Parent Involvement Facilitators: Unlocking Social Capital Wealth

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Abstract

This case study provides an overview of a family outreach intervention that supports student retention in school through a school–home communication link. This intervention structure, which employs staff appropriately called parent involvement facilitators (PIFs), is one that school districts have employed to facilitate family engagement in schools and to help parents build their sense of efficacy to support their children's success in school. The intention of the PIF is to provide direct services to families whose child or children are identified as at risk of not completing high school. What has not been studied is how this outreach program works in terms of family support, especially for those in an urban setting with language complexities, and how it helps provide social capital to the family and also to the PIF in this reciprocal process of working together to help the children complete high school.

Key Words: parent involvement facilitators, at-risk indicators, ninth grade

Introduction

Students who drop out of school face many negative consequences including decreased pay, higher unemployment, higher rates of incarceration, and even early deaths (Donahue, 2011; Martin & Halperin, 2006). Moreover, dropouts cost the nation billions of dollars in lost wages and taxes, welfare benefits, and costs associated with crime (Martin & Halperin, 2006). Dynarski et al. (2008) gave a number of recommendations for dropout prevention,

including using existing data to identify students who are at risk of dropping out and pairing at-risk students with adults in the school for "addressing academic and social needs, communicating with the families, and advocating for the student" (Dynarski et al., 2008, p. 16).

Many school districts have instituted dropout identification and intervention programs based on the work of Dynarski and others, such as the Building Bridges consortium in Washington state (2011) and the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). By considering factors such as performance on standardized tests, number of credits earned, attendance, and other issues associated with school failure, school districts are able to determine which students are at risk of dropping out. Typically, this is largely based on quantitative data. While data have power in substantiating cases that create public interest and press, data do not provide the total complex picture for dropout prevention (Larson, 2007; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004).

This case describes an intervention that marries two interventions suggested in the Dynarski report: at-risk identification, and adult support in the school linked to the family, namely, a parent involvement facilitator (PIF). The role of the PIF is to serve as a communication link with families whose children are not on target to graduate from high school and to provide "select" families with updates on the progress of their children (e.g., attendance, achievement scores) during the school year (Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006). The term "select" is used because the students of these parents have been identified as at high risk of not completing high school. This risk index places elementary, middle, and high school students along a continuum from "no risk" to "high risk" to facilitate early identification and, even more importantly, early intervention to prevent these students from dropping out of school. The risk indicators alone are not enough to reduce dropout statistics. The indicators merely sound an alarm; listeners must hear and respond. This means that interventions are typically conducted on a case by case basis.

Theoretical Perspective of the Case

Parents play an influential role in the academic and social success of their children; yet, there is an inverse relationship in parent involvement as students move through middle school and high school (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005). It is a time when some students, teachers, and parents need more collaboration. Unfortunately, it is also a time when parents have a less visible presence at the school. Teachers, too, in secondary schools tend to experience a sense of disconnect from families (e.g., Brooks, 2009; Ferrara, 2009; Feuerstein, 2000) and a lack of communication between the classroom and the home setting

(Brooks, 2009; Eberly, Joshi, & Konzal, 2007). For some families, the school is an intimidating place. In some cases, it is also a time when parents are trying to understand their role as a parent and reach a level of confidence in helping their children learn (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). There appears to be a positive carry-over influence, however, when parents are involved. Various studies (e.g., Lee & Burkham, 2002; Trusty, 1996) have shown that secondary students tend to earn higher grades, set higher career goals, and have fewer discipline problems when parents are involved in school during the middle and high school years. Parents have reported that they need more guidance on how to involve themselves in their children's education during the secondary years (Gould, 2011), but this is not always possible for teachers, who report limited time and expertise to work with parents of secondary students (Kelly, 2014).

On the other hand, family support is most challenging during the high school transition time. Transition to high school is a growing area of study in educational research as well as a targeted area of prevention and intervention programs in K–12 educational institutions (Chen & Gregory, 2009). Students who have already demonstrated at-risk behaviors in middle school become even more vulnerable to falling detrimentally behind in the critical first year of high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Researchers (e.g., Green et al., 2007; Walker et al., 2005) also recognize from three decades of studying this issue that families play an important role in their children's transition. The question that has challenged researchers and educators alike is how to support families most effectively during their children's secondary school learning experiences to help students complete their high school education.

Raising the Question

This case study captures a close look at PIFs who provide a direct link to parents whose children are at varying degrees of risk of dropping out of school at the critical grade level—ninth grade (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). In this case, the PIFs have the power of the language of the families—Spanish—and understand the stories of the families based on personal cultural experiences. The PIFs also bring a special human element to the home and bridge a communication gap that cuts through the "educanese" lingo of education and a complex data literacy that confronts families when they want to understand, "How are my children doing in school?" A question raised in any such study is: "Are we talking about an intervention that is targeting parents, students, or families?" (Dufur, Parcel, & Troutman, 2013). In the case of this study, the target is the family. The intervention, however, begins with the parent or guardian. The intent is that the impact of the program moves into the family structure so there is a collaborative team—the school and the home.

Researchers identify a number of early signposts to identify students at risk of dropping out—absenteeism, mobility, and academic failure—that can lead to a pattern of disengagement identifiable as early as middle school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006; Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Furthermore, personnel in school districts are capable of recognizing at least half of future dropouts by the end of sixth grade and three-quarters of them by ninth grade. These early warning signs serve as points of reference linked to achievement, attendance, and behavior, and help put targeted programs and strategies into place early (Balfanz et al., 2007). Researchers (e.g., Balfanz et al., 2007; Dynarski et al., 2008; Hill & Tyson, 2009) have suggested that reforms need to be put in place at the points where students transition from one level of schooling to another. Setting up students for successful transitions to elementary, middle, and high school involves taking into account not just students' academic needs but also their needs for social supports and clear expectations for college and career goals (Balfanz & Bridgeland, 2007; Sanders, 2009).

One of the first steps to set dropout prevention into motion is to have multiple interventions available. In other words, one size does not fit all because of the complexity of dropout causality. Lehr (2004) reports that most dropout prevention strategies can be categorized into five types: personal/affective (individual counseling); academic (tutoring); school structure (reducing class size or creating an alternative school); work-related (vocational training or volunteer work); and family outreach (home visits).

This case provides an overview of one of these prevention strategies, family outreach, and its degree of effectiveness. The PIF structure is a strategy school districts have employed to facilitate family engagement in schools and to help parents build their capacity to work with the complexities of the school system. In this case, the task of the PIF is to provide support beyond the family link by also serving as a teacher support and as a data gathering person for record keeping about student progress (Sanders, 2008, 2009). What has not been studied with this outreach program is the degree to which these strategies work in terms of families, especially those in an urban setting with language complexities. Equally as interesting is the question of how this program personally impacts the PIFs, providing social capital to themselves and their own families in the process.

Ultimately, the purpose of this case study is to look more in depth at the PIF program from the lens of the facilitator in relation to the parent to see what creates the elements of social wealth. The intent is to gain an understanding of how the family and PIF not only work together, but also how each one works to gain a stronger collaboration to support the student and help build his or her resiliency to stay in school to graduate.

These questions helped guide this exploration:

- What are essential dispositions and necessary behaviors that are important in a PIF?
- What effective strategies serve as collaborative interventions for the PIFs and families to use to help students to stay in school?
- Using the theory of social capital, what has been learned to date about this program that can be shared with others who want to use this intervention?
- What are other unintended outcomes that have made a difference in using this intervention?

The overall purpose of this case study is to provide preliminary evidence on the effectiveness of a program that builds parents' efficacy to help their at-risk students stay on track for high school graduation through one-on-one support.

The Meaning of Social Capital and Parent Involvement

Social capital, as defined by Coleman (1988), is explained as a source of wealth and power that is inherent in society based on one's network of connections. More simply explained, social capital is composed of two general elements: the social relationships that one possesses, and the degree to which the individual has quantity and qualities in those relationships and their resources (Portes, 2000). To be successful in a school environment, families need to have learning resources and a wealth of social capital to help with achievement goals. Many families lack these resources; they are not engaged in schools or the community and are limited by lack of proficiency in English, economic wealth, or technology. Coleman goes on to explain one of the resources of social capital is the resource of information channels. These are social relationships that help one acquire information, such as finding out what an excellent school is or how to access educational opportunities at a signature charter school in the school district.

Ultimately, social capital wealth enhances human capital. The family and the community play a key role in fostering the development of social capital. Family background is analytically separable into three different parts: financial capital, human capital, and social capital, all of which are necessary. Coleman (1988) explains these parts; in a simplistic form, human capital is measured by parents' education. Social capital is evaluated by the relationship between children and parents (and other family members). It gives children access to the adult's human capital and depends on both the parents' physical presence and the personal attention they give their children. "If parents' human capital is not complemented by social capital embodied in family relations, it is irrelevant to the child's educational growth that the parent has a great deal, or a

small amount, of human capital" (Coleman, 1988, p. 110). Beyond the family, social capital is found in relationships outside the home and with the parents' relationships with the institutions of the community, in this case, the school.

The understanding of the importance of cultural capital has been brought into focus through the work of Lee and Bowman (2006) as well as Croninger and Lee (2001). These researchers have noted that teachers are critical resources who provide students with social capital, that is, tools to help them be successful in school to graduate. Beyond this work, other researchers have looked beyond the classroom and explored other forms of "capital" within the school setting: principals (Fullan, 2014), other students (Gottfredson & DiPietro, 2011), families (Crosnoe, 2004), and, as in this study, support personnel (Fritch, 2000).

The Case Method to Capture the Essence of Social Capital Connections

In order to capture the voices of the PIFs "heard" in this study, the researcher used a case study format (Stake, 2005) supported by a comprehensive research data analysis guided by Denzin and Lincoln (2005). The study took place over a period of three years to enable the researcher to gain rich, substantive data from multiple perspectives (PIFs usually stayed with the program for an average of a year) and informal statistical reports. Triangulated data were drawn from notes based on discussions with PIFs, recorded interviews with school facilitators (e.g., school counselor, assistant principal), and scripts used for conference presentations over the three years. Notes and interviews were verified for accuracy. Themes, chronologically ordered, emerged from the discussion notes and were used to compare perceptions of the PIFs on a yearly basis over the three-year period. Data from these various sources were further collapsed to analyze lessons learned from the study. The word "parent" and "family" were used interchangeably in some sessions in the first semester and less in the second semester of this study. By year three, contacts were typically noted in reports as "mother" rather than "parent" or "father." This was because much of communication work was based on using the telephone; mothers typically answered the phone more frequently than fathers. Also mothers' phone numbers were more readily provided as contacts as compared to the phone numbers of the fathers.

The qualitative design used for this program analysis consisted of three data points to build a rich case: (1) broad analysis of data collected through PIF tracking tab to identify the frequency and nature of PIF contact with parents; (2) discussion sessions with PIFs to understand what strategies were being used

to engage families; and (3) PIF reflective writings on what they learned about themselves and the process of working with students and their families. To a lesser degree, interviews with school facilitators and the first year program supervisor were used to provide additional descriptions to enrich this case study.

Student Identification Based on Risk Indicators

The PIF program studied here took place in a large school district in the western United States with a population of 63,000 students. Some ninth grade students were identified as at risk of dropping out by five risk indicators based on the work of Balfanz et al. (2007). In the first year, students from 12 comprehensive high schools were identified as candidates for the program. These were students who had a history of at least three of these criteria: non-proficiency on eighth grade standardized test scores in English Language Arts/mathematics; poor attendance; changing schools in the past year; retained for two years in the same grade; and a record of being suspended from school at least once in the past year. For each of these risk indicators, students received a rating based on a rubric assigning 0, 1, or 2 points for attendance, transiency, retention, and CRT scores. The risk index of suspension was based on a score of 0 (never suspended) or 1 (suspended). Each student receives a composite risk index score at the conclusion of certain school years (Grades 1–6; Grade 7–9; Grade 10; Grade 11–12). Students in this study were identified using this risk index at the end of their eighth grade year and placed in risk order from most at risk to least at risk. Those most at risk were the students and families who were targeted to receive support in their ninth grade year through the PIF intervention.

Role of the Parent Involvement Facilitator and Training Support

Twelve schools in the school district participated in the first year, and eight continued into the second and third years of the program (Crain, Davidson, & Ferrara, 2013a; Ferrara, Crain, & Davidson, 2013). In the first year of the program, the school district, along with a community agency, secured funding through Americorps for 12 part-time PIFs and a full-time field coordinator. The field coordinator's role was to work closely with the PIFs to increase their proficiency in using the school district data software and teaching the software to parents. Additionally, the field coordinator monitored the workstations for grant compliance and PIF support. The PIFs were selected for their position based on their knowledge of working with parents, their bilingual ability

(Spanish-speaking), and their time availability (20 hours per week during school time). Even though not all 12 schools had a high Hispanic population, the families targeted in these schools were largely Hispanic. The PIFs received some training in using the parent portal system and in understanding the characteristics of an at-risk learner through school district professional development staff. Their main role was to contact as many parents as possible (given the phone numbers that each school had available) and to help parents understand how to access the parent portal. It was also important for the PIFs to enter all of their attempts, contacts, and follow-up contacts on the parent portal system. All PIFs received an initial training at the school district's personnel computer lab and training facility. During this initial training, FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) law, school policies, and employment issues were discussed. A large part of the training time was centered on learning the school district's software program. Additionally, the PIFs were shown their student list. After reviewing these lists, the PIFs were given training on family issues and dynamics, resources available, and basics in contacting the identified families. In addition to this initial training, every PIF attended a required semimonthly meeting with the grant administrator. When ongoing training was provided by the school district, PIFs had the opportunity to interact with one another to share insights and methods in helping families.

Changes were made for the second year of the study based on feedback from the PIFs and school administrators after the first year of the study. First, in the second year, the school district narrowed the number of schools to eight but increased the number of hours that a PIF was assigned to a school to full-time (40 hours). The number of hours of training for the PIFs was increased to four days before they began their assignments at their schools. The PIFs received training in using the electronic portal system (Basic Infinite Campus), the parent portal data tab for Infinite Campus, FERPA and mandated reporting, understanding high school graduation requirements, and the multiple school district websites. They also received several professional development workshops on family engagement, family–school partnerships, the intent of the re-engagement centers (high school dropout prevention initiatives), relationship building with hard-to-reach families, and how to handle conflict. Only a few of the PIFs returned in year two, mainly because the others did not have the time necessary for the position or had elected to take another higher paying position.

A more concentrated effort was made in the second and third years to help PIFs reach data-driven decisions based on high-risk indicator data. Data were reviewed at the beginning of each semester. These data included the number of at-risk students in each of the targeted ninth grades in the eight schools at the beginning and the midpoint of the year. Data also included student mobility,

number of families reached from one semester to another, and percentage of families reached.

The PIFs in years two and three also participated in a "field trip" to their assigned school and were introduced to the faculty and staff. An important difference, too, was that the PIFs were assigned to a school administrator, which added another positive impact. In many schools, the freshmen dean was chosen as the supervisor, while a few chose the head counselor. Either configuration allowed the PIF to be closely aligned with ninth grade students at each school. At the beginning of each school year, PIFs receive a list of incoming high-risk ninth grade students and are asked to contact as many of their parents as possible to work to build a positive relationship with them, to help them understand how to access the parent portal, and to link them to any additional family supports they might need to ensure students' successful continuation in high school (e.g., tutoring, translation services, financial support for families, counseling). All PIFs were required to document which students' families they contacted using the school district's student information data tracking link to the school district parent portal system. The information entered included a description of the outcome of the contact (e.g., family was linked to supports; no call back from family) and any additional notes the PIF had about the contact with the family. PIFs scheduled semi-monthly meetings with their community liaison and other facilitators involved in parent programs in the school district to share insights and challenges in their roles.

Data Collection Opportunities

Three times a year during PIF training sessions, each of the PIFs from Grades 8–12 took part in one-hour personal experience discussions. In order to build a rich data understanding, the transcripts from the individual interviews and discussions were read in their entirety at least twice, with marginal notations indicating short phrases, ideas, or key concepts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Coding was completed for all sentences and phrases of each participant in order to capture the essence of what the participant shared. After the initial coding, each participant's data file was "filtered" to identify common codes. This study employed this method of triangulation by incorporating individual interviews, discussion notes, member checks, and archival program documents. The case study also utilized data source triangulation (Stake, 1995) by conducting discussion sessions at three different periods of the year. Through these systematic steps, a picture of the challenges and successes of PIFs became clearer over time.

Other data collected over the three-year period were analyzed as an on-going process. In the first year, the PIF supervisor provided insights on the relationships and challenges in the start-up of the program. In the second and third years, data were included in this case from presentations at the national level (e.g., American Educational Research Conferences). In year three, two informal interviews with school-based facilitators were included to provide a broader perspective of the impact of the program at the school level.

Unfolding the Evidence: Looking More Closely at the Parent Involvement Facilitator

One of the eye-opening lessons learned quickly was that the role of the parent involvement facilitator was unique. Those who were successful in the position had qualities beyond the basic job description of being able to speak Spanish. In years two and three, they worked 40 hours a week in this role and became skilled in entering data in the school district reporting system. The most significant quality of being a successful PIF was demonstrating a high level of caring about students and their families. The PIFs who left their position after a few months were those who found the job too challenging. They reported that it was a task that required persistence, as they were required to make phone calls on a daily basis, be highly organized in maintaining details, and remain flexible in working in a school setting with multiple interruptions and unanticipated expectations.

One of the PIFs aptly described her role as very important, and she clarified this by sharing her personal experience: (Note: all comments as verbatim)

> My parents did not have the support to finish school, and I had the support of my brothers. If there are older siblings in the family, they can provide support. It can be others too—like my cousins. I moved here from California. I made it happen because I had my siblings to help me finish school.

When asked the question, "What is the most outstanding characteristic you have that makes you a highly successful PIF?" the frequent answer was the ability to communicate. Because PIFs were able to speak Spanish, they also noted this as important. As one added, "I can understand the language, and this helps me understand the perspective of the family." Other attributes frequently cited during the three years that this question was asked were empathy, persistence, patience, respect, and the ability to suspend judgment. Ironically, these criteria were those identified early on by PIFs as necessary qualities to be successful in this position.

An assistant principal acting as a supervisor at one of the schools where there was a PIF program in place added some other qualities:

I use to think it was important to be a graduate of this school. Now, I would say that is not crucial…It is the work ethic and able to work as a team member and have follow through…They [PIFs] need to be able to handle tough conversations and know how to refer the parent to someone else.

One of the ways that the PIFs were able to describe the qualities of the role was answering a retrospective question at the end of the experience: "What advice would you give a new PIF for next year?

Have patience because even through parents do not do this intentionally, they can be rude.

Be open—sometimes we need to keep the problems in the office, and we need to separate the problems and not internalize what happens in the position.

Try to help and follow up in whatever circumstances it would be. Keep reaching out—it takes a certain amount, of course, because some parents are not as welcoming.

Try to not tell parents the same story of how the students is not coming to school or not doing well in school. They are tired of hearing the same story. The student tells his parents that he is doing fine, but the teacher does not like him.

Be a safe listener—listen to what you can do and cannot do.

Those who worked with PIFs identified an important quality in them: the belief that they could make a difference in families. While the PIFs themselves did not verbally identify it, this quality was reaffirmed in their sharing of stories of their daily interactions and how they provided natural counseling with their families. One PIF who is a social worker helped a parent with community resources when her child was arrested: "The parent did not know what to do first or next. I just helped the family get the resources they need to get through the crisis. Now, the student is back in school."

As with any program, this one also faced challenges in hiring and retention. Each year, at least one to two of the PIFs left the position midway through the year. Sometimes, it was the challenge of working in the role. More frequently, the PIF found a position that paid more money or was closer to his or her home. Because the job was during school hours, it was a challenge for a PIF who was also attending the local community college or university. By the third year of the program, retention issues were minimal. This was attributed to lessons learned in the first two years, more selectivity in the hiring of the

PIFs, and closer matching of the qualities of the PIF to the expectations of the schools in which they were placed.

What Strategies Do PIFs Use to Engage Parents of At-Risk Students?

Even though the PIFs received training in their roles, it was a role that was primarily learned "on the job." In the first two years, training was limited to school district workshops provided to all new employees, namely, using the parent portal and data entry systems, FERPA, and sexual harassment training. In the third year, the PIFs attended some targeted workshops using case studies with discussions (Walker, 2012) during which they watched or read the case and suggested ways to address issues related to a family conference scenario. The most powerful sessions, however, were those where the PIF shared stories with each other about their roles. Such "side-by-side" sharing provided rich data about strategies that were working and those that they needed to change in order to collect data or to support families and students in the program.

An early awareness insight that PIFs typically reported, especially after they had been in their position for two to three months, was the importance of building relationships. The PIFs described how many of these relationships evolved from a personal software training opportunity for the parent to a trusting relationship. One of the PIFs described the relationship in this way, "Once the parent realized I was a resource and support, they would listen to me, and many would return my phone call." Another PIF emphasized the importance of trust:

> The PIF needs to build trust with parents. The PIFs want to help the parents and the families. They want to help families understand that they are not there just to represent the schools but to help the students get back on track. The hard part is connecting to the parents and to help them understand they are not the police or [alleviating] the fears that the parents might have. That is the biggest challenge.

In addition to building trust, the PIFs over the three years recognized the importance of persistence. One of the PIFs explained this through the perception of the parents, "At first, parents do not think they need help…and then one day, they come to you and ask what can they do." One PIF described persistence as being motivated by the time requirement in the job description: "…to complete the 1,700 hours. That is a lot of work, and you have to know you've done something with that. It is how I measure effectiveness with success." Another realized the importance of patience: "Parents will get angry

because their children are not doing well, and I will try to help them overcome their anger so that their children will have another chance."

The bottom line is how well the student is doing in terms of grades. As one PIF reports, "I measured success based on how many parents I was able to pass on information like grades. I also recognized that I needed to just do my best… I know that I was going to try to provide a contact, and if a parent does not want to have help, I still try to give it my best…talk to them about their situation and give them an idea of what to do."

One of the most consistent strategies shared over the three years is the acknowledgement that all families need to be treated with respect. "I did not want to enter into that judgmental circle; I just want to get into their shoes, [know] what they are doing, and what is not working." The outcome, as one PIF explains is "I have empathy for parents and students, not because I have children. I have learned to suspend judgment and not to jump to a conclusion but wait and be respectful for parents as they share their stories with you."

Finally, the theme of personal connections and a growing relationship also carried into the PIFs direct contact with students. One of the PIFs recognized that a student chose not to attend a class. She and the student worked out a plan to walk to the class so the student would not skip. This PIF reported that the student eventually passed the class. Another PIF echoed the impact of personally connecting with students and shared her work with a family to help them get their daughter to school. The PIF persisted with her communication, and the student started coming to school on a regular basis.

This evolving relationship was also apparent when working with the school staff and being seen as a valuable contributor to the school community and school goals for students. The school facilitator reported that the PIF was "part of the team. She was invaluable, and we were in constant contact, and her voice was very important." Sometimes, a school relationship was "bumpy" as described by one of the PIFs. These were small but annoying issues, like not having a dedicated space in the office or having to serve as a translator when a parent, who was not English speaking, came to the office and there were a need for a Spanish translation. These were issues that were more frequent in the first year and minimal by the third year. As the facilitator admitted, "There was a misunderstanding, and we did not understand the intent of the role of the PIF." Since that time, and with open communication, the role of the PIF has been clearly defined, and these issues have been resolved. By the end of the school year, PIFs viewed their successes working with families as growing and progressing, eventually believing that they could have an impact on student outcomes. It is this belief and acknowledgement that they are making a difference which makes the challenges faced in their roles easier to overcome.

What Is Working and Not Working To Date?

One would be remiss in excluding data that showed what was taking place in the school district in terms of the question asked: "Did this program work?" This answer is: to some degree; it had a positive impact on contacting parents. In year one, PIFs had 1,333 interactions with parents of 651 students, 16% of which were initiated by parents. In year two, 3,529 contacts were made to 800 students (17% initiated by parents). In year three, a total of 3,147 contacts were made to 845 high-risk students (27% initiated by parents). The number of times a family was contacted varied considerably, from as few as one time to as many as 49 times in 2012–2013. PIFs provided a wide range of support to families, with the largest support provided in the areas of attendance, grades, the parent portal, and tutoring across all years. In fact, in 2012–2013, 31% of all contacts related to grades; 19% of contacts were related to attendance; 13% were related to teaching families to use the parent portal to check their students' grades, and 3%, helping students with credit recovery. The rest of the contacts were related to information about programs that were being provided by Parent University (e.g., English Language Learners, understanding assessment data, high school graduation requirements). The portal helped the PIFs be more specific about the nature of their contacts, and by the third year, the PIFs were more aware, too, of programs that the school district was offering to support families. When the PIFs were asked which type of contacts yielded the most success, it was in those where parents were informed about the positive success their child was having in school. This was usually a phone call that a PIF made to share academic success like the passing of a test or completion of a project.

As noted previously, students in the school district receive risk index points partially based on their attendance. Students who miss 9.5 days of school (excused or unexcused) receive one point on the index, while students who miss 22.5 days or more receive two points on the index. In this study, 1,104 students were identified in this way at the beginning of the school year. At the end of the ninth-grade year, only 717 (65%) of PIF students were considered high risk because of their attendance. These findings indicate that although the number of students contacted by PIFs who were at risk because of their attendance declined from the start of the year to the end of the year, attendance issues continued to remain a major concern among high-risk students.

In the first year, approximately 545 students (45%) supported by PIFs earned five credits or more during the school year and were considered "on-track" for graduation. In the second year of the program, 675 (53%) of at-risk students earned enough credits to achieve sophomore status. In the third year

of the program, 651 (59.2%) of students were considered "on-track" in terms of their credits. The percentage of credit deficient students contacted by PIFs differed substantially from school to school, with some schools ending the year with only 30% of students credit deficient, while others continued to have as many as 58% of students credit deficient (Crain et al., 2013b). However, all high schools experienced a positive decline in the proportion of their students who were considered credit deficient at the end of their freshman year from 2011–2012 to 2012–2013, perhaps indicating the PIFs became more involved.

By the end of the year, the majority of students supported by PIFs improved their attendance and were on-track to graduate. Findings from parent portal log-in data indicated that parents contacted by PIFs were significantly more likely to log into the portal even one year after their participation in the PIF program and that parent portal log-ins were positively associated with credit attainment and attendance. Again, these preliminary correlational findings do not necessarily indicate a causal relationship, but they do provide data to further pursue in future studies.

Strategies and Outcomes That Emerged From the Intervention

Data analysis of PIF contacts show that PIFs provide a wide range of support to families, from serving as a liaison between the school and home to providing information on logging into the parent portal to helping students connect to credit recovery systems. These preliminary analyses indicate that there are mixed correlations between increased PIF contact and students' credit accrual and attendance. These findings, rather than a reflection on the quality of PIF contact, are most likely indicators of which students PIFs tend to devote the most time and of how much support severely credit deficient and truant students need to stay on-track for graduation.

An invaluable strategy that helps PIFs stay motivated and informed is having discussion times with other PIFs during the year. During these discussions, many of the PIFs reported that building trusting relationships with families was not instantaneous; it required both patience and persistence. Once trust and strong relationships were built, PIFs realized they could work effectively with families to develop solutions for obstacles students faced. PIFs also found that sharing their reflections on their capacity to engage families helped them acknowledge that they had gained valuable skills to partner with families as the semester progressed. Much of the PIFs' success also depended on school administrators and their ability to support each PIF in meaningful ways. When a PIF had the support of an administrator, he or she was able to focus on outreach and support to families as opposed to doing routine clerical work. When

PIFs felt included as members of the school staff, they also reported the ability to make valuable contributions to formulate school goals and promote student progress. PIF program data suggest individualized support with at-risk families helps build both the efficacy of the PIF and the target families. This collaborative outcome helped support students in staying on track for graduation.

The Power of the Human Contact as Social Capital

Over the three years, the voice of the PIF has helped show the power of human contact. Social capital exists in relationships and provides a network of support—between families, teachers, and staff; between families and the community; and, in this case, between families and the PIFs. When families use the resources available to them, their well-being is improved. It helps create a success story, that is, a high school education or even a university degree. What has happened, according to Coleman (1988), is that life challenges (e.g., poverty, increased mobility, a decline in family affiliations) decreased social capital in some families. Coleman warned that social capital that exists in families is different from school resources. Schools need to provide children from resource-weak families with experiences that approximate those provided by homes and communities that are rich in social capital (Powell, 1989).

The voices of the PIFs have been built on PIF comments over time, which serve as building blocks of evidence and support the power of this program. The most power lies in its essence and outcomes of communication. These findings back research developed by the Harvard Family Research Project and highlighted by the work of Allen (2009). When asked, "What qualities do you have that make this program and your link with parents work?" the PIFs shared many unique thoughts:

Communication, because I have good communicating skills with parents.

Native ability, because I understand their perspectives with others. I had trouble with school. I've been there myself.

I have empathy for parents and students—not because I have children; I know where the resources are and where to find help for parents.

Ask parents to suspend judgment and to not jump to a conclusion but wait and be respectful for parents as they share their stories with you.

The PIFs also shared their level of importance of being part of a team paired with the parents in supporting and helping students be successful in school and complete their high school education:

I have been calling a family because one of the sons was failing and had low test scores. I talked to his dad who told me that he never saw this,

and I told him about his grades. The dad was divorced and did not know what to do. I suggested he meet with the counselor. I set up a meeting with the counselor. He and the counselor met, and he wrote me to let me know how helpful it was, and he was working more closely with his son.

By the third year, follow-up communication, such as between this father and the PIF, was a more frequently cited story. It was also more common by the third year to hear how the PIFs supported families through community resources, especially as there was a substantial rise in the number of families in homeless support programs in the school district:

> One of the students had been missing a lot of school because the family was evicted, and they were staying at a motel. The student's mom tried to get transportation to the new school, but she was having trouble filling out the paperwork and contacting the counselor. I contacted the counselor and helped the student and his mom get the paperwork started. The counselor then helped them get some bus passes, food, and clothes. I contacted the mom yesterday, and she said that her son is going to school and doing ok.

More support from school staff was in place by the third year. At one school, the PIF, counselor, and the other parent liaison not assigned to the PIF program collaborated on ways to encourage families to come to the school:

> I have been working with parent nights and getting more help to get the word out. I have been letting parents know that I am there to support them. I have good support with the administration, and we have meetings each week to talk about the families and their children.

Another PIF shared a strategy that brings in both the students and their families with an end goal in mind—high school graduation:

> I am participating in a graduation program, which is the second or third Wednesday of every month. We meet with parents from 7:30 until 9 AM. The invitation is for freshmen and sophomores, and the phone call goes out in Spanish and English. The goal is to try to recruit more Hispanic parents. The site supervisor tries to have a session in Spanish. She helps the parents by going over the students' transcripts and discussing student grades. More and more parents seem to be comfortable coming to school.

Other programs are now in place in several of the schools where the PIFs are assigned. These are typically afterschool tutorial programs to help students who have not passed a subject during the first semester or are presently earning a D or an F in one of their core content areas of English, mathematics, science,

or social studies. Some of the PIFs have started to play a role in supporting the afterschool programs as tutors or as those who encourage students to attend these sessions. One PIF uses the afterschool program as a goal with the intent of helping students on his call list reduce their number of F's:

> We have 22 kids in the program, and our goal is to have 50 in the program. The student is suppose to attend the number of sessions based on the number of Fs he or she received on the first semester report card. So, if a student failed three classes, he is supposed to come to all three sessions, and so forth. There are subs for afterschool transportation. One of the students did so well in the program; he was failing, and now he is passing with straight A's and able to take on the courses through another program to replace the failed course.

The facilitators learned invaluable things through the exchange of information, also highlighting the importance of social capital in this program:

> I enjoyed the experience working with families because you learn different things from families—different values and different ways of doing things. For example, parents from Central America are very different. When they bring their transcripts and birth certificates to school, it looks different. In Mexico, they base grades on numbers and number from 1 to 10. Parents do not understand percents and letter grades that we use in the U.S. Also, students take 10 classes in the other countries sometimes, and in the U.S.; the student only takes six or seven classes a day. Here in the U.S., it is a longer school day, but in Central America, students go from 8:00–12:00 or 1:00–5:00. Students go to college to prepare for a career. It is harder to get into college in Central America than it is in the United States.

Also interesting is what happens to the PIFs. The PIFs report the program has impacted their lives and their future career goals. Some complete the year and then enter the community college to begin their studies in various fields related to education. This is well-captured by one of the PIFs who is completing his student teaching experience at the university:

> I contacted an advisor and the secretary at the university. They put me in contact with the Latino Research Center. I contacted the Director of the Spanish Department. I talked to a professor to get into classes and met them to work out my schedule. I was finally accepted to the Spanish Master's program, and now, I am finishing up my teacher certification.

The Final "So What?"

If this study were reported as a quantitative study, it might appear that the PIF program is not working. The numbers, however, do not tell the whole story. What happens when and if the student moves into tenth grade? This intervention targets one grade level—and after ninth grade, the student becomes part of the larger data set of students who continue through high school, hopefully with a low risk index and needing fewer interventions.

When PIFs were asked about parent follow-up support for their children after the ninth grade intervention, they provided some unique insights they had shared with their parents. In a discussion group, the PIFs agreed that it was important to have parents continue to stay informed. "Help the parents find options—like the 211, a national call center for human service support, and other options and build on these as they go." An insightful suggestion was to make sure that parents find ways to have personal space and time set aside to get to know the teachers and to try to monitor the child's grades and build a working relationship with their children and the school. The case also brings out the importance of data literacy. If data do tell a story, even though it is a complex one in terms of understanding at-risk indices and variables that are linked to dropout predictions, these data do need to be understood and discussed on a frequent basis. Simply looking at statistics two or three times a year yields limited findings. It is especially difficult if the data are reduced to a few categories like attendance or credits attained overall.

Data from a program such as this have multiple sources. This paper does not focus on quantitative data, not because data do not exist, but because the lens in this paper is on a point of intervention—the parent involvement facilitator. This study uses a more naturalistic inquiry method guided by the case study structure and explores lessons learned about how a group of parent involvement facilitators played a role in providing parent support for helping their children stay in school. Training became more focused after the first year, and group discussions were held on an informal basis to "touch base" with the PIFs to see "how everything was going," the supervisors reported. These informal discussions helped focus follow-up discussions with the PIFs on their personal self-awareness of strategies to work with "their families" on the phone and in person. This case study helps capture the stories of these discussions over time.

The bottom line is the question, "Did this make a difference in keeping students in school and helping them persist to graduation?" The answer is that it depended on the risk level of the students. The higher the risk, the less likely it remains that students are completing their education. The less likely the risk, the more likely it is for at-risk students to continue to the next grade.

Of course, the PIF program alone is not the "cure-all" for the complex task of addressing and making significant changes in a large, urban school with a population of students from diverse cultures. What the PIFs shared in their focus groups is a belief that they are playing a meaningful role in the lives of at-risk families and helping build relationships between schools and families. Data on the PIF program suggest that individualized support with at-risk families that helps build their efficacy to support their child's learning through monitoring may be a start in designing a successful model for helping at-risk students stay on track for graduation.

Any success needs to build on more data, and to date the voice of the parents has not been captured in the program in a formalized way. Parents have informally shared their enthusiasm for the phone calls and school visits during the past few years. A video has been developed that captures the story of one of the parents whose child has been successful through the support of the program. More formal methods of data collection are anticipated to be in place by the end of the fourth year to bring the parent's voices more clearly into this intervention.

The study also explores a question that was raised by Dufur and his colleagues (2013) in a research article entitled, "Does capital at home matter more than capital at school?" The findings from this case study indicate that enhancing the links between home and school by empowering parents with both data and a human connection has the potential to unlock social capital that can help students succeed in school. It is a powerful start to improving a complex issue.

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