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An Analysis of Urban School Leaders' Role in Community Support and Involvement

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Introduction

While school systems have the arduous task of educating a plethora of diverse students from different backgrounds and social economic status, the task is multifaceted. Epstein (1995) argued that to successfully meet the goal of improving education for all children, there must be considerably more involvement from parents, the community, and other stakeholders working together to promote the success of all students. That is, “students learn more and succeed at higher levels when home, school, and community work together to support students’ learning and development” (Epstein & Sanders, 2006, p. 87). To meet the needs of such diverse students, their families, other administrators, and faculty (i.e., school community), school leaders, according to Green (2013, p. 14), must engage in several processes: (1) have knowledge of the emerging issues and trends that can potentially impact the school community; (2) be able to recognize the need to involve stakeholders in school decision-making; (3) assess whether they are highly visible; (4) assess whether they are actively involved; (5) assess their effectiveness in communicating with the larger community; (6) assess whether they give credence to individuals and groups whose values and opinions may conflict with theirs; and (7) assess whether they are recognizing and valuing diversity. In essence, these factors have an impact on the organizational structure of the school, influencing a collaborative culture of student, faculty, parental, and stakeholder decision-making processes (Wagner, 2007).

School leaders are hired to manage and supervise schools (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). In such, a number of characteristics are pertinent towards becoming a successful and effective school leader. One particular tenant is forming a collaborative relationship with stakeholders in the community (Compassion Capital Fund Resource Center, 2010). Although the school leader functions as the instructional leader within the school, *setting up and maintaining parental and community relationships* are equally important (Compassion Capital Fund Resource Center, 2010, p. 16). This includes, sharing the vision, clearly articulating the goals, an agreement of roles and responsibilities of members to reach the target (Compassion Capital Fund Resource Center, pp. 16-18). Fiore (2016) adds that even more important to the role of the school leader or principal as school-community leader is the “values and beliefs that guide the principal’s behavior” (p. 40). That is, the principal’s beliefs guide his or her actions with community stakeholders. These actions are deliberate and intentional leading towards a “two-way communication with internal and external groups” Fiore (2016, p. 40).

While much is known about the necessity for parental and community involvement in schools, very little research explores teachers’ views of their school leader’s role in developing and

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maintaining school and community relations. Since it is well documented that collaborative and participatory leadership is critical in the success of an organization and the culture of such organization (see Green, 2013), it is presumably just as critical to explore such dispositions of those individuals directly involved in the day to day structure of the school and the teaching and learning processes of students and faculty. In short, there are few research studies directed towards teachers' perceptions of their urban school leaders' roles in creating and sustaining partnerships with community, stakeholders and families. Considering the importance of community involvement and support in the success of student achievement, it is critical that other denominating factors are explored and not delineated from the overall establishment of the professional learning community. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand teachers' dispositions regarding their school leaders' role in community involvement and support within their urban schools. That is, skills that contribute to the organization's "success in building positive relationships, developing a supportive culture, and effectively communicating with all stakeholders" (Green, 2013, p. 232).

Literature Review

Improving Community Relationships. Epstein, Galindo and Sheldon (2011) state that there lies a dichotomous view of school leaders as "irrelevant, peripheral, or inadequate managers" to "essential for improving schools" (p. 463). However, as noted by Sergiovanni and Green (2015), "there are various types of relationships within a school community" (p. 142) to improve and lead a 21st century school. In an effort to utilize a school's human resources, Sergiovanni and Green (2015) indicate that "regardless of the type of relationships or where they exist, the school leader has to build bridges to goal attainment through them" (p. 142). To meet this challenge, Hirsch (2013) provides several factors in effectively utilizing essential data for improving schools. Hirsch (2013) states that teaching and learning conditions are "systems relationships, resources, environments and people... that affect teaching (sic) and learning (sic) at a high level" (p. 8). Hirsch (2013) concludes that when assessing teaching and learning conditions, a more critical, but positive view towards school improvement is pertinent to results, that is: (1) teaching and learning conditions are an area for school improvement, not accountability; (2) teaching and learning conditions are not about one individual and it will take a community effort to improve; (3) perceptual data are real data; (4) conversations need to be structured and safe; (5) identify and celebrate positives as well as considering areas for improvement; (6) create a common understanding of what defines and shapes teaching and learning conditions; (7) focus on what you can solve; and (8) solutions can be complex and long term.

Preparing School Leaders. 21st century school leaders are providing leadership in "an era of standards, competencies, and accountability measures" (Sergiovanni & Green, 2015, p. 40). As such, ten standards were developed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) focused on "promoting the learning, achievement, development, and well-being of students" (2015, p. 3). These revised standards called the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) guide school leaders in creating effective schools. One specific revised PSEL standard to effectively lead the second half of 21st century schools includes Standard 8. PSEL Standard 8 indicates that: "effective education leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being (NPBEA, 2015).

PSEL Standard 8 requires the school leader to effectively collaborate with faculty, staff, the community, and stakeholders. Knowledge of the community in which the school leader serves is advantageous when building relationships and collaborating with parents, community members, and stakeholders who have a vested interest in the success and academic achievement of students within the community. Green (2013, p. 14) notes seven tenants that are essential for school leaders in building a collaborative school culture: (1) have knowledge of the emerging issues and trends that can potentially impact the school community; (2) be able to recognize the need to involve stakeholders in school decision-making processes; (3) assess whether they are highly visible; (4) assess whether they are actively involved; (5) assess their effectiveness in communicating with the larger community; (6) assess whether they give credence to individuals and groups whose values and opinions may conflict with theirs; and (7) assess whether they are recognizing and valuing diversity. Green (2013) adds that when school leaders are not open to the idea of collaboration, the result is “a lose-lose situation with the school standing to lose the most” (p. 94).

Community Support and Involvement. Research has demonstrated that parental support and involvement is one of the key components tied to academic achievement (Darling, Kleiman & Larocque, 2011). In such, parental involvement has several benefits for students: student behavior improves, student motivation increases, attendance becomes more regular, student dropout rates are lower, students have a more positive attitude toward homework, parent and community support for schools increases and academic achievement rises (see Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfeld, & York, 1966; Epstein, 1984, 1995, 1997, 2001; Griffith, 1998; Schneider & Coleman, 1993). Research denotes that in many cases, poverty and parental support has been a contributing factor in student attrition (see Deslandes, Royer, Turcotte, & Bertrand, 1997; Dornbusch, Ritter, Liederman, Mont-Reynaud, & Chen, 1987; Rumberger, 2006; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992; and Wiggan, 2007). When parents are involved in their children’s education, there is a higher academic performance in course content. Other findings include fewer disciplinary problems (see Deslandes, Royer, Royer, Turcotte, & Bertrand, 1997; Eccles, Early, Frasier, Belansky, & McCarthy, 1997).

Haines, Gross, Blue-Banning, Francis, and Turnball (2015) present significant findings on family-school partnerships in knowledge development sites (KDS) conducted by the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Center. The findings of a focus group research approach resulted in five themes: (1) school culture of inclusion; (2) administrative leadership; (3) attributes of partnerships; (4) opportunities for family involvement; and (5) positive outcomes for all students (p. 229). Haines, et.al (2015) found that positive and inclusive schools lead to trusting partnerships and involvement with the family, community and stakeholders.

While most research focuses on specifically classroom practice and parental and community involvement as major factors in influencing student learning and achievement, only recently have research focused on deep discussions and reflections amongst school leaders at and across building levels positioning teaching conditions and data use in the forefront of school improvement. More research is needed to establish a framework to guide school leaders and school district personnel in developing effective processes towards the involvement of a new

wave of 21st century parent/guardian and community stakeholders. The focus of this study is not to examine the value of particular activities associated with the current orientation of community support and involvement, neither is it intended to highlight issues that specifically influence such involvement. Rather, the focus of this study is to gain insight into the dispositions of teachers regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement and to provide a platform for establishing communication amongst school officials regarding how to engage and involve parents/guardians and other stakeholders who represent a new cultural wave of opinions and thoughts that differ from the former and present academic institutional landscape.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant difference in terms of teachers' dispositions regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement by type of school level?
2. Is there a significant difference in elementary and middle school levels in terms of teachers' dispositions regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement?
3. Is there a significant difference in middle and high school levels in terms of teachers' dispositions regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement?
4. Is there a significant difference in elementary and high school levels in terms of teachers' dispositions regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement?

Methodology

The researcher submitted four questions to be answered by this study. In order to answer the research questions, this study used a quantitative methodology that facilitates an analysis of the variables in the study. The researcher determined that a non-experimental approach utilizing descriptive and non-parametric statistics would be the most appropriate for a secondary data analysis study. To compare between group data, the researcher performed the Kruskal-Wallis one-way ANOVA of ranks test. There were three independent sample populations included in this study, which were non-normally distributed data. Using SPSS 23 Tests for Several Independent Samples, the three factors extracted through factor analysis were tested against the grouping variable, type of school level. A descriptive analysis was performed on the sample group to obtain a clear understanding of the group. Standard deviations were determined during data analysis and reported as well. A Mann-Whitney U Test was utilized to determine which groups were statistically significant from one another. In the parametric analysis, the researcher was able to determine significant differences between pairs of school levels by Bonferroni adjustment. An effect size was calculated. The results of the analysis procedures were interpreted and evaluated for implications.

Instrumentation

The survey for this study is the Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) Survey (New Teacher Center, 2012). The TELL survey is based upon the MET Working Conditions Survey of the New Teacher Center. The TELL analyses presented are based on the responses to a survey instrument that was based on the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (Hirsch & Church, 2009), but customized to Texas.

Different in some particulars from versions of the TELL administered at other times in other places, the TELL Texas 2014 nevertheless partakes of an accumulating body of evidence that testifies to the instrument's psychometric quality. To be sure, some degree of informal or *prima facie* evidence of the validity of the TELL derives from its longevity and wide-spread usage. To the same point, however, more formal evidence derives from initial efforts to ensure the instrument's "content validity" "and later efforts to establish its "construct validity." With respect to its content validity, the TELL capitalizes on two sources: 1) a wide-ranging literature review of the role of working conditions on teacher dissatisfaction and mobility and 2) an analysis of School and Staffing Survey data focused on areas identified as driving teachers' satisfaction and employment decisions. In terms of its construct validity, a 2014 Research Brief published on the TELL Texas website alludes to the work of Swanlund (2011) in confirming the factor structure of the instrument and in using "Rasch model person separation reliability and Cronbach's alpha" to verify that the TELL is capable of producing consistent results across participant groups" (NTC Validity and Reliability Report, 2014, p. 3). In sum, for purposes of measuring teacher dispositions towards the working conditions directly or indirectly fostered by the leadership of their schools, the TELL Texas 2014 would appear to be a generally accurate tool that produces consistent results.

The TELL Survey provides analyses of "teaching conditions... associated with improved student achievement" and "provides direct support to facilitate school improvement" (TELL Texas, 2014, para. 2). The TELL Texas 2014 Survey examines eight different constructs from teacher leadership to new teacher support. However, this research study will only examine the TELL Texas 2014 construct of community engagement and support.

Sample Population

Schools in this study were selective elementary, middle and high, all located in a large urban district in the southwestern United States that were selected based on convenience. That is, "only campuses with 50% of educators responding to the survey have we reports" (TELL Texas, 2014). The TELL Texas was administered to educators at 282 district sites in the large urban school district. 1793 respondents provided data from these 282 district sites. The total teachers employed are 11, 452, and total principals employed are 258. The total enrollment for the large urban district are 211, 552 students in the 2013 - 2014 school year. With over 100 languages spoken, educators serve a population of 61.9 % Hispanic and 25.2% African American students in the large urban school district. By program, 93.3% of students are Title I, 68.7% are "At Risk," and 80.4% are economically disadvantaged.

Data Analysis and Findings

Urban teachers' responses by school level are pertinent to some aspect of community support and involvement invested in improving a climate of academic achievement in schools. The eight "community support and involvement" items read as follows:

1. Parents/guardians are influential decision makers in this school.
2. This school maintains clear, two-way communication with parents/guardians and the community.
3. The school does a good job of encouraging parent/guardian involvement.
4. Teachers provide parents/guardians with useful information about student learning.
5. Parents/guardians know what is going on in this school.
6. Parents/guardians support teachers, contributing to their success with students.
7. Community members support teachers, contributing to their success with students.
8. The community we serve is supportive of this school.

Research Question 1: *Is there a significant difference in terms of teachers' dispositions regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement by type of school level?*

Table 1

Results and Descriptive Statistics for Community Support and Involvement by Type of School Level.

School Level	N	Median	SD	χ^2	Sig.
Elementary	30	31.00	5.22	19.42**	79.62
Middle	46	31.00	4.31		68.34
High School	107	32.00	6.83		105.64

* Indicates $p < .0125$; ** Indicates $p < .001$.

A Kruskal-Wallis Test revealed a significant difference in community support and involvement across three different school levels (Gp1, $n = 30$: Elementary Level; Gp2, $n = 46$: Middle Level; Gp3, $n = 107$: High School), $X^2(2, n = 183) = 19.42, p = .000$. The high school group recorded a higher median mean score ($Md = 32$) than the other two school levels which both recorded median values of 31. Results indicating that high school teachers have higher dispositions towards their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement compared to both elementary and middle teachers. Table 1 also relates the school level median mean values, the standard deviation, the calculated P value report as Chi-square, and the mean rank for the school levels.

Research Question 2: *Is there a significant difference in elementary and middle school levels in terms of teachers' dispositions regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement? (Elementary and High School)*

Table 2

ANOVA Results and Descriptive Statistics for Elementary and High School Leaders' Role in Community Support and Involvement

School Levels	N	Median	SD	X2	Sig.
Elementary	30	31.00	5.22	.02*	54.95
High School	107	32.00	6.83		72.94

* Indicates $p < .0125$; ** Indicates $p < .001$.

Table 2 indicates the school level median mean values, the standard deviation, the calculated P value report as Chi-square, and the mean rank for the school levels. A Mann-Whitney U Test revealed a significant difference in teacher dispositions regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement for Elementary (Md = 29) and High School (Md = 27), $U = 1184$, $z = -2.34$, $p = .02$, $r = -0.2$. Results indicate high school teachers having a higher disposition regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement compared to elementary school teachers.

Research Question 3: *Is there a significant difference in middle and high school levels in terms of teachers' dispositions regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement? (Elementary and Middle)*

Table 3

ANOVA Results and Descriptive Statistics for Elementary and Middle School Leaders' Role in Community Support and Involvement

School Levels	N	Median	SD	X2	Sig.
Elementary	30	31.00	5.22	.56	40.17
Middle	107	31.00	4.31		37.41

* Indicates $p < .0125$; ** Indicates $p < .001$.

Table 3 indicates the school level median mean values, the standard deviation, the calculated P value report as Chi-square, and the mean rank for the school levels. A Mann-Whitney U Test revealed no significant difference in teacher dispositions regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement for Elementary (Md = 31) and Middle (Md = 31), $U = 640$, $z = -.587$, $p = .56$, $r = -0.7$. Results indicating no difference in dispositions of elementary and middle school teachers' regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement.

Research Question 4: *Is there a significant difference in elementary and high school levels in terms of teachers' dispositions regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement? (Middle and High School)*

Table 4

ANOVA Results and Descriptive Statistics for Middle and High School Leaders' Role in Community Support and Involvement

School Levels	N	Median	SD	X2	Sig.
Middle	46	31.00	4.31	.000**	54.42
High School	107	32.00	6.83		86.71

* Indicates $p < .0125$; ** Indicates $p < .001$.

Table 4 indicates the school level median mean values, the standard deviation, the calculated *P* value report as Chi-square, and the mean rank for the school levels. A Mann-Whitney U Test revealed a significant difference in teacher dispositions towards their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement for Middle (Md = 31) and High School (Md = 32), $U = 1423$, $z = -4.38$, $p = .000$, $r = -0.4$. Results indicating high school teachers having higher dispositions towards their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement than middle school teachers.

Discussion

The researcher sought to identify urban school level dispositions regarding leadership roles that could attribute to positive school climate and community support and involvement. For this study the researcher analyzed the responses from teachers within three different school levels: elementary, middle and high school in the fourth largest city in the nation, specifically, by the use of a secondary data set related to school leaders' roles in community support and involvement that could highly improve school climate and conditions.

At the elementary level, a major perception is that parents/guardians and the community are not supportive of their teachers; yet, the school provides useful information to parents about student learning and respondents believe that parents know what is going on in the school. Grunig and Hunt (as cited in Moore, Bagin, and Gallagher, 2016) state that as much as 50 percent of schools follow a public information model when communicating with the community. This model involves the dissemination of information in a one-way format, directly to the parent. Perhaps, this sentiment supports Bagin's (as cited in Moore, et.al, 2016) assumptions surrounding the failure of school and community relations. In addition, solely disseminating information to parents/guardians is not a two-way communication (Bagin, as cited in Moore, et.al, 2016).

Although results from high school teachers indicate that their school leaders encourage teachers to provide useful information about student learning to parents/guardians, maintains a clear two-way communication with parents/guardians and the community is supportive of the school, one area of concern is encouraging parent/guardian involvement. Simon (2001) reveals that the role of parental involvement drops when students enter high school. However, Simon (2001) points out several findings from high school parents and school leaders regarding parental and community involvement. Simon's (2001) research explores various activities that create a symbiotic relationship (two-way communication) between the school, parents/guardians and community such as creating parenting workshops, (re)introducing parent-teacher conferences, parents/guardians attending school activities with their teens, communicating through direct contact about student's homework, establishing a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) as a forum for parents, and creating community-service programs. According to data results, teachers at all levels believe that the majority of efforts to provide useful information about student learning to parents/guardians is sustainable. However, Simon's (2001) research findings contradicts participant responses from groups in the present study that a clear two-way communication between parent/guardians and schools is optimal, particularly within the high school. Perhaps, it is unclear to the extent in which the

schools choose to communicate with the diverse parents served. That is, e.g., communication through letters in the first language of the parents, accessibility to a computer or Internet access.

Although, the literature indicated that school leaders' roles in community support and involvement does impact student achievement, it also identified that learning environments must have certain attributes in order to facilitate effective communication between the school, community, and stakeholders. An ideal form of communication style is the two-way symmetric model that emphasizes an ebb and flow open communication between the school and community (Grunig & Hunt, as cited in Moore, et.al, 2016). This particular model emphasizes an understanding of the needs of the community and the needs of the school that greatly impacts school climate.

Based on related surveyed items on dispositions of school leaders' roles in community support and involvement, the responding participants indicated a significant difference between elementary and high school teachers' responses and middle and high school teachers' responses regarding dispositions regarding their school leaders' roles in community support and involvement. In fact, of the sample population surveyed, high school teachers stochastically dominate elementary and middle school teachers' overall responses.

Implications

Two implications for school leaders emerge from this study. The first entails creating a plan of action. According to Holliday (as cited in Moore, et.al, 2016, p. 13), the purpose of school-community support and involvement is to "foster student achievement... establishment of positive school climate and parental and citizen involvement". Unsuccessful urban school leaders continue to forge relationships with the community without a plan of action. According to Moore, et.al (2016), the most current schools have a community relations' plan or public relations' plan. This plan involves specific elements supported by The National School Public Relations Association. Based on the results found in this study, elementary, middle, and high school leaders in the Southwestern region of the United States should consider the following recommendations from The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) concerning the elements of the school climate as it relates community involvement and support (building trust and relationships).

First, school leaders should do an effective job by letting parents/guardians and the community know about the successes and challenges of the school. Secondly, parental and community concerns regarding discipline issues should be taken seriously. A third recommendation to consider is enhancing the comfort of the parent/guardians and community being served. Personal experiences have an impact on decision making factors, even within the school environment. Fourth, inclusive decision making is an important factor in staff morale. Fifth, communication to parents/guardians and the community should be in words that are understandable. That is, less multisyllabic words and jargon. Sixth, to gain trust and support, a strong collaboration is key amongst teachers, administrators, parental groups and the business community. Seventh, attracting the support of the business community is essential when building public confidence in schools. Eighth, effort must be made to involve nonparents through community education and volunteer programs. Finally, a two-way communication process

involving feedback from parents/guardians and the community to school officials is a major part of the decision-making process (Fiore, 2016, pp. 4-6).

The second implication for school leaders involves removing barriers of communication to all stakeholders. Fiore (2011, p. 84) provides several communication barriers that school leaders should consider when building relationships and trust with the parents/guardians and the community. First, an influx of non-English proficient families is moving into large cities. Therefore, school leaders should consider ways to position personnel to facilitate communication with parents/guardians and community members who are less skilled with speaking English as a first language. Cultural differences have an impact upon communication style (i.e., direct eye contact). Also, school leaders should consider effectively communicating with underrepresented groups with a physical disability such as blindness. Adjusting the communication style by verbally articulating points within the message is important to this population. Finally, while school leaders are rushed to make quick time-related decisions; rather, consider purposeful communication to parents/guardians and the community through face-to-face meetings, e.g. town hall meetings.

Conclusion

Topor, Keane, Shelton, and Calkins (2010) postulate that there is a direct link or relationship between students' education, the school, and teachers. These three elements according to Topor, et.al (2010) strongly impact student achievement "by being engaged with the child to increase ... cognitive competence and ...the teacher and school to promote a stronger...positive student-teacher relationship" (p. 3). The findings in this research supports Henderson and Mapp's (2002) research that "when families of all backgrounds are engaged in their children's learning, their children tend to do better in school and stay in school longer" (p. 73) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 (latest authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA] of 1965 which was last reauthorized in 2002 as the No Child Left Behind [NCLB]) depiction of parent involvement as a consistent, two-way, communication regarding academic achievement and other school activities which supports student success. The ESSA 2015 Act ensures that schools are:

- training staff in regards to engagement strategies;
- supporting programs that reach families at home, in the community and at school;
- disseminating information on best practices focused on engagement, especially for economically disadvantaged students;
- collaborating with community-based organizations or businesses that have a track record of improving family engagement; and,
- engaging in any other activities that the district believes are appropriate in increasing engagement (The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2016).

The findings in this research also support Fiore's (2016) seven tasks or responsibilities that school leaders must assume that are relative to positive school-community relations. Fiore (2016) states school leaders should: (1) be a good listener; (2) be tactful and diplomatic in all relationships; (3) create meaningful professional development activities; (4) promote an open-door policy; (5) keep the superintendent informed of successes and failures; (6) recognize and

celebrate accomplishments of the school family; and, (7) maintain school publications and a school media plan that keep stakeholders informed (p. 41).

The common strands validated in the aforementioned research pertaining to parental and community involvement is based upon three specifics: (1) maintaining good internal communications which involves enlisting external support from parents/guardians and the community; (2) engaging in constructive conversations with internal (teachers) and external (parents and community) stakeholders; and (3) recognizing human needs that lead to a sense of belonging from internal and external stakeholders (Moore, et.al, 2016, p. 86).

Huang and Mason (2008) affirm that “empirical evidence supports the concept that student achievement is influenced by what parents believe, how they behave and the type of activities that they engage in association with their children’s education” (p. 20). More importantly, parents’ attitudes about the relationship with the school, that is with teachers and administrative staff, and parent’s participatory role in their child’s overall academic and social development, increases school involvement (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). While there is much progress in the area of community and school involvement, to meet the academic and social needs of a new generation of students, a paradigm shift must take place in the communication style of school leaders regarding the involvement and support of parents/guardians and community members in the second half of the 21st century.

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