

# **Low-Income, Urban Consumers' Perceptions of Community School Outreach Practices, Desired Services, and Outcomes**

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## **Abstract**

Community schools require the active involvement of family and community members in the education and schooling of children both in the home and on the school site. However, schools often have difficulty effectively bringing low-income, diverse parents onto school campuses even when they are involved in their children's education in the home. This study explores outreach methods, desired services, and benefits of participation from the perspective of 113 low-income, urban, predominantly Latino, community school consumers. A multi-pronged community outreach approach which emphasizes personal relationships is likely to be most effective. Consumers participated in diverse programs, but their first priorities were programs that would benefit their children's learning and their home environment. Consumers reported positive changes in their children, themselves, their collaboration with the school, and, to some extent, in their community as a result of their involvement. The findings suggest that the successful engagement of urban parents and community residents on school campuses requires diverse outreach strategies. A wide variety of learning opportunities should also prove beneficial to children, families, and schools. Implications for practice are discussed.

Key Words: community schools, outreach, services, consumer perceptions, parental involvement, parent education, families, communities

## Introduction

Community schools are defined as restructured academic programs that emphasize community involvement and provide services for parents and families including health centers, family resource rooms, after-school activities, cultural and community activities, and 24-hour access (Dryfoos, 1997, 2002; Dryfoos, Quinn, & Barkin, 2005; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2001). The school is seen as a resource to the entire community and perceives the community as integral to its efforts to increase student learning and enhance the development of children and youth. Many community schools also focus on improving the community as well (Dryfoos, 1999, 2002; Dryfoos et al., 2005). Typically, community schools are open in the afternoons, evenings, and weekends during the year and provide services to children, their families, and the entire community. Effective community schools result from purposeful partnerships that provide support and opportunities to students and their families as well as the neighboring community (Coalition for Community Schools, 2003). Consumer involvement, participation, and sanction are key ingredients in establishing a community school (Coltoff, Kaplan, Moses, & Stack, 1997). Given that consumer involvement on the school site is critical to the success of a community school, it is important to understand how best to accomplish this goal in low-income, urban communities. The purpose of this study was to investigate adult consumers' perceptions of community outreach strategies; programs; the outcomes of community school participation on children, families, the school, and the community; and how these perceptions varied by gender.

According to the Children's Aid Society (Coltoff et al., 1997), community schools should transform schools into new institutions that are not only focused on educating children but also on strengthening communities. The key ingredients of a community school include an emphasis on education, a long-term commitment to collaboration with social service providers as partners, integrated services, a high level of consumer and community involvement, incorporation of school day curriculum and learning, and a focus on community strengths (Coltoff et al., 1997; Dryfoos, 2002; Dryfoos et al., 2005). Research on community schools has shown that more consumer involvement in the educational process has led to better relationships with the teachers and school staff, a positive school climate, and a school culture that is more inviting (Desimone, Finn-Steveson, & Henrich, 2000; Dryfoos, 2002; Dryfoos et al., 2005; Epstein, 1991, 2004; Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006; Jordon et al., 2001; Marschall, 2006; Smith, 2006). Marschall found that schools that devoted efforts to "improving parent involvement and community relations had significantly higher levels of parent involvement in schools" (pp. 1069-70).

## Consumer Involvement

With the recent emphasis in education legislation on parents becoming more involved on the school campus as well as in the home, schools and communities have looked at effective ways to engage parents on the school grounds (Marschall, 2006). Studies on parental involvement have shown that when parents are viewed as consumers of community resources and these resources are easily accessible, strengths-based, and culturally sensitive, consumers are more likely to participate in their children's education (Aspiazu, Bauer, & Spillett, 1998; Boyd & Correa, 2005; Howland et al., 2006; Jeynes, 2005; Smith, 2006). Some of the strategies that have been identified as most helpful in encouraging consumer involvement in schools are flexible scheduling of events and adult classes, child care, transportation, and services that the consumers need in order to improve their own and their children's lives (Marschall). Classes can range from parenting education to instructional/vocational classes such as English as a Second Language (ESL) and General Educational Development (GED) test-taking preparation to recreational/networking activities like salsa dancing and arts and crafts (Dryfoos et al., 2005; Epstein, 1991, 2004).

There is also a body of evidence that supports the supposition that when parent and community involvement at the school increases, children's academic achievement increases, relationships between parents and school staff improve, family functioning is more positive, and the school climate is more positive and supportive (Epstein, 1991, 2004; Howland et al., 2006; Jeynes, 2005; Marschall, 2006; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004; Smith, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Parents who are involved in their children's schooling can support and reinforce behaviors learned by their child at school as well as supply their children with good role models by learning new things themselves (Epstein, 1991, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Furthermore, by having consumers involved at the community school sites, teachers can gain a better understanding of the sociocultural aspects of the community that can be used to strengthen and tailor curriculum (Moll, 1992).

Consumers' level of self-efficacy has also been found to be related to their level of involvement in their children's schools (Dryfoos, 2002; Dryfoos et al., 2005; Dupper & Poertner, 1997; Mapp, 2003). In other words, when consumers believe they have the knowledge and the skills to help their children succeed, they are more inclined to become involved both at home with school work and at the school (Desimone et al., 2000; Dryfoos, 2002; Dryfoos et al., 2005; Epstein, 1991, 2004; Jordan et al., 2001). As involvement in their children's school life increases, so do the consumers' positive attitudes toward education and their understanding of the school system (Jeynes, 2005;

Sanders, Epstein, & Connors-Tadros, 1999). This is particularly true when looking at the level of participation by male consumers.

While parent involvement in their children's education is often viewed as mainly the mothers' involvement, attracting fathers to become actively involved in their children's education is equally important (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE] & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2000). Children with fathers who are actively involved with the school (observing in the classroom, going to conferences, meeting with counselors) experience more educational success than children who only have mothers involved (McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Moon-Ho, 2005). A father's involvement has also been shown to significantly impact his children's problem-solving capabilities and ability to demonstrate responsible and appropriate behaviors on both family and community levels. When males actively participate in their children's education, they demonstrate positive role modeling for their children, thus decreasing negative stereotypical gender roles. Activities that can help increase male participation include ones that reinforce fathers' contributions; generate specific interests such as leadership roles, mentoring other fathers, coaching, and team activities; and ones that help the fathers understand how important their participation is to their children's academic success (USDOE & USDHHS).

### **Challenges to Consumer Involvement**

Research has shown that involvement on school sites among families of color and families with low incomes, where children are at increased risk for poor academic achievement, is often low to nonexistent (Dupper & Poertner, 1997; Fan, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). There may be many reasons why these parents do not come to school campuses. For example, low-income parents do not typically have employment that offers paid leave, the ability to take unexpected time away from work, or flexible schedules that allow them to get to the school during school hours, not to mention the constraints that often come with working more than one job (Lopez, Kreider, & Coffman, 2005; Smith, 2006). Other challenges to involvement at the school include lack of child care for other children, limited or no access to transportation, language barriers, and feeling uncomfortable in the school environment (Boyd & Correa, 2005; Chin & Newman, 2002; Jeynes, 2005). In addition, schools may not be designed to meet the needs of low-income, culturally diverse children and families, may not have teachers who adequately understand the culture of the community (Marschall, 2006), and may fail to actively encourage school-family collaboration (Howland et al, 2006). Parents are more likely to participate at schools that are welcoming, respectful, and empowering (Comer & Haynes, 1991)

and offer programs that encourage parental support in their children's schooling (Jeynes).

### **Stevenson-YMCA Community School (SYCS)**

The Stevenson-YMCA Community School (SYCS), in an urban area of southern California, was originally funded in 1997 as an adaptation of the Children's Aid Society Community School Program model. This community school is a partnership of children, adult consumers (parents and community members), school staff, the YMCA (lead agency), community organizations, and the Department of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach. The goals of the SYCS are: (a) to improve school behavior and performance by providing high quality and integrated out-of-school programming for children and families; (b) to provide programming to strengthen parenting skills and promote self-sufficiency; (c) to develop grassroots community leaders with the skills to reduce barriers to positive child, family, and school functioning; and (d) to increase collaboration between the family, school, and community to improve children's learning. The SYCS operates from an empowerment perspective and emphasizes the many contributions families and communities make toward the education of children.

The SYCS offers a wide range of extended-day programs for children, families, and community members. During the 2005-2006 academic year, the extended-day programs served 520 adults. An extensive array of adult and family programs and opportunities for involvement are offered. Consumers are involved as learners (class participants), teachers (class instructors), and leaders (SYCS Advisory Board, PTA, etc). Classes include family literacy, family communication, school advocacy, parenting skills, how to help your child in school, college preparation, healthy lifestyles, English as a Second Language (ESL), cake decorating, flower arranging, and computer skills. The SYCS also offers a four-month community leadership program which is designed to develop the leadership skills of participants and requires a community improvement project. Once participants graduate, they may then join the alumni program. The SYCS received the Community Schools National Award for Excellence from the Coalition for Community Schools in 2006. All classes are offered in English and Spanish and free child watch is provided so parents with children can attend the classes. (For a more complete description of the classes offered, please contact the authors; see contact information at the end of the article.)

Ninety-eight percent of the children in the school are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Of the students, 78% are Latino, 15% are African American, 4% are Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 3% are Caucasian. Thirty-three percent of the parents of these children have less than a high school education.

The neighborhood in which the school is located has a high poverty rate, some of the highest rates of overcrowding and crime in the city, and close to 60% speak a language other than English in the home.

## **Methods**

### **Data Collection**

Consent forms and self-administered surveys, in English and Spanish, were distributed by university researchers to class members over a month's time. Trained, master's level research staff went to the school to administer the survey. They explained the purpose of the research to consumers in both English and Spanish, and participants signed informed consent forms prior to completing the surveys. Questions were read aloud by the researchers to ensure consumers who could not read were able to remain in the study. Informed consent letters and surveys were returned separately to ensure participant confidentiality. SYCS staff was not present while the data was collected. Of the 113 surveys completed, 104 (92%) were completed using the Spanish version.

### **Sample**

Data were collected from consumers attending classes at the SYCS. This non-random, purposive sample consisted of 113 consumers. Of the consumers, 85 (75%) were female, 13 (11.5%) were male, two pairs (2%) answered as a couple, and 13 (11.5%) did not specify their gender. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the belief that the information was gathered for program planning purposes, the researchers decided to include the two surveys that were completed by couples. The vast majority of the sample ( $N = 106$ , 94%) was Latino, with equal proportions ( $N = 2$ , 2%) of African Americans, Caucasians, and multiracial. Analyses compared those in the sample with the larger population attending classes at that time who did not participate in the study. There were no gender or ethnic differences between the groups, suggesting the sample was representative of the larger consumer population.

### **Instrument**

The survey was designed specifically for this study by university researchers to explore perceptions of community outreach methods, consumer service usage, consumer likelihood of future service use, and perceptions of changes in child and consumer behaviors. Although the content of the instrument was purposely designed to investigate the SYCS and drew on information from prior consumer focus groups at the school, the format of the survey was modeled after one used for a statewide study of culturally diverse Family Resource

Center consumers (O'Donnell & Giovannoni, 1999, 2000). The survey was originally designed in English, translated into Spanish by a researcher familiar with the local community, and then back-translated into English by another Spanish-speaker. Modifications were made to the Spanish version as appropriate. (Survey available from the authors upon request.)

## Analyses

Frequencies and descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample and to rank order class usage and preferences. Chi square analyses compared those in the sample with the larger school population to determine whether the sample was representative of the larger population. Chi square and independent t-tests were used for gender comparisons on outreach methods, service preferences, and perceived outcomes. The internal reliabilities of the scales were examined using Cronbach's alpha.

## Results

### Community Outreach Strategies

One of the purposes of the study was to learn about the ways consumers became involved with the SYCS. Of the 101 consumers responding, the most common source of community outreach was via a friend, neighbor, or relative ( $N = 53$ , 52%), followed by Parent Center visits ( $N = 19$ , 18%), community school staff outreach ( $N = 10$ , 10%), and school meetings ( $N = 9$ , 9%).

The second community outreach question asked respondents what made them want to become involved. Respondents were asked to circle all answers that applied from a prepared list. The most common response was to help their child succeed in school ( $N = 59$ , 52%) followed by to improve their English ( $N = 32$ , 28%), to learn about resources within the community ( $N = 25$ , 22%), to learn new skills ( $N = 23$ , 20%), and to improve their community ( $N = 21$ , 19%). Other responses included help with parenting skills ( $N = 20$ , 18%), to learn more about the school ( $N = 14$ , 12%), and to have fun ( $N = 12$ , 11%).

The third question asked for the consumers' opinion of the most effective ways to get others involved based on a prepared list of options. Consumers were asked to circle the top three most effective strategies. As shown in Table 1, the most common response was to recruit other consumers by making presentations at school meetings ( $N = 44$ , 41%), followed by outreach by consumers who were already involved ( $N = 35$ , 32%), sign-up fairs in front of school ( $N = 33$ , 30%), school-wide events ( $N = 33$ , 30%), and parent socials ( $N = 32$ , 30%).



Table 1. Most Effective Community Outreach Strategies for the Community School ( $N = 108$ )

Response	Frequency	Percent
Presentations at school meetings	44	41%
Outreach by consumers who are already involved	35	32%
Sign-up fairs in front of school	33	30%
School-wide events (pancake breakfast, multicultural fair, etc.)	33	30%
Parent socials	32	30%
Flyers	30	28%
After-school program family nights	30	28%
Personal outreach by community school staff	17	16%
Telephone calls by teachers	13	12%
Home visits	12	11%
Telephone calls by consumers	10	9%
Telephone calls by community school staff	8	7%

### Consumers' Service Usage and Likelihood of Future Use

Consumers were asked to respond as to whether or not they had participated in a list of 30 SYCS adult and family activities. The most frequently attended classes and activities were ESL ( $N = 53$ , 47%), Community Leadership Institute ( $N = 43$ , 46%), aerobics ( $N = 36$ , 32%), family communication ( $N = 33$ , 29%), and family nights ( $N = 26$ , 23%). Consumers were asked how likely they would be to go to classes they had not yet attended. The responses were 3 "very likely," 2 "somewhat likely," and 1 "not at all likely." Table 2 displays those classes that consumers rated a 2.50 and above. It is worth noting, however, on average, consumers were at least somewhat likely to attend all of the classes. However, they were more likely to attend how to prepare your child for college ( $M = 2.72$ ), talking with your children ( $M = 2.70$ ), how to help children with homework ( $M = 2.68$ ), and how to help your child succeed at school ( $M = 2.68$ ). Overall, it appears that consumers were most interested in taking classes that were directly related to their child's academic success.



Table 2. Likelihood of Future Consumer Service Usages

Future Service	N	Mean	SD
Prepare your child for college	68	2.72	.64
Talking with your children	76	2.70	.59
Help children with homework	76	2.68	.62
Help your child at school	76	2.68	.62
First aid/CPR	75	2.64	.65
Help your child get better grades	75	2.64	.65
Improving parenting skills	75	2.63	.67
Technology	77	2.62	.67
In-home education	63	2.54	.69
Family night	65	2.54	.64
Stopping substance abuse	68	2.53	.72
Make your neighborhood safer	67	2.52	.70
Family communication	67	2.51	.72
Money/finances	71	2.51	.71
How to work with the school	69	2.51	.68
Child watch	68	2.50	.70

### Perceptions of Change from Consumers

The next section of the survey asked respondents to rate the extent to which their children, themselves, the school, and the community had changed as a result of their SYCS participation. A list of potential changes was given and respondents identified the extent to which changes had occurred. The response categories were 1 “not at all,” 2 “somewhat,” and 3 “very much.” Table 3 displays these perceived changes. Consumers perceived the most changes in: gave me a sense of pride and accomplishment ( $M = 2.64$ ), taught me how to help my child do better in school ( $M = 2.63$ ), helped my children do better in school ( $M = 2.61$ ), improved my child’s grades ( $M = 2.58$ ), and showed me how I can help the school ( $M = 2.58$ ).

Table 3. Consumer Perceptions of Changes Resulting from SYCS Participation

Change	N	Mean	SD
Gave a sense of pride and achievement	69	2.64	.64
Taught me how to help my child do better at school	67	2.63	.62
Helped my children do better in school	77	2.61	.65
Improved my child's grades	72	2.58	.60
Showed me how I can help the school	60	2.58	.59
Increased belief that I can make a difference	75	2.57	.62
Better role model for my children	65	2.57	.59
Helped me make new friends	76	2.57	.64
Helped my child learn social skills	70	2.56	.67
Improved my children's behavior	79	2.54	.64
Improved my parenting skills	71	2.52	.65
Gave family a fun and safe place to go	63	2.51	.62
Improved relationship/communication with teachers	63	2.49	.69
More involved with school	63	2.49	.67
Taught me about community resources	62	2.48	.70
Better cooperation with school staff	60	2.47	.72
Improved my community	60	2.47	.62
Taught me to be more healthy	63	2.44	.69
Improved personal skills	68	2.43	.78
Helped the community work toward common goals	57	2.42	.73
Gave me someone to talk to about my kids and my family	60	2.42	.70
Taught me about other cultures	63	2.37	.70
Better understanding of school expectations	62	2.37	.66
Improved neighborhood appearance	54	2.30	.72
Improved my English skills	80	2.30	.70
Taught me leadership skills	66	2.27	.78
Helped create parent advocates in the community	55	2.25	.78
Increased neighborhood safety	57	2.21	.77
Taught me job skills	47	2.15	.91

### Gender Comparisons

To reduce the number of statistical comparisons when exploring gender differences in future service preferences, the classes were combined into six scales reflecting the types of services provided. The scales were family well-being ( $\alpha = .70$ ), leadership/advocacy ( $\alpha = .71$ ), child well-being ( $\alpha = .95$ ), interpersonal well-being ( $\alpha = .88$ ), physical well-being ( $\alpha = .60$ ), and economic well-being

( $\alpha = .77$ ). (Details of the items on each scale available from the author upon request.) Given the small size of the male sample and exploratory nature of the study, the results are reported at the .10 level. No significant differences were found between males and females on how they first became involved at the community school, what made them want to become involved, or the ways they believed were best to get other consumers involved. However, as shown in Table 4, males were somewhat more likely, in the future, to attend family well-being classes,  $t(66) = 1.67, p \leq .10$ , and leadership/advocacy classes,  $t(65) = 1.80, p \leq .10$ , than females.

Table 4. Gender Comparisons: Likelihood of Consumer Future Service Usage by Class Type Scale

Scale/Class Type	Males			Females		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
Family well-being	2.78*	.37	9	2.45*	.57	59
Leadership/advocacy	2.75*	.37	9	2.43*	.52	58
Child well-being	2.68	.50	11	2.70	.47	71
Interpersonal well-being	2.53	.49	13	2.48	.57	75
Physical well-being	2.67	.47	11	2.57	.52	67
Economic well-being	2.61	.42	9	2.54	.62	59

\* $p \leq .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$

Scales were also constructed to examine gender differences in perceived areas of change. The scales were: perceived change in child behaviors ( $\alpha = .86$ ), perceived change in consumer behaviors ( $\alpha = .95$ ), perceived change in home-school connection behaviors ( $\alpha = .91$ ), and perceived change in community/neighborhood-related behaviors ( $\alpha = .94$ ). (Material that details the specific items on each scale available from the authors upon request.) No significant differences were found between males and females on perceived child, home-school, or community-neighborhood behavioral changes. However, as shown in Table 5, males were somewhat more likely than females to perceive positive changes in themselves,  $t(53) = 1.75, p \leq .10$ , as a result of SYCS participation.

Table 5. Gender Comparisons: Consumer Perceptions of Changes Resulting from SYCS Participation

Change/Improvement Area	Males			Females		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
Child behaviors	2.67	.62	12	2.57	.50	51
Consumer/adult behaviors	2.67*	.38	11	2.39*	.49	44
Home-school connection	2.55	.45	11	2.45	.59	42
Community/neighborhood	2.65	.48	10	2.35	.59	42

\* $p \leq .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$

## Discussion

Getting parents and community members involved at school can be challenging, and successful strategies to involve them can be different depending on various factors such as culture and economic status (Caspe, Lopez, & Wolos, 2006). The single most frequent way these consumers heard about the community school was from a friend, relative, or neighbor. The top consumer suggestions for involving others were to do presentations at school meetings, outreach by involved consumers, and sign-up fairs in front of the school. These findings suggest that the involvement of low-income, urban consumers may be highly dependent upon personal outreach efforts and relationship building. Thus, efforts such as “bring a friend to class” and including consumers in outreach efforts and presentations may prove beneficial in involving more parents and residents in community schools. This is consistent with other studies that have found personal outreach strategies and positive word of mouth from consumers may be the most effective ways of actively involving urban parents and community residents (O'Donnell & Giovannoni, 2000; Quezada, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2003).

About 20% of consumers in this study first heard about community school programs through a Parent Center visit. Thus, establishing centers which are visible and welcoming may also be a useful involvement strategy to engage parents. Past research has similarly found that a warm and inviting school climate (e.g., having a warm family room with a homelike atmosphere and open door policy, the smell of fresh coffee) will help to get parents involved (Desimone et al., 2000; Dryfoos et al., 2005; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Dryfoos et al. also suggested that creating comfortable spaces to converse and hiring parents or recruiting parent volunteers should increase the likelihood of on-campus consumer participation. Overall, the findings here suggest that a multi-pronged approach which emphasizes personal or small group, face-to-face community outreach strategies should prove most effective in bringing low-income consumers to school campuses.

The reasons people became involved with the community school varied somewhat; however, the single most commonly identified reason was to help their children be successful in school. Other reasons residents became involved included the desire to improve their English skills, to learn about community resources, and to learn new skills. Other studies have similarly found that parents become involved in their children's schools because they want to help their children to succeed in school (Mapp, 2003), to gain family and personal benefits (Aspiazu et al., 1998), and because they want a good education for their children (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002). This knowledge can be used to both

develop programs that are relevant to the community and to more effectively market the program. Program descriptions and outreach efforts should indicate that participation may lead to these desired outcomes. For example, class descriptions should include how participation in school programs is linked to better school outcomes for children or better schools. Classes to support children's academic success may be very helpful in attracting consumers, however, community and personal development classes may also be needed to attract diverse residents, and are likely to be popular as well. Broussard (2003) reported that it was imperative to establish groups, workshops, and resource centers for parents that facilitate information sharing, mutual support, empathy, and a sense of community between the parents and the school.

Respondents reported both their current and past service use as well as likelihood of future use. In terms of services used, ESL, Community Leadership Institute, aerobics, family communication, and family nights had the most participants. The most frequently requested classes were how to help your child prepare for college, talking with your children, helping children with homework, first aid/CPR, how to help your child at school, improving parenting skills, and technology. However, it is worth noting that consumers were at least "somewhat likely" to attend all of the classes that were listed. Offering a variety of classes, including recreational, social service, educational enrichment, and vocational has been found to result in greater school involvement among consumers (Dryfoos et al., 2005; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Although low-income consumers may primarily become involved in schools to improve their children's educational outcomes and to strengthen family relationships and situations, community schools will be more likely to attract consumers by offering a wide range of classes. The provision of diverse involvement opportunities that help develop the skills of residents are also necessary if community schools are to really make a difference in the communities and the schools they serve. Dryfoos et al. suggested that programs continuously assess parent needs and adjust workshop topics and class content appropriately. Thus, efforts like the study reported here should prove beneficial to program planners.

The survey results suggest that consumers' community school participation has the potential to positively influence children's academics. One of the greatest changes reported by these participants was that children's school performance improved. This suggests, from the perspective of the consumers, that adult participation in school-based classes can positively influence children's academic performance. These findings are similar to other studies (Dearing, Simpkins, Kreider, & Weiss, 2006; Jeynes, 2005; Smith, 2006) in which parental involvement at the school resulted in increases in children's motivation and academic success.

The evidence also suggests that parenting skills and perceived self-sufficiency may be improved through consumer participation in community school programs. On average, all of the consumers' behavior changes were rated between somewhat and very much. Consumers rated their highest levels of change in sense of pride and accomplishment, ability to help their child in school, ability to be a better role model for their children, and in the belief that they can make a difference. It appears that community school participation can successfully empower consumers and help them become better parents and role models for their children. Past research has also shown that involvement at their children's school gave parents a sense of accomplishment and a feeling that they were better able to help and advocate for their children (Dryfoos, 2002; Dryfoos et al., 2005; Mapp, 2003; Smith, 2006).

School-home collaboration may sometimes be lacking in urban areas (Howland et al., 2006). One of the major goals of a welcoming school environment is to create mutual trust and respect among the school community (i.e., parents, teachers, school staff, principal; Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Mapp, 2003). The consumers in the current study noted improved family and school collaboration. In fact, the level of improvement in this area was second only to child improvement. Hopefully, this improved knowledge of how consumers can assist the school also translated into actual assistance, which could suggest that community schools, by involving residents, can contribute to systemic as well as individual level change. Furthermore, it is encouraging that consumers reported becoming more involved in the school and improved relationships with teachers and school staff. A positive home-school connection is an important one for schools to achieve since it helps to establish a sense of shared responsibility for children's education (Bowman, 1994).

Community schools are often committed to the development of community leaders and advocates who have the skills to make positive changes in both the school and the larger community (Mendez, 2005). Although the area of community change was rated lowest by the consumers in the current study, every indicator was rated by consumers as more than somewhat improved. The highest rated community changes were in making new friends, learning about community resources, and improving the community. The lowest mean ratings were on increasing neighborhood safety and creating parent advocates. Lopez (2003) found that when parents are presented with opportunities to learn and engage in leadership activities, parents with little or no previous involvement may develop into articulate and forceful community leaders. Quezada (2003) found that parents who participated in leadership training improved their advocacy skills and self-confidence and were then able to bridge gaps between the

school and the community. The findings here suggest that community schools can provide learning and involvement opportunities that help parents to make a difference in the lives of their communities, as well.

Since several past studies have shown the importance of father participation in their children's education (McBride et al., 2004; USDOE & USDHHS, 2000), gender differences in future service usage and in perceptions of changes were explored in the current study. Fathers indicated they would be somewhat more likely to attend classes involving leadership/advocacy roles, and more family-interactive classes. Males also reported more improvements in their own behaviors from community school participation than females. Thus, efforts to involve fathers in school-based programs may consider offering more family programming and leadership training and opportunities. Recruitment efforts should also include males and highlight the positive changes that may result from fathers becoming involved in schools.

## Conclusions

The data presented here are part of a larger, comprehensive study which is also investigating teacher perceptions of family involvement, the effects of community school participation on children's academic performance and school behaviors, and the effects of consumer involvement in leadership training. All of these evaluation efforts should prove useful to those interested in developing community schools. There were some limitations to the current study. First, the sample was non-random which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the survey was developed for the study so the reliability and validity of the instrument is unknown. Third, the sample size was somewhat small, so gender findings should be interpreted with caution. However, community schools appear to have the ability to positively influence children, families, schools, and communities. The results also suggest that low-income, urban consumers are interested in and committed to the education of their children and will come to school campuses if multiple outreach strategies and involvement opportunities are used to attract and retain those consumers.

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