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011).

Through the generation of social capital and expanding networks and resources, families and communities can fully grasp intellectual capital and the knowledge and capabilities of the potential for collaborative, joint action (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011). The emphasis on creating parent collaborations should be accepted by the school, and the model of parent engagement should shift from an emphasis on an individual relationship between a single family and the school to one of a full collective – families, the community and the school (Warren, et al., 2009; Montemayor & Chavkin, 2016).

The process of collaborating and making changes should be a continuous loop of inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and feedback. In practical terms, this requires (Chavkin, 2017):

- Identifying and gathering key stakeholders.
- Clarifying goals and choosing one or two to work on within the year.
- Reviewing assumptions and an action plan. All stakeholders should be on board with the goals.
- Choosing some indicators of success. This can include counts, self-reported data, surveys, interviews, tests scores, grades, skill development or attendance.
- Collecting the results.
- Analyzing and using the information gathered for improvements. Do not wait until the end of the process to fix problems – fix them as they come up.
- Examining the final outcomes.
- Assessing impact and cost-effectiveness.

Family Empowerment

Traditionally, the power rests in the hands of educators and the school environment because they do the teaching and have knowledge of pedagogy and what is required of them by the state and their districts about what to teach and how best to teach it. If teachers are unprepared and unaware of the communities their schools reside in or the cultures of the children they teach, relationships between families and schools can turn adversarial, with each seeing the other environment as detrimental to the child's overall success (Warren, et al., 2009; Lindsey & Lindsey, 2011). Community organizing itself has a reputation for being confrontational and outspoken on issues of prejudice and injustice through the lens of the media. This focus can overlook the important work done by community organizers off camera that is as vital as outspoken activism to enriching underserved communities (Hong, 2011). Creating genuine relationships can begin by putting the student at the center of the conversation, so that the students' welfare becomes a shared responsibility between families, the community and the school (Epstein, 2002; Warren, et al., 2009; Lindsey & Lindsey, 2011).

Focus on Action and Leadership Development

Communities, families and educators should empower the community and foster leaders and enthusiastic families with valuable input to create a balance of power between school and the home. Empowering families requires action: mutual support, critical reflection, caring, knowledge and group participation (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; Warren, et al., 2009). Conversations with families should let the parents lead, focus on their perspectives, create plans for addressing problems, thoughtfully respond to requests, be respectful and avoid negative assumptions (Chavkin, 2017). Additionally, educating parents about their role and responsibility in the school system enables them to know their rights. With this knowledge, they can have the confidence to act in their students' best interests by fully voicing their opinions and concerns about their local schools. The goal is to move from passivity in the academic environment to being active participants (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011). Building culturally-proficient leadership can better involve parents and community members beyond the local level, to actively engage them in the democratic process to call for more inclusion and understanding among diverse populations (Lindsey & Lindsey, 2011).

Civic engagement often is a forgotten goal of parent engagement and leadership, particularly for culturally diverse and immigrant parents. Going beyond *school reform* to *civic engagement* can incorporate the interests and concerns of immigrant families, for example, into policy decisions to enhance public life, expand economic opportunity and benefit immigrants and their new society. Civic engagement can provide inroads for (Terriquez & Rogers, 2011):

- Learning about the U.S. political system.
- Addressing collective problems with service, joint-action and decision-making.
- Mobilizing political pressure by advocating with elected officials, writing letters, attending meetings or protesting.
- Participating in electoral campaigns.
- Voting.

Multiple Levels of Involvement

Not all parents will become community leaders, but it is vital to revise the model of parent engagement to allow as much action and participation as possible from parents. Involvement should be active and engaged, not passive and reluctant (Warren, et al., 2009). The model should shift from *parent participation* to *parent engagement* (Hong, 2011). The roles that parents and families can take are varied. Forms of family engagement in education include (Epstein, 2002; Chavkin, 2017):

- Parenting.
- Communicating.
- Volunteering.
- Learning at home.
- Decision-making.
- Collaborating within the community.

IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework, an institutional change model, includes the following as key elements: fair funding, governance efficacy, parent and community engagement, student engagement, teaching quality and curriculum quality and access (Robledo Montecel, 2005). Parent and community engagement is defined as creating partnerships based on respect and a shared goal of academic success and integrating parents and community members into the decision making processes of the school.

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Community-Based Organizations

One of the most profound barriers that low-income and minority families face is the lack of common experiences between these families and educators, who often are White middle-class and college-educated. Without the proper support and leadership from the community, teachers and schools can have difficulties understanding the diverse communities they serve. Community-based organizations have a long history of helping low-income and minority communities acquire the resources they need to thrive and act as a bridge between the school and home (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011). These organizations can help parents gain confidence in their role as a vital part of their child's academic life, and band together groups of parents to act as leaders and advocates for their children's education by influencing policy and driving the conversation toward change and an education that also appeals to shared values and culture (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011). Community-based organizations are not encumbered by the professional practices, policies and mandates that educators must follow. Nor do they have the same heavy-hand felt by some governmental organizations that low-income or minority families may not want in their children's education (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011; Warren, et al., 2009; Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011).

Parents with busy work schedules and family obligations may lack the time or transportation to be physically on campus (Warren, et al., 2009). Community-based organizations can help by providing resources and information necessary to help families meet basic needs and open opportunities for familial involvement in education. These organizations also can bond parents together, creating new opportunities and a support system that can especially help isolated or struggling families find resources and guidance in their own communities (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011). They can help mobilize communities to enact real change (Montemayor, September 2010; Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011).

Relationship Building

Efforts to enact positive, meaningful change in family engagement does not happen overnight or after a single school event. Persistence and patience are necessary to build relationships between educators and their families. Parents are more likely to participate in school events when they have a personal relationship with school personnel or other parents who are actively involved in the educational environment (Warren, et al., 2009; Hong, 2011). This requires structured, sustained support that can be channeled into action. For example, school counselors are an underutilized resource when it comes to helping meet the needs of students and families. They are in a unique position to act as a school-based liaison between families and the school, and they are instrumental in creating a culture of acceptance and partnership on their campuses (Dotson-Blake, et al., 2009).

Clear Communication

Educators and school personnel should make parents the locus of communication efforts. This may require personal outreach, home visits, multiple settings for meetings and flexible ways of communicating with parents who work or have other circumstances that prevent them from meeting on campus (Chavkin, 2017; Araujo, 2009; Montemayor & Chavkin, 2016). Educators should take time to gain parents' trust, engage parents to develop a shared understanding of parent involvement, and explore the relative strengths that parents and educators bring. Parent interests and needs should be central when planning activities (Lindsey & Lindsey, 2011). Family volunteers are key leaders, and educators should connect with them to emphasize that all parties have high expectations for their students and will take action to support their children (Chavkin, 2017).

Community-based organizations can help schools reach out, especially to communities of color and immigrant families, by providing translation and door-to-door support. This helps inform new parents of what they need to know to be involved and helps educators and administrators set clear policy about family engagement with the community's help (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011). Community-based organizations are embedded in their communities and can provide educators with the information they need to understand their families.

Accommodations for bilingual and diverse families must include rethinking the school environment itself. Rules about parent and family participation on campus must be clear, and signs and identifying locations where parents can interact or go on the campus itself should include the language(s) spoken in the community (Dotson-Blake, et al., 2009; WestEd, 2007).

Culturally-Relevant Teaching

Culturally-relevant teaching is a necessary component of serving diverse populations. Parents and community members are the experts on their values, priorities and cultures. Educators should look to parent and community leaders for guidance on how to respect their students' cultural values in the classroom and incorporate culturally-relevant materials in their lessons. This often requires rethinking and changing the relationship between the classroom and the community to welcome different value systems, such as an emphasis on collective decision-making and action as opposed to the traditional model of individual actions between home and school (Araujo, 2009). Culturally-relevant education may entail allowing parent mentors into the classroom to help build a school community where educators and families learn from each other while engaging their students to a robust, challenging curriculum (Hong, 2011).

Childcare and Flexible Schedules

Schools should be flexible about how parents engage with their children's teachers. For instance, providing childcare for young children at parent-focused events would strongly encourage families with childcare issues to attend school functions. Rather than a stressful activity, these meetings turn into an opportunity for the whole family to have fun and learn together (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011). Social interactions can pave the way for genuine bonds to form between school personnel and the families and communities they serve. Community-based organizations can help educators meet directly with reluctant families, especially immigrant and undocumented families who may be hesitant to engage with school personnel. This, in turn, can lead to other parents and community leaders taking the initiative and going door-to-door to distribute bilingual fliers and information about school activities (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson 2011).

Effective Family Engagement Models

The papers, books and reports in this literature review all emphasize an asset-based approach to family engagement, and many offer frameworks or guides that schools and communities can follow to improve their own campuses. Of course, there is no magic bullet that will improve education, and family engagement is only one vital piece of overall school reform necessary to equitably educate every child. Regardless, the commonality among these frameworks is building trusting and respectful relationships between educators and the families they serve with an emphasis on collaboration, data-driven interventions, and constant evaluation to find and sustain what works.

Community Organizing for School Reform

Mediratta and her colleagues' six-year research study of education organizing efforts led to an emphasis on community organizing as a method of positive school reform and improved family engagement (Meridatta, at al. 2008). Though not a particular framework for community organizing, the components of community organizing for reform they identified are as follows.

- **Combining policy and resource advocacy with intensive school-level support –** In their study, organizing groups had different priorities.
    - Some groups focused on policy and resource improvement at the district or system level.
    - Most of the groups coupled policy advocacy with some form of school-level monitoring and support.
    - The majority of groups used local improvement campaigns to engage parents or students in fighting for larger, systemic policy change.
    - Two of the groups aimed at combining system-level work with school-based organizing efforts to create a collaborative culture of engagement.
- **Combining community knowledge and expertise with research to improve school capacity** – Community organizations can help build capacity at their local schools by using data-driven solutions along with the knowledge of culture their families already possess. In addition, community-led policy and advocacy can create support for restructuring schools, reducing overcrowding, demanding better-trained educators, and providing additional supports for family and community engagement.
- **Viewing organizing groups as legitimate, credible and effective –** Superintendents, school board members, and municipal leaders are vital to ensuring that districts fulfill their obligations to serve all students. Thus, school leaders can embrace the expertise of organizing groups as a bridge and facilitator of reform for the equitable education of all

students.

- **Facilitating high organizational capacity to increase the likelihood of success** – The most successful community organizations were ones with experienced, committed staff with high organizational capacity in place. This also increased their legitimacy and credibility with community members of varying race, class and educational backgrounds.

Template for Fostering Partnerships with Mexican Immigrant Families

Dotson-Blake and her colleagues' report on engaging specifically with Mexican immigrant families includes guidelines for schools and organizations to follow (Dotson-Blake, et al., 2009). The template emphasizes the role of the school counselor in providing leadership and facilitating collaboration between the school and home.

- **Foster respect and culture of engagement** – Mexican American families must be treated as active partners, not passive participants. Respect is paramount.
- **Create a welcoming, collaborative climate** – There should not be physical barriers to interaction. Schools should be clear about family involvement rules and create a bilingual environment that clearly identifies physical locations and how parents can help in both English and Spanish. Critical examination and reflection on current policies must always be accompanied by action and change.
- **Identify cultural brokers and community leaders** – These leaders can act as liaisons between school professionals and members of the community. It is important to emphasize that family engagement is for the betterment of their children's academic lives and that these families can interact with their schools without fear of legal repercussions.
- **Plan intentional, structured opportunities to interact** – Counselors can develop cultural competency activities that can naturally occur with teacher training and parent engagement opportunities.
- **Bolster investment through community engagement and reciprocity** – School counselors can help identify community resources that can partner with schools and families. Reciprocity is important and should be part of the process.
- **Reflect on the success and effectiveness of partnership efforts** – There should be a continuous cycle of feedback, reflection and improvement.

IDRA Family Leadership in Education Principles

Aurelio Montemayor (September 2007) draws on his expertise in working with families and emphasizes moving from a deficit view of diverse families to an asset-based approach with

IDRA's family leadership in education principles.

- **Families can be their children's strongest advocates** – All families have the potential to speak for, defend and support their children. Each family must be approached with respect and high expectations.
- **Families of different races, ethnicity, language and class are equally valuable** – Each group has assets, traditions and a language that is worthy of respect. Building relationships with families can increase the amount and quality of families' engagement with their children's schools and education.
- **Families care about their children's education and are to be treated with respect, dignity and value** – Diverse families prioritize their children's education and must be treated as the valuable partners and leaders they are and have the potential to be.
- **Within families, many individuals play a role in children's education** – The combination of all who live within a home are important influences on children and can be a collective force for creating excellent schools.
- **Family leadership is most powerful at improving education for all children when collective efforts create solutions for the common good** – Models of family engagement must move from isolated, individual experiences to whole communities dedicated to learning and improving education. Neighborhood schools need a network of families, co-supporting and co-creating action that improves schools. Collective efforts draw on the powerful roots of our democracy and are sustained with peer compassion (child rearing is a difficult and isolating responsibility), cooperation and revolving spokespersons so that when there is individual burnout, others from the network keep up the good effort.
- **Families, schools and communities, when drawn together, become a strong, sustainable voice to protect the rights of all children**.

Working Systemically in Action

Ferguson and his colleagues devised a guide for community involvement that, generally, works in phases (Ferguson, et al., 2010). The guide is research-based and geared toward academic improvement through community and family involvement in education.

- **Phase I** – Data collection and analysis on a school district. This includes meeting with the superintendent and acknowledging a commitment to improvement.
- **Phase II** – Forming a leadership team, organizing data and articulating a shared vision.
    - **Philosophy**: This requires that all stakeholders embrace an overall philosophy of partnership and are willing to be partners for the common good of the children they serve.
    - **Commitment**: Schools should fully communicate their commitment to family

engagement as a key part of reformation.

- **Phase III –** Reviewing existing plans, researching best practices, creating a plan for action and communication.
    - **Collaboration**: Schools should provide as much flexibility as possible to include parents in this process.
    - **Clarity**: In addition to a collaborative effort, action plans should have clear goals and expectations so that all stakeholders know their roles in helping improve student success. Parents, especially, should fully understand what is expected, academically, of their children so that they may provide the best support possible.
- **Phase IV –** Acting! Implementing improvement plans, leadership support and meeting new challenges.
- **Phase V –** Assessing the outcomes, addressing new issues, and communicating progress and accomplishments.

Research shows that "strong school leadership and organizational structures that establish expectations for meaningful engagement programs provide greater support for student learning" (Ferguson, et al., 2010). This requires making engagement a priority and all parties genuinely reaching out to one another. Characteristics of effective family and community engagement include:

- Shared responsibility for student learning among all stakeholders.
- Seamless and continuous support for learning from birth to career.
- Creating pathways to honor the dynamic, multiple ways that students learn.
- Creating a supportive culture for learning in both the classroom and community.
- Fostering advocacy for student learning.
- Ensuring quality education and learning opportunities for every child.

Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships

The framework by Mapp & Kuttner (2013), is based on existing research and best practices in family engagement and acts as "scaffolding" for developing family engagement strategies, policies and programs. The authors emphasize that their framework is a guide for policies and best practices, and that each community and school is unique and thus must develop policies that work for their circumstances. The components of the framework include the following.

- **Describing the challenges in capacity experienced by the community in favor of cultivating effective home-school partnerships.**

  - Identifying where and how school staff, educators and families do not have the opportunity or capacity for partnerships.
- **Clearly articulating conditions that must be met for success in home-school partnerships.**
  - Process conditions must be linked to learning, relational, collaborative and interactive.
  - Organizational conditions must be systemic, integrated and sustainable.
- **Identifying intermediate capacity goals that should be the focus of family engagement policies and programs at the federal, state, and local level.**
  - The goals should enhance families' capacity for connections, beliefs, values and confidence.
- **Describing the capacity-building outcomes for the school, program staff and families.**
  - Schools can honor and recognize the knowledge their families bring, connect family engagement to student learning, and create a welcoming, robust culture.
  - Families can take on multiple roles, to include supporters, encouragers, monitors, advocates, leaders and collaborators.

Equitable Collaboration

Ishimaru and Lott's survey (2015) is intended to provide actionable data to schools, districts and community-based organizations on best practices for building equitable collaborations between home, school and the community. The guide helps districts and families gather and evaluate data in the name of collaboration. The process helps highlight and prioritize addressing disparities, building collaborative capacity, and transforming how schools educate and serve their families. The principles of equitable collaboration are community capacity, authentic relationships, families as experts, educators as learners, balanced power and family-driven goals. The process of data inquiry for collaboration is as follows.

- **Question**: Convene leaders to question what is needed, why they need to act, who they need to work with and how will they use what they learn.
- **Prioritize**: Find the data or processes that will work toward equity and answer established questions. Data-driven collaboration is needed. Connect information on what the group is addressing and determine strategies that are most appropriate for the community.
- **Engage**: Draw on cultural brokers and leaders to invite stakeholder participation. Invite parents and community leaders to better collect data.
- **Make Sense**: Share the data and collaborate with stakeholders to make sense of it. Identify any new questions. Gather varying perspectives on the data from the community. Identify two to three actionable pieces of data.

- **Strategize**: Expand leadership groups. Figure out the next steps. Integrate core, sustainable changes through data-driven planning and investment by parents and the community.
- **Act**: Change policies or practices, leverage new relationships and discover new questions.

Community Action Forums for Excellence

IDRA developed a strong model of parent engagement constructed from experiences in the field, especially with Title I schools and their families. IDRA's Education CAFE (Community Action Forums for Excellence) demonstrates the power of families taking leadership to transform their community public schools (Montemayor, 2012; Chavkin, 2017).

An Education CAFE is a parent group that is rooted in a community-based organization or in a community-school partnership with the sole purpose of collaborating with schools to improve student success and opportunities for an equitable and excellent education. Education CAFEs are comprised of a parent group and a school (or school feeder pattern) where they identify areas of concern in their community schools by analyzing data and policies. The group in turn collaborates with schools to develop a project designed to address the issues they identified (Montemayor & Chavkin, 2017).

Three components are central to the Education CAFE model.

- **Community-based, Distributive Leadership** – Education CAFEs are born in their communities. They must be connected to a local organization that commits to focus on education (among its other mission areas). Meetings are attended by parents, grandparents, students' older siblings, neighbors and all who consider themselves custodians of children's academic success and future. By rotating leadership roles, the Education CAFE is not dependent on a central, charismatic leader and instead is based on input and action from all.
- **School Partnerships** – Education CAFE members come together and partner with schools in their neighborhood to ensure student success. Collaboration includes co-planning and sharing responsibility for outreach and ongoing activities that improve education in their neighborhood public schools.
- **Education Projects** – Education CAFEs carry out education projects based on actionable data. For example, they have brought families together to examine education policies and their implications for children's access to advanced placement, dual credit and pre-algebra courses; the state's education budget; and college readiness strategies. They also have met with school administrators to talk about shared concerns. Some group projects have included campus visitations to introduce the new organization, participating in open hearings with school board candidates, convening large public events to protest cuts to the state education

budget, and conducting surveys about how new graduation plans are being implemented and their impact on poor and minority students.

Sustainable educational reform entails community will and informed engagement at the local level. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel states, “Schools, after all, belong to the community, and change is too important to be left to schools alone” (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010). Community engagement that is based on active participation by both the school and the community produces results for students (Petrovich, 2008; Mediratta, et al., 2008; Levin, 2008).

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