How Father-Friendly Are K–12 Schools? Findings From a Community Survey

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Abstract

Fathers make important contributions to children's learning and development; however, schools and community organizations consistently report challenges to engaging fathers in their work. As part of a larger community-based participatory research project, a local fatherhood coalition created and distributed a survey to learn how various organizations and programs supported or marginalized fathers in their work. A mixed methods analysis of survey data indicated that K–12 schools were significantly less father-friendly than social service organizations, with K–12 schools disclosing that little to no services targeted fathers and most family engagement efforts prioritized mothers or assumed father disinterest. Comparatively, some social service organizations reported father-specific programming or early efforts to change policies and practices that unjustly favored mothers. However, most organizations, including K–12 schools, needed greater guidance and resources to become more father-friendly. In this article, we describe how the fatherhood coalition utilized survey results to guide their efforts in supporting local fathers and transforming organizational practices to make family-related programming and activities more inclusive of fathers and other male caregivers.

Key Words: father engagement, community-based survey research, family engagement, K–12 schools, school bias, dads, male caregivers

Introduction

To care about children is to care about families, and to care about families is to care about fathers. For decades, family research narrowly focused on mothers (Parke, 2004), distorting what we actually know about fathers because so much of what we know about families is defined by the maternal role (Amato, 2018; Guterman et al., 2018; Lynch & Zwerling, 2020). Even though research on fathers consistently documents the many ways fathers benefit children's academic, social–emotional, and physical development (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Carlson, 2006; Jeynes, 2015; Hill, 2015), fathers' parenting abilities and desires to be engaged are often dismissed or discounted by schools and communities (Arditti et al., 2019; Fagan & Kaufman, 2015; Miller et al., 2021; Palm, 2014; Posey-Maddox, 2017). Outdated views of fathers as merely "providers" or "secondary parents" continue to obscure the reality that fathers are more present than ever in children's lives (Livingston & Parker, 2019; Trahan & Cheung, 2018; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Unfortunately, these antiquated views slow the response of community programs and organizations to support fathers' evolving roles in the lives of their children (Lee et al., 2016; Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Perry, 2011).

For that reason, a local nonprofit organization assembled a community-based fatherhood coalition to address the biases that fathers often face in parenting and family-related services and activities. The purpose of this community-based research was to support the direction and efforts of the coalition by investigating levels of father-friendliness in a small urban community, as well as by comparing how different community sectors reported supporting the engagement of fathers. In this article, we share our research process and how findings are guiding our efforts to create a more equitable and father-friendly community, especially in educational spaces.

Literature Review

Father and Family Engagement

Father engagement is a multidimensional construct encompassing the various ways fathers can support children and their development (Pfitzner et al., 2017). It might involve specific activities related to their parenting role (e.g., teaching skills, helping with homework, attending child events, contributing resources), building attachment with the child, or finding joy and fulfillment as a father (Trahan & Cheung, 2018; Varga et al., 2017; Yoder et al., 2016). Given the multifaceted nature of parenting, various community roles and sectors intersect with fatherhood, but this topic is especially relevant to social service

organizations and schools, as they serve families and are typically required to set goals for family engagement (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Lundahl et al., 2008).

Family engagement definitions vary slightly, but in general, definitions suggest that family engagement is a shared process across schools, families, and community agencies to actively support children's learning and development in meaningful ways (Allen, 2007; Amatea, 2013; National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, 2023). One might assume that family engagement is father engagement, as fathers are part of the family unit, and that is the line of reasoning most organizations and school districts use. This belief assumes that since fathers fit within the parameters of who is considered "family," fathers are therefore served by "family" programming and services (de Montigny et al., 2017; Miller & Arellanes, 2023). Unfortunately, that is often not the case. Historically, "family" and "parent" engagement have been inclusive in name only and, in reality, are generally geared toward mothers and other female caregivers (Amato, 2018; Lee et al., 2016; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Although *family* and *parent* activities sound inclusive of and welcoming to fathers, they are simply not.

Father Marginalization and Schools

Perhaps the most influential organization in a community is the public school, as schools often serve as the hub for services and information related to children's growth and development (Bergin & Bergin, 2018). However, schools and other educational spaces share a long history of directing communication and programming toward mothers (Lee et al., 2016; Lynch & Zwerling, 2020). For example, McBride and Rane (2018) reported that some teachers and mothers are hesitant to involve fathers in early childhood programming. Similar research finds that mothers are assumed to be the primary caregiver and point of contact for schools, which explains why fathers report experiencing marginalization or, in some cases, even resistance to their engagement (de Montigny et al., 2017; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Posey-Maddox, 2017).

Although many could argue that parents, in general, lack support from social institutions and communities, fathers in particular are devalued, ignored, and often viewed as incompetent caregivers (Osborn, 2015; Wilson & Thompson, 2020). To be "seen" as an involved parent, fathers struggle against socially constructed roles of parents (Amato, 2018; Wall & Arnold, 2007) and often have to initiate contact with schools (Miller et al., 2021). This is likely to reflect an inherent deficit-minded perspective of fathers in society, which is evidenced by the erroneous assumption that males are less willing and less able to nurture their children (Livingston & Parker, 2019; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). This

bias, whether conscious or unconscious, places fathers on the sidelines with fewer inroads to connect with schools and other community organizations.

Today, most fathers want to experience the joys and challenges of parenthood and consider fatherhood as a dominant component of their self-identity (Livingston & Parker, 2019; Palm, 2014). However, if schools and communities continue to view fathers as "accessory parents" who are valued purely for their financial contributions to a child's upbringing, father engagement will continue to suffer. It is a missed opportunity for fathers and schools alike (Possey-Maddox, 2017). The long-standing assumption that mothers care more because they "show up" more ignores the gendered aspects of family engagement (Amato, 2018; Miller et al., 2021). Thus, we argue that although schools may believe that fathers are lacking in parental engagement, it may likely be a result of the mother-focused school structures within which fathers are asked to engage.

Fathers and Community Organizations

Many community organizations are dedicated to social justice and improving the lives of families (McLaughlin et al., 2015). Yet much of the national discourse toward social justice has focused on women, underserved populations, and individuals with disabilities (Unterhalter & Brighouse, 2007). These efforts, though admirable, often ignore fathers, as fathers may not be seen as primary caregivers or as a group facing barriers to engagement (Amato, 2018; Arditti et al., 2019). This discrepancy may be best illustrated by the naming of local and federal programming such as *Woman, Infants, and Children* or *Abused Women and Their Children,* which demonstrate that the service is not for fathers, only mothers.

In a meta-analytic study of fatherhood programs, researchers found that father-specific programming can generate a small but positive effect on father involvement (Holmes et al., 2020). Father-based community programs with positive outcomes can also improve other aspects of family life such as child development (Sarkadi et al., 2008), employment help (Fatherhood Research and Practice Network, 2018), involvement in children's education (Palm & Fagan, 2013), men's health (Rosenberg, 2009), and even breastfeeding support (Bich et al., 2019). Although we celebrate the effectiveness of these programs, many fatherhood programs continue to struggle (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007). Community programs that target fathers often face challenges in getting fathers to participate (Fagan & Pearson, 2020; Perry, 2011), funding (Martinson & Nightingale, 2008), and staffing (Palm & Fagan, 2013). Even when a program is established, a community program alone cannot overcome the widespread systemic challenges that fathers face as parents (Randles, 2020). To address

these issues, research emphasizes the importance of developing consistent programming that resonates with fathers in their community (Perry, 2011), and there is some evidence that social service organizations are moving in that direction (Fagan & Pearson, 2020).

Theoretical Perspective

The fatherhood coalition is made up of over 20 different organizations and groups representing various fields and roles (e.g., school districts, social services, legal groups, libraries, community health centers, etc.). Therefore, the coalition is founded on the idea that to support fathers we must consider the surrounding systems and social factors that shape their lives as fathers—and that community roles and efforts are all interconnected in some way. Without explicitly naming a theory, the principles of systems theory guided the creation of the coalition and all subsequent activities of the group (Amatea, 2013). "General systems theory is likened to a science of wholeness" (Friedman & Allen, 2014) in that intersecting factors from the micro-level to the macro-level determine the experiences and engagement levels of fathers. For example, living with a child may give a father regular access to engage with a child, but cultural stereotypes and conceptions of motherhood and fatherhood will shape what those interactions might look like (Cabrera et al., 2000; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). The coalition approached our research with an understanding that the community plays a key role in a father's engagement, but also recognized that many other systems and factors inform a community's capacity to support fathers (e.g., funding, transportation, cultural beliefs, societal attitudes).

Therefore, this project also draws upon the concept of *deficit ideology* (Gorski, 2011; Sleeter, 2004), also referred to as *deficit theory* (Collins, 1988; Dudley-Marling, 2007) and *deficit thinking* (Valencia, 2012), which can influence what the community looks like and feels like to fathers. Deficit ideology draws attention to institutionalized worldviews of marginalized groups and individuals who are seen for their assumed flaws and deficiencies rather than their strengths or the systemic conditions within which they live (Gorski, 2011; Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Sleeter, 2004). Historically, fathers are positioned as the less competent caregiver (Wall & Arnold, 2007), and men are presumed to be the problem from which women and children need to escape (Wilson & Thompson, 2020).

Deficit-minded professionals and communities assume/portray fathers as either absent or disengaged which, in turn, deteriorates expectations and opportunities for fathers to be engaged in children's lives (Gorski, 2011; Jimenez-Castellanos & Gonzalez, 2012). For that reason, the fatherhood coalition explicitly states that our mission is to better understand and support

fathers' many contributions to children's development, rather than unjustifiably try to remediate *perceived* failings. Further, *deficit ideology* allowed our research process to consider and critique deficit-based stereotypes of fathers within our data and the larger story of father engagement in our community.

Context and Background

The fatherhood coalition emerged from an issue that united many community organizations and programs—failure to effectively engage fathers in parenting and family programming. Conversations across various organizations led to the creation of a fatherhood coalition in 2018 with representatives from various sectors across the community (e.g., community programs, nonprofit agencies, early childhood services, K–12 school districts, universities, faith communities, local residents). The first gathering involved a working lunch with small group discussions about fathers in the community and barriers to program engagement. From there, attendees decided to meet regularly to brainstorm ideas and support one another. To date, over 90 individuals have participated in meetings or coalition activities, with approximately 20 members attending regularly (see Miller et al., 2020).

The fatherhood coalition did not originally envision research as part of our work. However, as the group grew and made movements in the community, we realized that gathering local data was critical to making informed decisions about what we should be doing and with whom (Hacker, 2013; Letiecq et al., 2022). We began our research journey by learning about fathers' lived experiences through interviews and focus groups (see Miller et al., 2020, 2021) and then moved into the current study that focused on the community's levels of father-friendliness.

The unique and diverse dynamics of the group allowed us to adopt principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) to coincide with our ongoing efforts to learn more about fathers and use data to drive our decisions (Schensul et al., 2008; Viswanathan et al., 2004). Such principles included:

- Using techniques from social science to support community activism and change
- challenging elitist structures of higher education by valuing the expertise of the community
- Drawing from community strengths and resources
- Promoting co-learning and capacity-building among all partners
- Maintaining mutual ownership of the process and products

Further, a community-based approach allowed community members to consider the father-related strengths and limitations of our community and ways

to bring about positive change for children and families (Caldwell et al., 2001; Hacker, 2013; Letiecq et al., 2022).

Materials and Methods

Since the design of the study is rooted in the principles of CBPR, the goal was to make the research process a co-learning and capacity-building endeavor (Lantz et al., 2001). Therefore, we exercised shared governance during each step of the research process. First, we collectively generated research questions to pursue in examining community data on father engagement.

1. How do local K–12 schools compare to social service agencies on their reported levels of father-friendliness?
2. How do descriptions of father-related programming and activities compare between K–12 schools and social service agencies?

We selected a concurrent mixed methods design, which included quantitative and qualitative items within one instrument (Ivankova, 2015). This blending of qualitative and quantitative data allowed us to consider general patterns in the community while also interpreting those patterns with the assistance of participants' written comments and insight. To maintain our community-driven approach, the study was designed in a way that community members and schools alike could understand and share the findings from this study, as well as allow coalition members to engage in the full scope of the research process.

Participants

One goal of the survey was to gather information from a wide range of individuals who serve within the community. Therefore, coalition members created a spreadsheet of names and organizations whose work intersected with families and children. Names and email addresses were collected from website directories connected to organizations and programs that served children or families in the local community. We did not check if each recipient's organization offered fatherhood or father-specific programs, just that they offered family services. Additionally, we did not target specific roles, such as administrators, as we desired representation across positions. The spreadsheet remained open to coalition members for their review, which allowed for the addition of names or programs that were missing from the list, based on their knowledge of the community. Ultimately, the distribution list consisted of approximately 500 recipients from a range of sectors (i.e., K–12 schools, social services, family services, early intervention, community health, nonprofit organizations, first responders, government agencies, faith communities), and a total of 122

participants completed the survey listing positions from each of the previous sectors (see Miller & Arellanes, 2023).

For this study, we narrowed the sample to focus on the two largest groups of respondents, participants from the field of social services and K–12 schools. We sent emails to 119 individuals in social services and 125 individuals in K–12 schools. Twenty-eight participants (23.5% of recipients) identified as social service professionals and 24 participants (19.2% of recipients) identified as K–12 school professionals. Of these 52 participants, 11 (21.2%) identified as service providers, 19 (36.5%) identified as educators, 14 (26.9%) identified as school or community administrators, and eight (15.4%) identified as "other" (e.g., specialist, coordinator, board member). Although the county has an approximate size of 130,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), given the interconnectedness of organizations and the familiarity of individuals within the community, participants were only required to report their professional sectors and roles to protect anonymity. All participants completed an IRB-approved consent form before completing the survey.

Data Collection

The coalition used the Father-Friendly Check-up Survey as a starting point for developing a community survey (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2016). The tool was developed for organizations to use in assessing how much they encouraged or discouraged father engagement in programming and activities. The survey contained over 80 Likert-scale questions, from which eight questions were drawn for the community survey. The eight questions (see Appendix) were selected because coalition members believed they were the most relevant to aspects of father engagement in community services spanning areas of *direct services and resources* (i.e., Does your organization offer father-specific services or programs?), *internal reflection and planning* (Has your organization conducted an audit of services for fathers?), and a *contextual/ecological understanding of fatherhood* (Does your organization acknowledge systemic bias against fathers?). Each item prompted participants to select from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) on a Likert-scale.

Some survey questions were constructed to be pro-father friendly. This was done as directional survey questions were more relevant to the research questions than neutral survey questions (i.e., is being father-friendly good or bad?). This decision is supported by previous literature as meta-analyses suggest father involvement in schools is beneficial (Hill, 2015; Jeynes, 2015). The survey also included open-ended comment boxes following each question item to allow participants to explain or expand upon their quantitative responses. Additionally, participants were asked to provide general feedback and ideas for the coalition, followed by questions about their positions and organizations.

Analysis

For research question one, we compared the two subgroups within the sample: social services (N = 28), and K–12 schools (N = 24). We compared these groups because teachers and social service providers are trained in differing philosophies and approaches to working with children and families (Amatea et al., 2013), wherein teacher education typically positions the student as the focal point with families on the periphery, and social services typically viewing the family more holistically in their work. To compare responses, we conducted independent-samples *t*-tests (two-tailed) for each item on the survey using SPSS Version 29. Comparing each item accounted for eight different areas of father engagement and friendliness within local services. Output scores of assumed equal variance were used, having met the assumption of homogeneity of variance for each item. Additionally, we created composite scores for each participant survey to examine the difference in rank sum for social service and K–12 school participants using the Mann-Whitney *U* test. The Mann-Whitney *U* test (SPSS Version 26) helped us rank participant surveys based on their cumulative responses related to father friendliness. Scores ranged from 1–52 with 52 representing the most father-friendly responses. Thus, we compared eight individual aspects of father engagement as well as the cumulative ranking between social services and schools.

For research question two, we qualitatively analyzed open-ended responses. We began with a collective review of all written comments at a fatherhood coalition meeting. Members met in small groups to review data and create bullet point notes of the main ideas. Next, data were uploaded into NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2012) by the principal investigators, and an inductive coding process was applied to written responses through an open-to-axial coding process, in consultation with the analytic notes generated by coalition members (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Through a constant comparative approach (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013), we determined ways in which responses overlapped and ways in which they diverged between K–12 school participants and social service participants. Initial themes were then presented at monthly meetings for coalition members to review. Coalition members were presented with the data and asked to confirm if they saw similar themes or how themes could be expanded or refined. Coalition members also discussed qualitative themes in relation to quantitative scores (Ivankova, 2015). After three coalition meetings, the group agreed upon final themes.

Results

T-test results showed that K–12 schools are significantly less father-friendly than social service organizations and agencies based on participant reports. Differences were significant (p-value < .05) for every item on the survey, which covered the areas of *programming and services*, *internal reflection and planning*, and *contextual/ecological understandings* of fatherhood and father engagement. Table 1 summarizes these results. Additionally, the Mann-Whitney *U* test showed a significant difference in the sum or ranks between the two groups ($U = 131.5$, $p = .000$), with the mean rank of social service professionals (33.8) significantly higher than K–12 school professionals (18.0). Both sets of results provided sufficient evidence that social service organizations are more father-friendly than K–12 schools within our local community.

Table 1. Independent Samples *T*-tests

Survey Item	Social Services Mean (SD) (N=28)	K–12 Schools Mean (SD) (N=24)	*t*-value	df	*p*-value
Programming and Services					
Item 1: Services specifically for fathers	3.86 (1.35)	1.71 (.95)	6.51	50	.000
Item 2: Services to strengthen fathers' role	4.07 (1.05)	2.54 (1.14)	5.03	50	.000
Internal Reflection and Planning					
Item 3: Building staff capacity	3.43 (1.28)	1.83 (1.01)	4.91	50	.000
Item 4: Review of policies	2.86 (1.27)	1.67 (.92)	3.82	50	.000
Item 5: Hiring males	3.79 (1.13)	2.54 (1.14)	3.93	50	.000
Item 6: Surveying fathers	3.29 (1.18)	1.71 (1.00)	5.15	50	.000
Contextual/Ecological Understandings					
Item 7: Acknowledging bias	3.68 (1.06)	2.17 (.87)	5.58	50	.000
Item 8: Trauma-informed approach	4.00 (1.02)	2.75 (1.19)	4.09	50	.000

Written responses helped to explain the lower quantitative scores from participants working in K–12 school settings. There was some but limited overlap in qualitative coding between these two groups, as most K–12 participants were unaware or unsure as to how fathers were engaged or supported by the district, with some even suggesting the schools created bias and harm toward fathers.

Conversely, some social service participants described specific father-related services or efforts occurring in their organizations or programs as they moved toward more father-friendly practices. However, many social service participants also admitted there was much work to be done for fathers, with some agencies struggling to move beyond the status quo of assuming gender-neutral family services met the needs of fathers. Each theme is described below with explanations as to how themes help explain quantitative results.

Open to Fathers Versus Targeting Fathers

There was a strong sentiment from K–12 participants and some social service providers that fathers were served through their gender-neutral *family* and *parenting* programs, resources, and outreach efforts. In fact, this thinking may have inflated some of the father-friendliness scores if participants assumed that "family" and "father" can be used interchangeably since fathers are part of the family unit. One K–12 school educator wrote, "We do not specifically target mothers or fathers but just generally parents/guardians." Similarly, a K–12 administrator wrote, "Throughout the year, home visits, parent–teacher conferences, events, etc. are offered to strengthen fathers' roles as a parent. Any benefits would apply to all parents/guardians. Nothing specific to fathers."

In comparison, a notable portion of social service responses communicated that *father* engagement was unique to *family* engagement and that targeting fathers was critical to their work with families—setting father engagement apart from general family engagement activities. This suggested that, although fathers could attend family and parent programs or activities, fathers would benefit from programming specific to their parenting identities and needs. For example, one social service provider wrote, "We provide workshops and trainings that are father specific and parent groups for fathers. Collaborative efforts are made to provide fatherhood activities in the county." Similarly, a social service administrator shared they were at the "beginning stages of fatherhood program and group services." Such comments showed that gendered programming was occurring or emerging within some social service organizations in the community. With other community organizations suggesting that although their agency might not yet be at the father-friendly level they desired, there was an openness to change and desire for growth (e.g., "Would love to offer something like this," "I will bring this up at our next meeting," "Great idea!").

Unsure or "Not Applicable"

Most written comments from K–12 participants suggested that participants working in K–12 school settings were unaware of any specific resources, services, or activities for fathers. For example, several K–12 school participants

wrote, "We do not offer any [programs/services] to my knowledge," "I'm not sure we have anything geared toward fathers," "Just haven't done this," and "If they did, they did nothing to make me aware of it." However, there was one response that identified a school in their district that may have hosted a father group in the past but was unsure if it still existed. This comment, although an anomaly, showed that a father-specific program may have existed in the district under the leadership of a male principal.

Interestingly, several K–12 participants wrote "N/A [Not Applicable]" in the comment sections following each survey item, which could be interpreted as not having information to report on this topic or that the participant did not believe it applied to their role or sector. "N/A" was found in the comments section for every survey item at least once. One participant wrote it in every comment box, and several other participants responded with "N/A" for items related to offering father-specific services, strengthening fathers' roles, and utilizing a trauma-informed approach with fathers. Comparatively, zero participants in social service roles responded with "N/A" to any of the survey items. It should be further noted that participants were not required to write in the comment boxes. When proceeding to each new survey item, participants who had not entered a comment received a reminder that they could write comments in the identified box, but the system did not require written text to proceed. Therefore, writing "N/A" was not a necessary step to move forward, indicating it was an intentional response.

Unlike K–12 school participants, those working in social service positions rarely responded with "I don't know" or "unsure" and never suggested this survey did not apply to their work. It was clear that conversations about engaging fathers and some programming were occurring within social service organizations in the community. Even if their agency did not offer fatherhood services, they recognized the value of offering such programs. This helped to explain higher mean scores and rankings for father-friendliness and also transferred into the next theme on an organization's capacity to serve fathers.

Resources and Capacity

We identified a notable difference in the number of resources and amount of time invested in fathers, based on participant responses. For several social service responses, participants described hiring individuals to serve as a father liaison or facilitator within the organization and allocating time for professional development related to engaging fathers. Such comments included, "We have a male program manager and male coordinators" and "We have a fatherhood coordinator." Such comments showed a level of commitment to fathers in the funding attached to these positions.

However, more robustly, participants identified a need for more funding and support to make their organizations more father-friendly (e.g., "need more staff for program growth," "funding is limited at this time," "no staff"). This was true of social service participants and K–12 school participants. Several social service responses described their organization's reliance on volunteers and therefore found it difficult to specifically seek out males/fathers to fill roles, build the capacity to develop surveys for fathers, or conduct audits specific to father engagement. Most organizations lacked the staff and funding to implement services for fathers. Interestingly, several educators talked about a few male hires but explained that this was purely for instructional purposes, and not an effort to support father engagement. One educator wrote, "I've seen males hired, obviously, but never specifically to engage with fathers. I've never even seen an employee be asked to engage specifically with fathers at any time." Such comments help explain the low quantitative scores attached to hiring males to engage fathers.

The theme of *resources and capacity* also intersected with the COVID-19 pandemic response. We collected survey data in the spring of 2022, which overlapped with an academic school year impacted by the pandemic and its accompanying policies and struggles. A few K–12 participants mentioned that the focus of the school year was simply "getting through COVID," which could explain some of the lower rates of father-friendliness. It emerged as a type of disclaimer for several participants who reported low levels of father-friendliness for their school. For example, a few comments stated, "Right now, our efforts have been focused on COVID-19" and "We have been focused on COVID and its effects this year." Further, one educator wrote, "I am new to the district, and COVID has impacted programs. I do not know what was offered in years past, but at this time, I know of no such programs." This comment acknowledged that programs and activities were disrupted or paused during the pandemic (2020–22); this may be especially true for family engagement activities and school districts' wariness of in-person interactions. Interestingly, the pandemic was not mentioned by any social service participants in the study, suggesting that social service positions felt less of the pandemic's impact on their capacity to serve families or fathers in the spring of 2022 or that they experienced greater success in working around those challenges.

Bias and Harm

Social service and K–12 participants discussed bias and harm in written responses but in different ways. Those who served in social service organizations more frequently acknowledged the bias and harm that fathers face in the community or ways they were trying to bring about change for fathers. One

participant wrote, "We see a tendency of bias against fathers in our community. We do try to serve fathers alienated from their families." Such comments help to explain the more favorable scores related to father-friendliness on quantitative items. In a few responses, participants distinguished between their personal view and their organization's view. For example, one service provider wrote, "I agree there is bias against fathers. But that is my individual position. Organizationally, we do not have a position on this topic." Such comments suggested that personal beliefs about fathers and the need for change might not match organizational mindsets or practices.

Conversely, K–12 participants reported a lack of acknowledgment of bias against fathers, with some comments suggesting schools are contributing to deficit views of fathers and the bias they experience as parents. For example, several comments reinforced the view that fathers are lacking and need help. One educator wrote, "Fathers need to be given tools on how to be involved. Fathers need mental health, addiction, job support, etc." Therefore, rather than acknowledging the systems that may serve as barriers to involvement or accepting some ownership of the problem, such comments directed blame toward the fathers. Another participant had personally experienced that type of negativity from the school as a father and shared:

> Keep your head up. You have picked a tough battle to fight, and even as a school employee and a father of a student in the district, I have accepted that I will be valued less or even treated like a necessary evil in my kids' lives. It would bother me a lot more if it actually affected my kids' thinking, but somehow they still seem to love and value me as much as their mother.

This was an interesting quote because it shows the complexity of being negatively impacted by an institutionalized bias while simultaneously serving within a system that enacts those biased practices.

A few participants wrote more critically about a notable bias towards mothers. For example, one participant wrote, "Every bit of outreach I've seen [name of district] appears to be catered to women, if not explicitly addressed to mothers." Other educators reported activities that they viewed as harmful to fathers. For example, one participant shared, "The district 'resource officers' (cops who treat schools exactly how they treat prisons) are good at creating trauma in families, but I've never seen any positive intentional approach to fathers at all," suggesting that schools may not just neglect fathers, but actually impose harm. One participant even wrote about the fear of bringing up this issue in the district, "I feel like even voicing that opinion [to create father-specific services and supports] puts a target on my back in the district." This comment highlights

the political and social pressures within districts and organizations that appeared across several written comments.

Discussion

Recognizing and building upon father engagement is paramount to student success and well-being (Amatea, 2013; Jeynes, 2015), and the lack of father-friendliness reported by K–12 schools was concerning, more so than other sectors in the community. The differences between groups may be best identified by the lens they are bringing to the conversation. Schools were predominantly focused on treating all parental figures as a unified group. They often dismissed the differences between parents or actively disregarded the need for father-specific programming. The social service community programs instead shared a greater openness to father-specific programming, which matches some of the emerging research in this area (Fagan & Pearson, 2020; Holmes et al., 2020). Though some agencies did not currently offer resources for fathers, there was a greater acceptance in considering change within the organization to offer such services (i.e., "This has been part of our discussions"). Comparatively, K–12 school participants viewed such programming as "not applicable" or outside the purview of their role.

Overall, most organizations and schools could benefit from auditing their current family engagement practices and policies. In fact, community organizations as a whole might be doing less than the data communicated, in that organizations that are actively focusing on fathers were more likely to write about those activities in the comments section rather than skip the prompt. Therefore, although findings showed that community organizations were doing "better" than K–12 schools, we do not suggest that they are doing well as a whole (Amato, 2018). By reviewing current practices and policies, organizations and schools could determine how established operations may benefit mothers and marginalize or neglect fathers, which could lead to inclusive changes for fathers (Lee et al., 2016; Lynch & Zwerling, 2020). Additionally, many participants assumed that family engagement activities were also father engagement activities, as fathers are part of the family unit. However, there is a strong need to move beyond the "one size fits all" family engagement strategies and programs that are essentially designed for mothers (Panter-Brick et al., 2014) and recognize that seemingly inclusionary terms like "family" can unintentionally exclude fathers (Guterman et al., 2018).

Survey results also showed that father engagement is a multidimensional concept, with many factors influencing the mindset of professionals and the programs/services available to fathers (Cabrera et al., 2014), from funding to

overarching societal views. A systems perspective asks scholars and professionals to look at the "wholeness" of a phenomenon (Friedman & Allen, 2014), and our data certainly showed the expansive and interconnected web of father engagement influences within the community and schools. Our findings are similar to previous research that suggested father engagement opportunities are limited by participation, funding, and staffing (Palm & Fagan, 2013; Perry, 2011), but it appears that COVID-19 placed additional restraints on schools and community programs in their abilities to deliver father engagement services. Schools noted the lack of bandwidth during this time. Social services noted issues with hiring and retaining qualified male professionals. For that reason, improving community conditions for fathers relies upon a collaborative community effort. Little progress will be made or sustained if organizations and schools continue to operate independently (Hacker, 2013; Lantz et al., 2001).

Deficit Ideology

Negative assumptions about fathers and their parenting roles permeate society and are present in how we view and treat fathers in various fields, including education (Tollestrup, 2018). These negative stereotypes can overshadow the many contributions that fathers make to children's learning and development and can weaken schools' relationships with important family members (de Montigny et al., 2017; Lynch & Zwerling, 2020; Posey-Maddox, 2017). In our qualitative data, deficit ideas and views of fathers appeared across the full data set, especially within comments from K–12 participants, with participants stating that father engagement is not applicable to schools and that fathers need "help" and "assistance." Additionally, some male employees reported feeling devalued as fathers in the school system.

There were also more subtle ways that deficit thinking manifested in the data. When participants stated that family engagement activities are open to all family members but "fathers just don't attend," it perpetuates the stereotype that fathers either do not want to be involved or are less competent parents in knowing how to be involved (Osborn, 2015; Wilson & Thompson, 2020). Accepting the dominant narrative that fathers *could* but *don't* is deficit thinking because it assumes weakness on the part of the fathers rather than our educational practices when, in fact, it is our practices that are failing fathers (Lee et al., 2016; Posey-Maddox, 2017). Schools *could* make activities more father-friendly, but the majority *don't*, as fathers are still viewed through a deficit lens (Wilson & Thompson, 2020).

Realistic Expectations

In defense of schools, K–12 schools are generally tasked with relentless expectations and expected to *do it all,* even during a pandemic (Pressley, 2021). It is an era of accountability measures, large class sizes, changing curricula, teacher shortages, and ever-changing student needs (Burden & Byrd, 2019). Schools should not be expected to do this work on their own. By building greater father-friendliness in the community and then partnering with schools, fathers will benefit (Tollestrup, 2018). We believe that a systems-based perspective is a beneficial response to this problem. Ideally, all schools would have a family coordinator, with ties to the community, who could help facilitate father-related activities and spend time listening to and learning from fathers. These factors and more show the ecological complexity of this issue (Cabrera et al., 2014), as so many intersecting forces inform fatherhood and father engagement with schools.

Considering that social service participants reported concrete and deliberate efforts to engage fathers, it presents an opportunity to bring community organizations together with schools to transfer some of those ideas or partner with educators. Findings also support the need for widening the theoretical and philosophical content in educators' preservice and in-service professional development to incorporate a more holistic and systems-oriented understanding of children and their families (Amatea, 2013). This presents an important opportunity for teacher educators to rethink how father engagement can be addressed within family engagement courses and professional development workshops. The social service field has historically viewed family engagement as vital to their work; however, this perspective is newer to the field of education. It was only in the last few decades that schools pivoted from viewing family engagement as a "nice" practice to a "necessary" one (Burden & Byrd, 2019). We hope conversations and content on family engagement will include fathers as the field continues to move forward.

Community Change

As does most community-based research, our inquiry helped to raise awareness about a local issue and determine how we can reconstruct and reframe social practices to make community organizations more equitable (Ivankova, 2015). The study empowered the coalition to create resources and supports specifically for schools, as well as other agencies connected to schools. We first responded by preparing a summary of our research findings for all organizations serving families, with six recommendations for increasing father friendliness which stemmed from the survey questions:

1. Acknowledge there is bias against fathers, especially against fathers of color.
2. Build the capacity of staff to effectively engage fathers through workshops, written materials, or creating a specialized committee to focus on fathers.
3. Conduct an audit/review of policies to determine your level of father-friendliness and identify changes that can be made.
4. Survey fathers to determine their needs, concerns, and interests related to activities and services.
5. Develop programs, groups, or events that are specific to fathers. Fathers assume "family" programs and events are geared toward mothers.
6. Hire male staff or recruit male volunteers to lead father-related efforts.

Next, we created a video with tips for schools to increase father engagement by spotlighting the words and faces of fathers from the community (5 Tips for Father Engagement in Schools - YouTube). The video served as a platform for discussions with districts and schools about their perceptions of and experiences with fathers and, most importantly, how they could restructure their current family engagement practices to include fathers more meaningfully. For example, one district embedded father engagement in their diversity, equity, and inclusion plan, and another district attached it to their wellness goals. As intended, the community survey led to community action and educational change (Hacker, 2013).

Limitations

Despite the strengths, there are notable limitations to this study. First, our results are limited to one midwestern community. Future research is needed to replicate these findings in additional communities. For instance, comparisons in rural or highly urban areas could render different results. Additionally, though we directed our survey questions to be pro-father friendly, this may have biased our results. As our evidence suggests, some educators or practitioners may not believe that being father-friendly is beneficial. Though we anticipated some level of negativity toward schools being father-friendly, the level of responses was surprising. Future research could address this by utilizing more neutral questions such as, "Is father-friendliness a good thing for schools to consider?" Finally, some of our survey items were compound questions (i.e., two statements in one question). This was done to follow the initial Father-Friendly Check-up Survey (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2016) and to limit participant burnout within the survey to encourage deeper qualitative responses. However, as with any survey, compound questions can be problematic. Future research could adapt the Father-Friendly Check-up Survey to no longer include compound questions.

Conclusion

We encourage communities to create school-based committees or a community coalition to focus on fathers and learn about the barriers to their engagement through community-based research (Lantz et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2016). Using a collaborative process, we realized K–12 schools needed the most support in becoming more father-friendly and created concrete resources that could benefit father and family engagement practices. It is our goal that the current study serves as a model and resource for other community organizations and schools. Together, improvements to father friendliness will not only impact men but the entire family unit. To care about fathers is to care about families, and to care about families is to care about children.

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Authors' Note: This project was a collective effort involving representation from over 20 different programs and agencies in our community. Although there was no funding attached to the project, the expertise and resources of coalition members and their agencies made this project possible.

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Appendix. Father-Friendliness Survey Questions

Please respond to the following questions based on your personal experiences with your organization or program.

Strongly disagree (1)
Somewhat disagree (2)
Neither agree nor disagree (3)
Somewhat agree (4)
Strongly agree (5)

Direct Services & Resources

1. My program or organization offers father-specific or father-only services.

   Comments:

2. My program or organization offers services which strengthen fathers' roles as a parent.

   Comments:

Internal Reflection & Planning

3. My program or organization has implemented specific ways to build the capacity of staff to effectively engage fathers (e.g., workshops, written materials, specialized committee).

   Comments:

4. My program or organization has conducted an audit/review of policies and procedures to determine the level of father friendliness and identified changes the organization might need to make.

   Comments:

5. My program or organization hires male staff to deliver programs or engage with fathers.

   Comments:

6. My program or organization periodically surveys fathers to determine their needs, concerns, and interests related to the organization or program's activities and services.

   Comments:

Contextual/Ecological Understandings

7. My program or organization acknowledges there is systemic bias against fathers and actively challenges this bias through policies and practices.

   Comments:

8. My program or organization utilizes a trauma-informed approach with fathers.

   Comments:

9. What else would you like to share with the coalition about fathers or father engagement?